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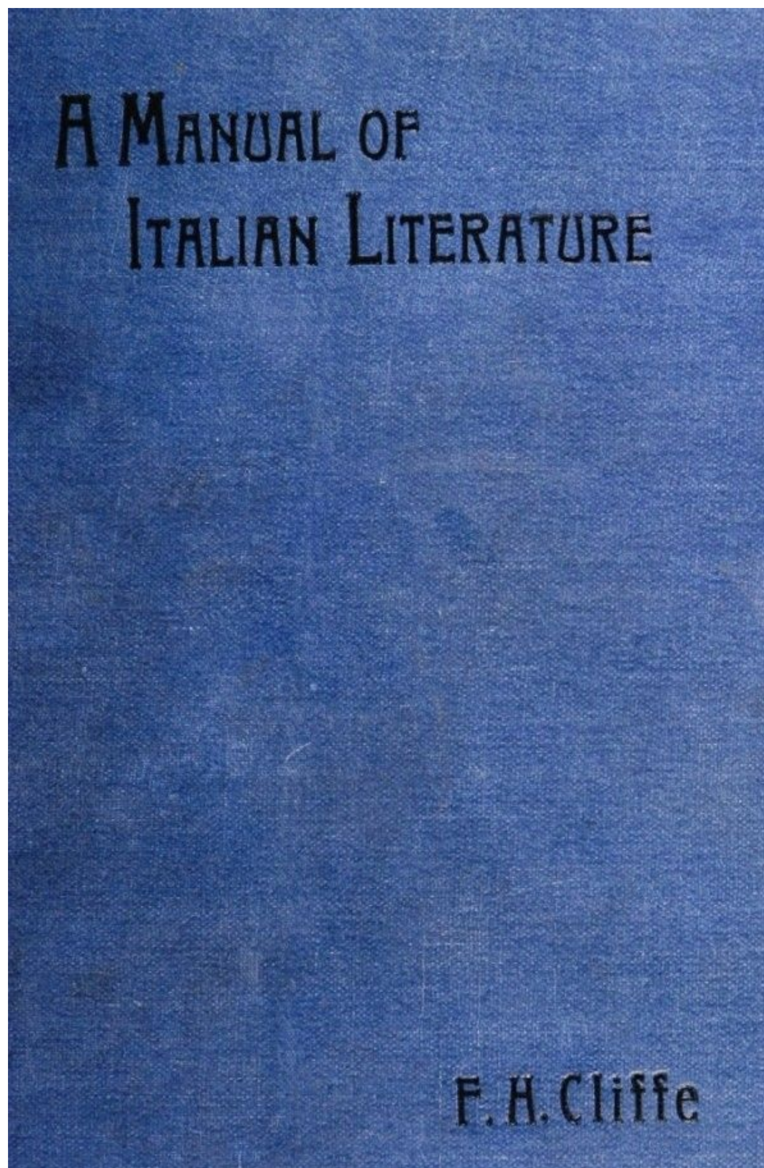

A Manual of

Italian Literature

BY

FRANCIS HENRY CLIFFE

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1896

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CHAPTER I.

INTRODUCTION.

Whoever examines a map of Europe, and sees the position occupied by Italy, must, even without knowledge of history, come to the conclusion that a country situated in so central a position and favoured in so many respects by Nature, cannot have failed to command an exalted rank in the hierarchy of nations. But the most daring conjectures would probably fall short of the brilliant reality. The rise and the dominion of Rome would be regarded in a romance as too improbable for the credulity of the simplest reader, but as a well-established fact in the annals of mankind, it [Pg 2] becomes a phenomenon of the most striking importance and interest. That a solitary city should produce brave and distinguished men, and even, aided by wealth and courage, establish settlements in remote countries, is not wonderful; Carthage and Tyre did so at an earlier period, Venice and Genoa did so in times nearer the present; but that a solitary city should play a part reserved apparently only for a great nation, should draw to itself, as in a magic circle, all Italy, should conquer Gaul, Greece, Africa, Spain, Britain, Asia Minor, and even threaten Persia and India, is indeed marvellous. Nor were the conquests of Rome transient conflagrations whose fury was soon exhausted; they were as durable as they were brilliant, and the subjugated races speedily learned the language and the manners of their masters. Only one nation, though politically enslaved, remained intellectually free. Greece had produced poets so sublime, philosophers so profound, historians so brilliant, that even in the darkest hour of degradation, even when Memmius was despoiling Corinth of the works of the greatest of statuaries, even when Sulla was slaughtering the helpless inhabitants of Athens, she had the satisfaction of seeing the master minds of Rome coming as humble disciples to the sources of art and wisdom that took their origin only on her soil.

[Pg 3] Indeed, it is scarcely far-fetched to say that Greece was avenged for her slavery by the not less complete slavery of Rome to her intellectual supremacy. The Roman poets, dazzled by the brilliancy of their Athenian prototypes, fancied that only by imitating, could they hope to excel. A more unfortunate idea never took possession of a nation. It destroyed everything in their writings that was spontaneous and redolent of their native soil. Whatever is really endowed with life and intrinsic value in their works, has had to struggle into existence through the suffocating

atmosphere of foreign fashions and foreign trains of thought. This evil was apparent in other branches of literature, but it was very far from injuring them as it injured poetry. Virgil was assuredly one of the greatest poets that ever lived, and yet how much of his poetry is second-hand, or, at best, adapted from others. The adaptations are often executed with marvellous skill, but this fact only enhances our regret that he should have made of his *Æneid* but an echo of Homer; and of his *Eclogues* but a repetition of Theocritus. His *Georgia,* indeed, escaped being only a decoction from Greek herbs, because in them he wrote of what he had actually seen and experienced, and they are, in truth, his masterpiece. Indeed, if we deduct the extraordinary beauty of the style, which is above praise, what is there of great value in the *Eclogues,* except some images of rural beauty, and some outbursts of exquisite tenderness? Or in the *Æneid,* except those passages where he praises the greatness of Italy and Rome, expatiates on his philosophy, and depicts with tenderness and fire, such as no other ancient poet could command, the passion of love? Better, far better, would it have been for him if he had never heard of Homer, and had never studied Theocritus. This great poet would then have been compelled to rely on his own resources, and would have produced works, different it may be, but far more striking and profound, than those we now possess.

The vigorous mind of Lucretius suffered but little from reliance on Greek models. But this was partly owing to the nature of his subject. A philosopher is assisted, his mind is enriched, by the speculations of his predecessors; and the fact of his writing in verse is but an accident which in no way detracts from the truth of this remark. His strength of mind and matchless powers of description make his poem one of the finest monuments in the Latin language. Catullus had so much sweetness and tenderness, a cast of thought at once so fiery and so natural, that even the study of the most laboured performances of Alexandrian pedants could not rob him of his spontaneity and freshness. With Horace the case is somewhat different. He was deeply read in the poets of Greece, and that course of study is visible in every line he wrote. But he had the wisdom to select as models only the sublimest passages of the noblest writers, and he adapted what he borrowed from them with such exquisite art to his Roman surroundings, that we may well ask whether he did not positively gain by having Pindar, Alcæus and Sappho constantly before him. Still, the result is artificial in a high degree, and the emotions that greater poets really feel, he too often only simulates.

If we except many tender passages from Tibullus, many picturesque passages from Ovid, and many vigorous passages from Lucan, Roman Poetry presents us for centuries with nothing but feeble echoes of Greek models, and those models too often the pedantic and lifeless productions of Alexandria. A genuine Roman Drama may be said never to have existed. Plautus and Terence are but pale reflections of the Attic comedies; the tragedies attributed to Seneca, the only specimens that have come down to us of Roman Tragedy, are but clumsy imitations, or rather travesties, of Sophocles and Euripides. In the declining ages of Roman Literature, Claudian was the only poet who showed genuine originality and freshness of thought, and he, strange to say, was an Alexandrian by birth, to whom the Latin language was not natural, but acquired.

I know of no other instance of a great nation, victorious and dominant over the whole civilised world, humbly sitting as a disciple at the feet of one of her captives, and that not only for a short time, but for the whole course of her intellectual development. Spain, in the Sixteenth Century, borrowed many of her literary fashions from Italy; England, in the Seventeenth Century, modelled her productions in many respects on France, as did Germany somewhat later; but these were merely transient fashions, not deep-rooted customs, and produced no very lasting effect. Rome was alone, and has been since, in her deference to a foreign model, nor can it be said in extenuation that she had only the choice of having poetry on that model or no poetry at all. She had plenty of indigenous material, and Niebuhr has well said that the true poetry of Rome must be found in her history and in her early legends rather than in the finished productions of her literary poets.

This is all the more remarkable, as her greatness was such that it could not fail to inspire even the least susceptible of minds. It made itself felt from the shores of the Baltic to the Persian Gulf, and is attested by ruins more substantial than the uninjured structures of feebler races. Such was its inherent strength, that it withstood the bloodiest civil wars and the most crushing despotism; nor is it easy to surmise what could have undermined it, had not the immigration of barbarian tribes from the mysterious and unexplored regions of the North given shock after shock to that stately system, the work of so many warriors and legislators. It may truly be said that the walls of Rome fell at the blast of the Gothic trumpet.

When Constantine removed the seat of Empire to Constantinople, he broke the spell that had for so many ages held the nations captive. The partition of the Empire into East and West finished what the removal began. Nor had Rome only the rivalry of Constantinople to dread. Milan, and then Ravenna, became the scene of Imperial splendour ind the centre of Imperial policy. Rome would, indeed, have been deserted but for her Bishop, who was gradually establishing for himself and his successors a dominion not less brilliant and more durable than that of the Cæsars.

When at last the old order of things had so completely collapsed that the phantom Emperor was no longer allowed to retain his phantom title, it must have been obvious to all thinking men that changes so far reaching had come over Italy as to make it almost another world. The invaders had mingled largely with the conquered nation, inter-marriages were frequent; and it must, in justice to the barbarians, be admitted that they rapidly assumed the manners, and, indeed, the thoughts, of civilisation. If we compare the Court of Theodoric to that of Honorius, or even to that of Valentinian III, the superiority of the Gothic ruler in statesmanship, and even in superficial attainments, is manifest. But wars and invasions desolated the unhappy country. Belisarius

defeated the Goths and regained Sicily and the South of Italy for the Emperors of the East. Although the Byzantine dominion was not of long duration, traces of its existence may still be found in those regions by the curious. It must not be forgotten that the Goths introduced new blood into the country, and that every new invasion tended to modify, if not to alter, the national character of the Peninsula.

But while Italy was suffering for ages from the invasions of the Lombards, the Saracens, and the Normans, it must not be forgotten that she was steadily increasing in wealth, until, in the Thirteenth Century, she became the great money market of the world, and retained that position until shortly after the discovery of America. Wealth produced its usual effect of giving men ample leisure, and leisure created the demand for intellectual and artistic gratifications. Sicily was the [Pg 9] favourite abode of the Emperor Frederick II, and at his brilliant Court poets were encouraged and minstrels rewarded. The Troubadours of Provence offered to Italy in noble verse that chivalric spirit of gallantry and love so congenial to the taste of the age. What the Italians so much admired, they naturally desired to emulate. But in order to do so they required a language capable of expressing thoughts with accuracy and adorning them with splendour. It is no exaggeration to say that from the decadence of the Latin language arose, not one tongue, but many dialects. These dialects were fostered by the division of the Peninsula into many principalities, townships, republics, and kingdoms. It was, therefore, incumbent upon the Italians to combine from existing materials a literary language. By a fortunate coincidence, the most gifted writers arose in Tuscany, where the most promising of these dialects was spoken. Thus it happened that the Tuscan idiom became the standard for literary composition. It was felt, even by the least discerning, that the Latin language, no longer the living property of the nation, was not suited to express the inspirations of contemporary poets, however advantageously it might be retained for legal, theological, and historical works.

At the end of the Thirteenth Century, Guinicelli of Bologna and Cavalcanti of Florence gave greater finish and regularity, more scholarly perfection, and more literary merit to that style of [Pg 10] amorous poetry which they, in common with their contemporaries, so greatly admired in the Troubadours. Even in prose, valuable works were produced. The *Chronicle* of Dino Compagni has many passages deserving the highest praise. Those writers were worthy predecessors of the poet who was to give the *Divine Comedy* to the world, and first among the moderns was to equal, if, indeed, he did not in some respects excel, the greatest poets of antiquity.

[Pg 11]

CHAPTER II.

DANTE.

Durante (a name afterwards called for shortness Dante) was born in Florence in the month of May, 1265, the son of Aldighiero Aldighieri and Bella, his wife. "Of his ancestors, this much is evident through the mists of a very nebulous antiquity," says Symonds, in his *Introduction to the Study of Dante,* "that they were well-placed among the citizens of Florence, and it seems that their primitive name was not Aldighieri, but Elisei. Tradition differs about the origin of the Elisei. Some of Dante's biographers trace them to Roman colonists of Florence in the time of Julius Cæsar. Others, and these are the majority, derive them from one Eliseo, of the noble Roman house of Frangipani, or bread-breakers—so called by reason of some eminent act of public charity—who is said to have settled at Florence in the days of Charlemagne, or soon after. In any case, the Elisei were honourable in Florence, possessing castles in the country round and [Pg 12] towered houses in the city. They dwelt within the old Pomoerium, or primitive walled circuit, in the Via degli Speziali, near the Mercato Vecchio; this in itself was a sign of ancient blood. Dante prided himself upon his descent from the purest blood of Florentine citizens. The change in the name of Dante's family from Elisei to Aldighieri took place thus: Cacciaguida degli Elisei, who was born in 1106, married Aldighiera degli Aldigheri of Ferrara, and he had a son by her whom he called Aldighiero. This son gave his Christian name to his descendants, whilst a brother of Cacciaguida continued the line and name of the Elisei. Cacciaguida followed Conrad III to the Crusades in 1147, was knighted by him, and died, at the age of forty-two, in the Holy Land."

The poet introduces this ancestor in one of the finest passages of the *Paradiso.*

Dante was educated by Brunetto Latini, the author of a curious poem, entitled the *Tesoro,* in which the germ of many thoughts of the *Divine Comedy* may be traced. He was subsequently placed by his grateful pupil in the centre of Hell. Dante possessed a thorough knowledge of the science of his day, and we may give his instructor credit for having carefully developed the brilliant abilities of his pupil. He is said to have studied music and to have shown decided skill in [Pg 13] painting.

His father died when he was nine or ten years of age. Shortly before his death, he introduced his son to Folco Portinari, a rich citizen of Florence, and to his daughter, Beatrice, who was his first, and probably his only, love. Although but a child, he was struck by her beauty. "Her dress on that day," he says, "was of a most noble colour, a subdued and goodly crimson, girdled and adorned as best suited with her very tender age." Beatrice died when Dante was in his twenty-sixth year, and the blow was so great that it was long before he was comforted by philosophy and study. She became, in his mind, the personification of everything great and noble. In the *Divine Comedy* she appears as his guide from the summit of Purgatory to Paradise.

In 1292, he married Gemma Donati, by whom he had seven children. Thus, it can hardly have been an unhappy marriage; but as she did not follow him into exile, and as he never mentions her in any of his extant letters, we may suppose there was no very ardent affection on either side.

The latter part of Dante's life was destined to be marked with many sorrows and disasters. He was dragged into the vortex of faction and civil war, and was wrecked with many less noteworthy mariners.

He was made Prior of Florence in 1300, and so eminent was he that he was appointed one of the four ambassadors who were sent to Pope Boniface Viii to complain of the French intervention under Charles of Valois. Before they returned, Charles had entered Florence; Dante and his companions were outlawed, his property was confiscated, his house pillaged, and he never again was suffered to return to the city of his birth. [Pg 14]

Tradition says, and I think it is supported by the internal evidence of the poem, that he wrote the first seven cantos of the *Inferno* in Florence before his exile, and that the beginning of the eighth canto:

"Io dico, seguitando,"

is a proof that the poem was continued after having been laid aside for a time, otherwise the word "seguitando" would be unnecessary to the sense, and it is not in Dante's style to admit unnecessary words into his lines. If this reasoning hold good, we can determine pretty accurately the date of the *Divine Comedy.* The poet feigns that he descended into the infernal regions on Good Friday of the year 1300; his exile began in 1301; therefore, the latter part of 1300 very probably saw him write the first seven cantos of the work. In the sixth canto there is an allusion [Pg 15] to his exile, and to the defeat of his party; but that may have been inserted afterwards.

Cruel was the blow that fell upon him, doubly cruel after so many years of prosperity and honour. He had to consort with unworthy companions; he had to eat the bitter bread of dependence; he was severed from those whom he loved most dearly; and, as he makes Cacciaguida foretell in Paradise, "this was the first arrow with which the bow of exile struck him."

"Tu lascerai ogni cosa diletta
Più caramente; e questo è quello strale
Che l'arco dell esilio pria saetta."

The reader may peruse in the seventeenth canto of the *Paradiso,* his concise and pathetic account of the sorrows of his later years. Clad in the form of prophecy, it constitutes one of the grandest passages in the whole poem. Some letters, written during his exile, are still extant and breathe a spirit so lofty that versification alone is wanting to equal them to his sublimest inspirations. Amid all the troubles of his eventful life, he still found leisure to study, meditate, and write, and when he died in Ravenna in 1321, the first great poem of modern times was completed.

"Many volumes have been written," says Carlyle, "by way of commentary on Dante and his book; [Pg 16] yet, on the whole, with no great result. His biography is, as it were, irrecoverably lost for us. An unimportant, wandering, sorrow-stricken man, not much note was taken of him while he lived; and the most of that has vanished, in the long space that now intervenes. It is five centuries since he ceased writing and living here. After all commentaries, the Book itself is mainly what we know of him. The Book, and one might add, that Portrait commonly attributed to Giotto, which, looking on it, you cannot help inclining to think genuine, whoever did it. To me it is a most touching face; perhaps of all faces that I know, the most so. Lonely there, painted as on vacancy, with the simple laurel wound round it; the deathless sorrow and pain, the known victory which is also deathless; significant of the whole history of Dante. I think it is the mournfullest face that ever was painted from reality; an altogether tragic, heart-affecting face. There is in it, as foundation of it, the softness, tenderness, gentle affection as of a child; but all this is as if congealed into sharp contradiction, into abnegation, isolation, proud, hopeless pain. A soft, ethereal soul, looking out so stern, implacable, grim, trenchant, as from imprisonment of thick-ribbed ice. Withal it is a silent pain, too, a silent, scornful one; the lip is curled in a kind of god-like disdain of the thing [Pg 17] that is eating out his heart, as if it were withal a mean insignificant thing, as if he whom it had power to torture and strangle, were greater than it. The face of one wholly in protest, and life-long unsurrendering battle against the world. Affection all converted into indignation; slow, equable, silent, like that of a god. The eye, too, it looks out as in a kind of *surprise,* a kind of inquiry, why the world was of such a sort? This is Dante, so he looks, this 'voice of ten silent centuries,' and sing us his 'mystic, unfathomable song.'"

Dante is one of those authors who concentrate all their greatness in one stupendous work. The *Vita Nuova* has many beauties, the *Convito* deserves to be read, the Latin Treatises offer numerous points of interest, but it is only in the *Divina Commedia* that he rises to the height of his sublimity. He was singularly judicious, both in the choice of his subject and in the form of his verse. The Terza Rima carries the reader onwards in its progress, calmly, nobly, irresistibly. Had the work been written in prose, it would not have commanded the attention of future ages, so great is the embalming power of verse. A fine prose work may be neglected in the course of ages; a fine poetical work, never. Had the work been written in Latin verse, as indeed it was begun, it [Pg 18] would only be a study for the curious and not a possession for all humanity.

The vivid power of Dante's imagination, the intense and rugged strength of his thoughts, and the graphic realism with which he presents the scenes of Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven to his readers, are above praise and can find no parallel in the works of other poets. Milton surpasses him in sustained grandeur, but in picturesqueness the English poet does not attempt to rival the Florentine.

Dante's Poem is so well known that it is needless to insist upon particular beauties. All cultivated readers are familiar with them, if not in the original, at least in translations. If any fault is to be found in the poem, it is that it somewhat falls off; the *Purgatorio* is not quite so fine as the *Inferno*; the *Paradiso,* not quite so fine as the *Purgatorio.* The poet sometimes has an unfortunate tendency only to hint at the histories of the spirits he meets, so that we are indebted to his commentators rather than to himself for stories worthy to be chronicled in immortal verse. His style is not always free from coarseness on the one hand, and from obscurity on the other. But in so noble an achievement it would be mean to dwell on occasional blemishes, instead of being grateful to the poet who has presented us with a work, perhaps in many respects, the noblest production of the human mind.

As a specimen of Dante's Poem, I quote the last canto of the *Inferno,* in Cary's translation. The reader will notice the curious passage that seems to prove that Dante was aware, four hundred years before Newton, of the law of gravitation:

CANTO XXXIV.

"The banners of Hell's Monarch do come forth
Towards us; therefore look," so spake my guide,
"If thou discern him." As when breathes a cloud
Heavy and dense, or when the shades of night
Fall on our hemisphere, seems view'd from far
A windmill, which the blast stirs briskly round,
Such was the fabric then methought I saw.

To shield me from the wind, forthwith I drew
Behind my guide: no covert else was there.

Now came I (and with fear I bid my strain
Record the marvel) where the souls were all
Whelmed underneath, transparent, as through glass
Pellucid the frail stem. Some prone were laid,
Others stood upright, this upon the soles,
That on his head, a third with face to feet
Arched like a bow. When to the point we came
Whereat my guide was pleas'd that I should see
The creature eminent in beauty once,
He from before me stepp'd and made me pause.
"Lo!" he exclaimed, "lo Dis! and lo the place
Where thou hast need to arm thy heart with
strength."

How frozen and how faint I then became,
Ask me not, reader! for I write it not,
Since words would fail to tell thee of my state.
I was not dead nor living. Think thyself,
If quick conception work in thee at all,
How I did feel. That Emperor who sways
The Realm of Sorrow, at mid breast from th' ice
Stood forth; and I in stature am more like
A giant, than the giants are his arms.
Mark now how great that whole must be, which suits
With such a part. If he were beautiful
As he is hideous now, and yet did dare
To scowl upon his Maker, well from him
May all our misery flow. Oh what a sight!
How passing strange it seem'd when I did spy
Upon his head three faces: one in front
Of hue vermilion, th' other two with this
Midway each shoulder join'd and at the crest;
The right 'twixt wan and yellow seem'd: the left
To look on, such as come from whence old Nile
Stoops to the lowlands. Under each shot forth
Two mighty wings, enormous as became
A bird so vast. Sails never such I saw
Outstretch'd on the wide sea. No plumes had they,
But were in texture like a bat, and these
He flapp'd i' th' air, that from him issued still
Three winds, wherewith Cocytus to its depth
Was frozen. At six eyes he wept; the tears
Adown three chins distill'd with bloody foam.
At every mouth his teeth a sinner champ'd
Bruis'd as with pond'rous engine, so that three
Were in this guise tormented. But far more

Than from that gnawing, was the foremost pang'd
By the fierce rending, whence ofttimes the back
Was stript of all its skin. "That upper spirit,
Who hath worse punishment," so spake my guide,

"Is Judas, he that hath his head within
And plies the feet without. Of th' other two,
Whose heads are under, from the murky jaw
Who hangs, is Brutus: lo! how he doth writhe
And speaks not! Th' other Cassius, that appears
So large of limb. But night now re-ascends,
And it is time for parting. All is seen."

I clipp'd him round the neck, for so he bade;
And noting time and place, he, when the wings
Enough were op'd, caught fast the shaggy sides,
And down from pile to pile descending stept
Between the thick fell and the jagged ice.

Soon as he reached the point whereat the thigh
Upon the swelling of the haunches turns,
My leader there with pain and struggling hard
Turn'd round his head, where his feet stood before,
And grappled at the fell, as one who mounts,
That into hell methought we turned again.

"Expect that by such stairs as these," thus spake
The teacher, panting like a man forespent,
"We must depart from evil so extreme."
Then at a rocky opening issued forth,
And placed me on a brink to sit, next join'd
With wary step my side. I raised mine eyes,
Believing that I Lucifer should see
Where he was lately left, but saw him now
With legs held upward. Let the grosser sort,
Who see not what the point was I had pass'd,
Bethink them if sore toil oppress'd me then.

"Arise," my master cried, "upon thy feet.
The way is long, and much uncouth the road;
And now within one hour and half of noon
The sun returns." It was no palace hall
Lofty and luminous wherein we stood.
But natural dungeon where ill footing was
And scant supply of light. "Ere from th' abyss
I sep'rate," thus when risen I began,
"My guide! vouchsafe few words to set me free
From error's thraldom. Where is now the ice?
How standeth he in posture thus reversed?
And how from eve to morn in space so brief
Hath the sun made his transit?" He in few
Thus answering spake: "Thou deemest thou art still
On th' other side the centre, where I grasp'd
Th' abhorred worm, that boreth through the world.
Thou wast on th' other side so long as I
Descended; when I turn'd, thou didst o'erpass
That point, to which from every part is dragg'd
All heavy substance. Thou art now arriv'd
Under the hemisphere opposed to that,
Which the great continent doth overspread,
And underneath whose canopy expir'd
The Man, that was born sinless, and so liv'd.
Thy feet are planted on the smallest sphere,
Whose other aspect is Judecca. Morn
Here rises, when there evening sets: and he,
Whose shaggy pile was scal'd, yet standeth fix'd,
As at the first. On this part he fell down
From heav'n; and th' earth, here prominent before,
Through fear of him did veil her with the sea,
And to our hemisphere retir'd. Perchance
To shun him was the vacant space left here
By what of firm land on this side appears,
That sprang aloof." There is a place beneath,
From Belzebub as distant, as extends
The vaulted tomb, discover'd not by sight,

But by the sound of brooklet, that descends
This way along the hollow of a rock,
Which, as it winds with no impetuous course,
The wave hath eaten. By that hidden way
My guide and I did enter, to return
To the fair world: and heedless of repose [Pg 23]
We climb'd, he first, I following his steps,
Till on our view the beauteous lights of heav'n
Dawn'd through a circular opening in the cave.
Thence issuing we again beheld the stars.

CHAPTER III. [Pg 24]

PETRARCH.

Unlike the life of Dante, of which so few particulars have come down to us that our curiosity is rather excited than satisfied by the information we possess, the life of Petrarch is illustrated in its minutest details by extracts from his works and correspondence.

Francesco Petrarca was born at Arezzo on the twentieth of July, 1304. His family originally came from the little village of Ancisa, fifteen miles from Florence, but for many years his ancestors had been settled in that city. His father, Pietro di Parenzo, was familiarly called Petracco, in Latin, Petracchus, whence his son was designated "Petracchi filius," and thus the poet evolved the more euphonious name of Petrarca. His father was a Notary Public, and seems to have held some responsible posts, but he belonged to the party of the "Bianchi," and was exiled in 1302 with Dante and many others. His property was confiscated, and he never returned to the city of his [Pg 25] birth. In 1313, he went with his wife and children to Avignon, where the Popes then held their court. He sent his children to the quieter neighbourhood of Carpentras, and there, under an able master, Petrarch studied Latin, and the acquaintance of the ancient writers kindled him in an enthusiasm that only ended with his life. He was destined for the study of the law, and in 1318 he went to Montpellier, and in 1322 to Bologna, but he felt little inclination for this science, and on the death of his father in 1326 he returned to Avignon and devoted himself to literature and society.

His name is inseparably connected with that of Laura, and it was on Good Friday of the year 1327 that he met her for the first time.

"Era il giorno, ch'ai Sol si scoloraro
Per la pietà del suo Fattore i rai,
Quando i' fuipreso, e non me ne guardai,
Che i he' vostr' occhi, Donna, mi legaro."
Sonnet 3.

From the researches of her descendant, the Abbé de Sade, there can be no doubt that Laura was the wife of Hugo de Sade, and the daughter of Audibert de Noves. She died in 1348 of the Black Death, which was then devastating Europe, and her loss inspired the poet with some of his noblest effusions. The attachment was perfectly platonic, nor does it seem to have excited any [Pg 26] adverse comments among his contemporaries, for similar homage had been paid by poetry to beauty from the first appearance of the Troubadours.

Petrarch was fortunate in acquiring the friendship and favour of some of the most eminent men of his time. Jacopo Colonna, Bishop of Lombés, invited him to his palace at the foot of the Pyrenees. He gratified his intense desire to see the world by travelling through France and Germany, and subsequently visiting many cities of Italy. In Rome he was welcomed by Stefano Colonna, the head of that illustrious family, but Rome was then deserted and lonely, and Petrarch soon returned to the more brilliant circles of Avignon. He found a delicious retreat fifteen miles from Avignon, at Vaucluse, a pleasant valley, watered by the river Sorga. Here he produced some of his loveliest Italian poems, and some of his most elaborate Latin compositions. So uncertain are the vicissitudes of literary taste, and so little do even great poets know where their real strength lies, that Petrarch treated his sonnets and canzoni, to which alone he is indebted for his immortality, as the amusement of his leisure hours, and devoted all his care and study to those Latin works which are now read only by the curious. He composed a ponderous epic poem in [Pg 27] Latin hexameters, and gave it to the world under the title of *Africa.* It procured for him an immense reputation. The whole literary world read it with avidity, and all Europe resounded with his praises. Paris and Rome simultaneously invited him to be crowned with the laurel within their walls. He decided to accept the invitation of Rome; but before the ceremony he went to Naples, where he was received with enthusiasm by King Robert, who was so enraptured with the *Africa* that he begged it should be dedicated to himself. This request the poet gladly granted, and he left for Rome laden with signs of Royal favour. He was crowned in the Capitol by the Senator Orso dell' Anguillara, on the 8th of April, 1341, and the laurel wreath bestowed upon him he hung up as a votive offering in the Church of St. Peter.

Petrarch was one of those who succeed in everything; and, as if the distinctions already showered upon him were not enough, he was, when visiting Parma, invited to the Court by Azzo da Correggio, and within a short time sent as his envoy to Clement VI at Avignon. He wrote a Latin

poem advising the Pope to return to Rome, and his Holiness, though he did not take the advice, was so delighted with the poem that he bestowed a valuable benefice on its author.

From the end of May, 1342, until September, 1343, Petrarch resided chiefly at Vaucluse, with occasional visits to Avignon. He was occupied writing his work, *De Contemptu Mundi,* and studying Greek under Barlaam, who was one of those emigrants from Greece willing to impart their language to the few desirous of acquiring it. No more zealous disciple could have been found than Petrarch. He spent large sums, like his friend, Boccaccio, in collecting manuscripts, and he even copied many rare works with his own hand. He seems to have been in possession of some productions of classical writers, which were subsequently lost during the interval between his death and the invention of printing. [Pg 28]

When Rome rose against the tyranny of the noble houses, Colonna and Orsini, and when Cola di Rienzi proclaimed himself the Tribune of the People, Petrarch's imagination took fire, and he hailed the deliverer in prose and verse. Cardinal Colonna was deeply offended at his taking the part of one whom he regarded as a rebel and a traitor. This diversity of opinion seems to have induced him to leave the Papal Court, and for some years he resided in various towns of Italy. He was in Parma, where he had just received a valuable benefice attached to the Cathedral, when he heard of the death of his beloved Laura. The blow was terrible, and he long refused to be comforted. But if he lost his love, he gained a friend, for in the year of Jubilee, 1350, on his way to Rome, he made the acquaintance of Boccaccio at Florence. This was his first visit to the Tuscan city, and the Florentines offered to restore his father's confiscated property, on condition that he should lecture at their newly-founded University. But this he refused, and nothing came of the offer. For many years he lived in Milan, the favoured guest of the Visconti. There is a pretty story of Galleazzo Visconti telling his little son in jest, at a brilliant entertainment he was giving, to find out the wisest man present, and to bring him forward. The child looked at the assembled company, and then went up to Petrarch and led him to his father, to the admiration of all beholders. "So clearly," says Schopenhauer, who quotes the anecdote, "does Nature stamp the greatness of the mind on the countenance, that even a child can perceive it." [Pg 29]

Petrarch was sent by the Visconti to Prague, as envoy to the Emperor Charles IV, and afterwards in the same capacity to King John of France. He subsequently resided in Padua and Venice, and in 1370 he retired to the village of Arqua, in the Euganean mountains, where he was destined to pass the remainder of his days. He was found on the morning of the 18th of July, 1374, dead in his library, with his head resting on a book. [Pg 30]

The host of imitators who, without a spark of Petrarch's genius, mimicked his mannerisms for centuries, produced at last the inevitable reaction, and of recent years many censors have insisted on his faults, while ignoring his beauties. But Petrarch was assuredly one of the greatest lyric poets that ever lived. The melody of his sonnets and the splendour of his odes are unrivalled in the literature of his country, nor did any Italian lyrist rise to an equal height until in the Nineteenth Century Leopardi combined inspiration no less ardent with a style more natural, simple and direct. Petrarch is one of those poets who present nothing to their readers in a sharp and graphic style, but everything involved in a rich haze of trope and metaphor. From this tendency, it cannot be denied, he becomes occasionally artificial and forced, but he is far more frequently soul-stirring and magnificent. Unlike Dante, whose chief inspirers were hatred and indignation, he is prompted by love and reverence: love for his country and for Laura, and reverence for all that is noble and heroic. His sublime ode, *Spirto gentil,* addressed to Rienzi, rouses the spirit like a trumpet, even after the lapse of so many centuries. How noble is the invocation to the heroes of ancient Rome: "O grandi Scipioni! O fedel Bruto!" And the conclusion is superb: [Pg 31]

"Sopra il monte Tarpeo, Canzon, vedrai,
Un cavalier[1] ch' Italia tutta onora,
Pensoso più d'altrui che di sè stesso.
Digli: Un che non ti vide ancor da presso,
Se non come per fama uom s'innamora,
Dice che Roma ogni ora,
Con gli occhi di dolor bagnati e molli
Ti chier mercè da tutti sette i colli."

Magnificent is the Ode to Italy, *Italia Mia,* and even superior, if possible, is the poem addressed to Giacomo Colonna in favour of another Crusade. Marvellous in their delicate beauty are the Odes addressed to Laura, *In quella parte dov' Amor mi sprona,* and, *Di pensier in pensier, di monte in monte.* But to enumerate the poems in which extraordinary beauties are to be found would be to enumerate nearly the whole collection. The tenderness and fire, the melody and richness of his style are equalled by no poet in any language unless it be by Tennyson in his finest lyric effusions, especially in the *In Memoriam.*

That Petrarch brought the Sonnet to the highest point of perfection is universally allowed, and to those readers who wish to enter into the details of the subject, I can recommend *The Sonnet, its origin and history,* by Charles Tomlinson. [Pg 32]

Dante was altogether a man of the Middle Ages, dwelling upon the past, and scarcely bestowing a thought upon the future; but Petrarch was in many respects surprisingly modern, and both in his Latin Prose and in his Italian Verse we can find many passages instinct with the fire of hope and the belief in progress.

[1] Rienzi.

CHAPTER IV.

BOCCACCIO AND THE PROSE WRITERS OF THE FOURTEENTH CENTURY.

Giovanni Boccaccio was born in 1313 in Paris, the son of a Florentine merchant and a Frenchwoman. His father had property in the hamlet of Certaldo, and the author always signed himself "Boccaccio da Certaldo." He was destined, first for commerce, then for the study of the law, but finding neither avocation congenial, he after his father's death, devoted himself entirely to his favourite pursuits. He was honoured with the favour of King Robert of Naples and with the love of the King's daughter, Maria, whom he celebrates in his poems under the name of Fiammetta. His zeal for the writers of antiquity was not inferior to that of Petrarch. He sent for Leontius Pilatus to teach him Greek. He devoted large sums to the purchase and reproduction of the works of classical writers. He seems to have been an amiable and honourable man, free alike from pride [Pg 34] like that of Dante, and from vanity like that of Petrarch. He repented in later years of the somewhat frivolous character of many of his writings, took holy orders, and spent the last days of his life at Certaldo. When Florence endowed a chair for the explanation of the *Divine Comedy,* Boccaccio was the first to be appointed. He wrote a life of Dante and began a commentary on the *Inferno,* which, however, he did not live to finish, dying at Certaldo on the 21st of December, 1375.

Boccaccio was a most fertile writer, both in Latin and in Italian. His Latin works have but little merit and are vastly inferior to those of Petrarch in strength and originality of thought. His Italian poems are heavy and uninteresting, but he has the credit of inventing the "Ottava Rima," the stanza in which Ariosto and Tasso subsequently wrote their immortal epics. Praise-worthy as these works were for the time in which they were written, he would not occupy a high position in the literature of his country, had he not proved himself in other productions to be the first great writer of Italian prose. His romantic stories, *Il Filocopo, La Fiammetta, l'Admeto,* are written in a flowing and pleasing style; his *Life of Dante* and *Commentary on the Inferno* are valuable for the [Pg 35] information they impart, but the crowning glory of his literary career is the collection of stories published under the title of *Il Decamerone.*

The terrible plague that swept over the earth in the middle of the Thirteenth Century, known in history as the "Black Death,"[1] ravaged Florence with peculiar malignity, and Boccaccio feigns that five ladies and their cavaliers took refuge in a villa in the neighbourhood and beguiled their leisure by telling stories to each other. Being a collection of tales told by various characters, the *Decamerone* bears a certain resemblance to another memorable work of the Fourteenth Century, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales,* but happier than his great contemporary, Boccaccio lived to complete his design.

The work opens with a noble description of the Plague of Florence, but this gloomy and terrible introduction gives no forecast of the light, festive and occasionally indecorous character of many of the tales. Others, however, are highly picturesque and even poetical, and some have a special interest for English readers as being the sources whence Shakespeare drew *All's Well that Ends* [Pg 36] *Well,* and *Cymbeline,*—Dryden, *Theodore and Honoria* and *Sigismonda and Guiscardo,* and Keats *Isabella, or the Pot of Basil.*

Boccaccio had every quality of a great novelist. His style is varied, flexible and animated, and his idiom is so purely Tuscan that it was held up as a standard by the *Accademia della Crusca,* and if any fault can be found with it, it is that the copiousness of his vocabulary sometimes leads him into florid and redundant amplifications. His characters are drawn with considerable skill. His dialogue is invariably natural and appropriate. His incidents, though sometimes overstepping the limits of decorum, are ingenious and entertaining. The work gives a brilliant panorama of the men and manners of Italy in the Fourteenth Century.

No writer has derived more advantage from the admiration of other writers than Boccaccio. Great poets are indebted to him for the plots of some of their most successful works. Great painters have vied with each other in illustrating the brilliant scenes of his *Decamerone.* Great philologians and grammarians have expressed their admiration for the purity and elegance of his style. Brilliant as his services were to the literature of his country, they have received a more than ample measure of reward from the gratitude of posterity.

Italy produced in the Fourteenth Century many other prose writers of note, though none so [Pg 37] eminent as Boccaccio.

First and foremost we must mention the invaluable *Chronicle* of Giovanni Villani. This historian rose in the service of the Florentine Republic until he became Prior. He was one of the many victims of the Black Death, and his unfinished work was continued by his brother Matteo, and this continuation was completed by Matteo's son, Filippo. All these are quoted as classics by the Accademia della Crusca. According to competent judges, Giovanni was the most brilliant, Matteo the most noteworthy for the important events he narrates, and Filippo remarkable rather for industry and research than for ability as a writer.

The *Travels* of Marco Polo, a Venetian, were an inestimable contribution to the knowledge of remote countries. For centuries he lay very unjustly under the suspicion of falsehood and exaggeration, and it was only at a comparatively recent date that his veracity, nay, his scrupulous exactness, received a tardy vindication.

Jacopo Passavanti, a Dominican. Friar, wrote a devotional book, entitled, *Lo Specchio della*

Penitenza, written in prose so musical and flowing as to be preferred by some to the prose of Boccaccio, because Passavanti never indulges in the over-elaboration sometimes to be detected in the pages of the *Decamerone.* [Pg 38]

Giovanni Da Catignano known in the Calendar as the Blessed John of the Cells, after a dissolute youth was converted by the ardent exhortations of the Abbot of Vallombrosa, and in deep contrition ended his days as a hermit. Some letters from this interesting penitent are extant, written in a style so exquisitely Tuscan that they are quoted by the Accademia della Crusca as models of propriety and elegance.

Another canonized celebrity, Saint Catherine of Siena, is no less remarkable for the beauty of her style than for the beauty of her character.

A Life of Saint Francis of Assisi, entitled *Fioretti di San Francesco,* has been highly praised for the freshness and simplicity of the language. The piety or the modesty of the author induced him to conceal his identity.

These religious writers, though treating of subjects so different, almost equalled Boccaccio in perfection of style, but the two authors who produced collections of stories somewhat similar to his, Franco Sacchetti and Ser Giovanni Fiorentino, were very far indeed from approaching his mastery.

On reviewing the literary development of Italy in the Fourteenth Century, we find that the language attained the fullest perfection both in prose and verse, only the lighter kinds of poetry [Pg 39] remaining uncultivated. The appearance in one century of two such great poets as Dante and Petrarch was quite phenomenal and threw a lustre over the age which has attracted the whole world. But another fact, less universally known, is equally worthy of attention, namely the extraordinary merit of the prose writers of the period. It may well be doubted whether any compositions in Italian prose of a later date exhibit the rare qualities of those of the Fourteenth Century. Leopardi, indeed, produced marvels of style, but they were the result of art and study, whereas the writers of the Fourteenth Century display an ease and a simplicity, a freshness and a graphic power, combined with the most exquisite lightness and harmony in their phrases, that must ever render them more admirable models than the artificial and laborious productions of later ages.

[1] For details on the subject of this most terrible pestilence, probably the worst that ever afflicted humanity, we may refer the reader to Father Gasquet's valuable and interesting work on the subject.

CHAPTER V. [Pg 40]

WRITERS OF THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY.

In striking contrast to the Fourteenth Century, the Fifteenth is conspicuous for a great dearth of eminent authors. The same may be noticed in the literary development of England. After the brilliant apparition of Chaucer, more than a hundred years elapsed before an eminent writer arose. This may be partly accounted for by the Civil Wars which devastated the island and brought misery and anarchy in their train. Widely different was the plight of Italy. There were wars and disturbances, it is true, but the wealth of the country became more enormous than ever, and great princes extended munificent patronage to science and learning. But all intellectual energies were directed, not to the cultivation of the Italian language, but to the study of the writers of antiquity. Greek and Latin were alone held in estimation, the vulgar tongue was contemptuously neglected.

The only eminent prose writer was Feo Belcari, a Florentine magistrate, who wrote the Lives of [Pg 41] the Blessed Giovanni Colombini and other Friars, and who reproduced the beauty and elegance of the best authors of the Fourteenth Century. He died at an advanced age in 1484.

Leon Battista Alberti was a universal genius. He distinguished himself as painter, sculptor and architect, but his Italian writings would hardly be of sufficient importance to mention, had not the dearth of names in this barren century made historians of literature thankful for any means of filling up the blank.

Leonardo Da Vinci wrote a *Treatise on Painting,* and he impressed upon all artists the necessity of being original, and of not copying their predecessors. It would have been well if the writers of the age had laid this injunction to heart as well as the painters, for as years advanced, the servile imitation of conventional forms became more and more the bane of Italian literature.

Pulci is celebrated for his mock-heroic poem, the *Morgante Maggiore.* The giant Morgante is the hero, but we also make the acquaintance of Orlando, Rinaldo, Charlemagne, and many other characters that appear in the more famous poems of Bojardo and Ariosto. It was unfortunate for Pulci that he had such great successors. He had abundance of wit and originality, but he had [Pg 42] neither the poetical imagination of Bojardo nor the magic style of Ariosto, so that it is no cause for astonishment that he fell into neglect.

Matteo Bojardo, Count of Scandiano, was born in 1430 and died in 1494. He was favoured by nature and fortune; a soldier and a statesman, he had every opportunity of enriching his mind with varied experiences, nor can we say that those opportunities were neglected. His *Orlando Innamorato,* which he did not live to finish, long as it is, displays great wealth of imagination and

considerable creative power; but unfortunately, his style is heavy and rough, and was completely eclipsed by the extraordinary merits of Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso,* which professes to be only a continuation of the earlier poem. Fifty years later, Berni entirely re-wrote Bojardo's work and certainly succeeded in giving it greater elegance, but he did not make it more interesting to modern readers. In truth, the knights of the epic cycle beginning with the *Morgante Maggiore* and ending in the Eighteenth Century with the *Ricciardetto,* appear terribly uninteresting in the present day, and it requires the picturesque and melodious style of a really great poet like Ariosto to entice the reader through the account of their numerous adventures.

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The celebrated scholar, Angelo Poliziano, shows a poetical mind in his poems, and his *Orfeo* may claim the credit of being the first dramatic work of any literary value in the Italian language. It has many lyric beauties and the choruses are spirited.[1]

His poem in Ottava Rima on a tournament given by Giniano de Medici, was interrupted by the tragic death of his patron in the conspiracy organised by the Pazzi family, nor was the loss of the remainder of the poem the least deplorable consequence of that great crime. Politian died in the prime of life in 1494. It is reasonable to suppose that if his years had been prolonged, he might have enriched the literature of his country with works of even greater beauty.

A poet of true tenderness and fire, but more remarkable for the extraordinary perfection of his Latin poems than for any other productions of his muse, was Jacopo Sannazzaro, a Neapolitan. He survived until the year 1530, but his Italian poems are the productions of his youth. His *Arcadia,* a pastoral romance in prose with poems interspersed, acquired a great celebrity and undoubtedly served as model to Sir Philip Sydney's work of the same name. It is tender and graceful, but the extreme unreality of the Nymphs and Shepherds makes it rather cloying to a modern taste. His Italian poems have not nearly so much melody and fire as those he wrote in Latin, which are, indeed, so perfect that they cannot be distinguished, as far as rhythm is concerned, from those of Virgil himself.

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These names practically exhaust the band of Italian writers of the Fifteenth Century, truly a meagre list, and in striking contrast to the countless painters who were an ornament to their country during the same period.

[1] The Chorus from the *Orfeo*—

"Noi seguiamo, Bacco, te;
Bacco, Bacco, evoè, evoè!"

is quoted by George Eliot in *Romola.*

[Pg 45]

CHAPTER VI.

ARIOSTO.

The Sixteenth Century had not seen many years before the world was presented with one of the most celebrated works in the Italian Language, a poem destined to acquire a reputation hardly inferior to that of Dante's great work, the *Orlando Furioso* of Ariosto.

Ludovico Ariosto was born at Reggio in Lombardy on the eighth of September, 1474. His father was attached to the Court of Ferrara, and he himself entered the services of Cardinal Ippolito d'Esté, brother to the Duke, but in what capacity is not accurately known. To the Cardinal he dedicated his great work, but received no thanks for the homage. He fell into complete disgrace by refusing to accompany his patron to Hungary. He then tried his luck with the reigning Duke, who was more generous than his kinsman, and who appointed the poet Governor of Garfagnana, a remote province of the Duchy, infested by brigands. He retained this post for three years, and brought the province into such excellent order that he acquired the love and esteem of the whole district.

[Pg 46]

When he returned to Ferrara, he enjoyed the highest consideration and favour of the Duke, who took great pleasure in the representation of his comedies. He was clandestinely married to a Florentine lady, by whom, however, he had no children. It is supposed that secrecy was kept in order to preserve some ecclesiastical revenues assigned to his share by the Cardinal. From previous connections he had two sons, on whom the Duke conferred patents of legitimacy. His descendants acquired considerable opulence, and became one of the first families of Ferrara. His son Orazio made himself remarkable by declaring, when the question of Torquato Tasso's superior genius roused the attention of Italy, that both poets had their particular beauties, for which opinion he was fiercely attacked by the zealots in his father's cause. In the Eighteenth Century, a Marquis Ariosto was intimate with Voltaire at Brussels. The last descendant of the poet, the Countess Ariosto, died at Ferrara in 1878, at the age of ninety years.

[Pg 47]

Ariosto gives us in his Satires with rare candour a picture of his mind and of the vicissitudes of his life. He was of a buoyant and open disposition, fond of pleasure and susceptible to the attractions of love, but faithful and sincere to his friends, and very generous to his numerous brothers and sisters. Titian was among his friends, and the great painter has preserved for us the features of the great poet. Curious anecdotes are told of his absence of mind when plunged in thought. Once he went through the streets of Ferrara in his dressing-gown, and was not aware of his apparel until an acquaintance accosted him and told him of the fact. He built himself a little house, and placed a Latin inscription over the entrance, and when someone remarked that it was

very small for one who had described such splendid edifices in his verses, he made answer that fabrics of the imagination are erected with little, and those of stone and mortar, with great, cost. His death, the result of indigestion, owing to the rapidity with which he took his meals in order to return to his studies, took place in 1533.

Fully to appreciate the genius of Ariosto we must understand the spirit of his age, for in him were developed, more fully than in any other writer of the period, the qualities, moral and intellectual, that gave their stamp to the memorable epoch of the Renaissance. The taste, the love of beauty, the classical simplicity, the vivid imagination, the ethereal lightness of touch characterising the [Pg 48] productions of the great contemporary painters, are united in as high perfection in the verse of Ariosto as on their canvas and frescoes. He had, with the merits of his age, also its shortcomings: the want of moral elevation, the frivolity, and the absence of religious enthusiasm.

He was, therefore, unfitted to be an heroic poet in the stiff old conventional style, and it was not until he had tried and abandoned many subjects chat he discovered himself to be something infinitely more striking and original. At last he discovered in the subject that inspired Pulci and Bojardo, an inexhaustible mine of poetry, and he took up the thread of narrative where Bojardo's unfinished poem had left it, and produced one of the greatest masterpieces in the whole range of literature.

He is matchless in the ease and clearness of his style, which never flags for one moment in the forty-six cantos of the work. He is said to have written with the greatest care, and to have corrected much and erased not a little. The stanza in the first canto:

> "La verginella è simile alla rosa,"

he wrote nine times before he was satisfied. [Pg 49] Galileo confessed that he owed the lucidity of his style to the assiduous study of Ariosto, but accused him of introducing verses for the sake of the rhyme; but we may pardon an occasional blemish in a work of such immense length.

He tells us himself that he saturated his mind with the spirit of the Latin poets, especially with Catullus, and in his works we find the urbanity of the Augustan age united to a strength and vivacity of imagination unknown to the Romans. With great judgement he improved on the hints they gave him, and the graceful manner in which he occasionally introduces mythological allusions seems to have been Milton's model when he did the same. Although he rates Virgil's flattery of Augustus at its proper value when he says:

> "Non era cosi saggio e grande Augusto
> Come la tromba di Virgilio suona,
> E per avere in poesia buon gusto
> Le proscrizioni inique gli perdona,"

he cannot himself be acquitted of the charge of gross flattery to the House of Este, without having even the excuse of Virgil, for it is well known with how little applause his patrons received his masterpiece. Some critics have asserted that he chose his subject merely because he could introduce the character of Ruggiero, ancestor to his patrons, but, fortunately for the glory of one of the greatest of human minds, there is no reason to believe this libel. [Pg 50] The subject recommended itself by its own merits to the poet, as any candid reader, after perusing the work, will confess. It is impossible to enter the maze of incidents in the *Orlando Furioso* without being bewildered, astonished, dazzled, and lost in all the wonders conjured up by the poet's fancy. His genius was essentially narrative (as is proved by his comedies being so vastly inferior to his Epic), and his subject allowed him to heap story on story, and to develop adventure out of adventure.

No finer compliment was ever paid by one poet to another, than by Byron to Scott, when he called him the Northern Ariosto, and the Italian poet the Southern Scott,

> "Who, like the Ariosto of the North, worth."
> Sang ladye-love and war, romance and knightly

It was not a mere compliment, but a very just parallel, and it would be difficult to decide which of the two poets was the greater. Scott had certainly more power of delineating character; but Ariosto had, if not the richer, the more vivid imagination. If we take only Scott's poetical works into consideration, Ariosto would have the advantage; but if the prose romances of Scott are thrown into the balance, they incline the scales in his favour. [Pg 51] Both poets were, as Byron called them, bards of chivalry, but Scott's chivalry was that of the soul, and Ariosto's too often only that of the sword. Perhaps we may come to a satisfactory conclusion by saying that Ariosto was the greater, and Scott the nobler, poet.

Ariosto's rapidity of style is such that I know of no poem more concise than this Epic, containing over forty thousand lines. One of his tricks to arrest the attention, or to tantalize the curiosity of the reader, is to break off a story in the middle, passing on to other incidents, and concluding the interrupted episode in a later canto. The graceful badinage with which he amuses us when the interest threatens to flag, is most judiciously introduced, for such a subject treated with solemn glumness and heavy pomp would become irksome in the extreme.

Every canto has an introduction, as ingenious in thought as it is beautiful in expression. The most interesting Introduction is probably that of the last canto, where he represents his contemporaries congratulating him on the completion of so arduous a work; but others deserve scarcely less praise; for instance, that on jealousy, and that in which he enumerates the great painters of the age, amongst others, Michael Angelo:

> "Quel che a par sculpe e colora,
> Michel, più che mortal, Angel divino."

The rapidity of his transitions is truly amazing. He whirls the reader in two lines from one end of the world to the other. When we are harassed and wearied by the breathless speed of his Pegasus, he pauses, lavishing all the riches of his mind on a description or an incident. Here he reveals himself the wonderful poet he is. The maiden chained to a rock and about to be devoured by the sea-monster; Zerbino and Isabella, Ginevra and Ariodante; above all, Alcina and her magic garden; and, not inferior to any passage in the greatest poets, the frenzy of Orlando: these are only a few of the wonderful passages that place his Epic among the noblest productions of the human mind. [Pg 52]

His style is, perhaps, if not the most lofty, yet the most perfect of any Italian poet; it is so sweetly varied, so gracefully and judiciously adorned with metaphors and tropes, so picturesque in description, so vivid in narrative, so exquisitely graduated to impart the suitable colouring to the poet's thoughts. Perhaps the only quality it lacks, is the expression of deep emotion, which his joyous and animated verse seldom attains. Nor can it be said that he ever displays great depth of thought, so that we seek in vain in his works for those marvellous flashes that irradiate the mystery of things. With this want is connected the absence of striking individuality in many of his characters; they are Knights and Saracens such as tradition supplied. When he chooses, however, he can individualize his figures, like Angelica, or Orlando and Alcina, with great success, and many observations interspersed throughout the work, show keen insight into human nature. Voltaire, an ardent admirer of this poet, said he had more knowledge of the human heart than is to be found in all epics and novels from Homer's *Iliad* down to Richardson's *Pamela.* He regretted Madame du Deffand had not learnt Italian in order to read so admirable a poet. He says in one of his last poems: [Pg 53]

"Je relis l'Arioste ou même la Pucelle."

The *Pucelle,* indeed, was written in emulation of the *Orlando Furioso* which it resembles no more than a statue of Silenus resembles the Jupiter of Otricoli.

No one represented more truthfully the effect produced by Ariosto on the mind than Leopardi in the following lines:

"Nascevi ai dolci sogni intanto, e il primo
Sole splendeati in vista,
Cantor vago dell' arme e degl' amori,
Che in età della nostra assai men trista
Empièr la vita di felici errori, [Pg 54]
Nova speme d'Italia. O torri, O celle,
O donne, O cavalieri,
O giardini, O palagi! a voi pensando,
In mille vane amenità si perde
La mente mia."

Ariosto began his great poem in 1505, at the age of thirty-one, and finished it in 1516; but the year before his death he published an edition with countless alterations and improvements, and with six additional cantos, and it is in the latter form that it has descended to posterity. At his death he left five cantos of an unfinished epic, entitled *Rinaldo Ardito,* in which many characters of the *Orlando* reappear; but the fragment is in a very imperfect state and by no means approaches the beauty of the completed work.

CHAPTER VII. [Pg 55]

POETS CONTEMPORARY WITH ARIOSTO.

The age of Ariosto is remarkable for the first appearance of blank verse in the Italian language. The *Italia Liberata* of Trissino, on the subject of the victories of Belisarius over the Goths, is the first work in that metre. Trissino thought himself a second Homer, and his epic is full of injudicious imitations of the *Iliad.* The scene between Jupiter and Juno on Mount Ida is transferred to Justinian and Theodora, in the Palace of Constantinople, with very voluptuous amplifications More than with this ponderous epic, Trissino did his country service by writing the first Italian tragedy, *Sofonisba,* a work containing passages almost worthy of Euripides. With a style less languid and prosaic, Trissino might have achieved considerable success in the drama.

The poet who came nearest to Ariosto in elegance of style, though far indeed from possessing equal fire and genius, was Francesco Berni, mentioned in a previous chapter, as having recast the *Orlando Innamorato* of Bojardo. He cannot have had a very original mind, or he would not have submitted to the drudgery of re-writing, line for line, the work of another man, when he might have been employed on poems of his own; but he had plenty of vivacity and raciness, as his Satires and Sonnets attest. So popular did they become, that light and comic poetry came to be called after him, *Poesia Bernesca.* His end was more tragic than his works. Unfortunately for himself, he lived in Florence in the intimacy of the Medici family. A bitter feud arose between the Duke Alexander and Cardinal Ippolito. The Duke endeavoured to bribe Berni to poison the Cardinal, and on his refusing to be a party to so terrible a crime, Alexander had him poisoned in his turn, lest he should reveal the secret of his guilt. [Pg 56]

Luigi Alamanni was an indefatigable writer of poetry. He wrote two enormous epics, *Giron il*

Cortese and the *Avarchide;* but it would require the musical diction of Ariosto to make such productions live; and, unfortunately, Alamanni, though a scholarly and painstaking writer, had nothing like Ariosto's powers of versification. The work by which he is most honourably remembered is a didactic poem, *La Coltivazione,* on the same subject as the *Georgics.* [Pg 57]

Giovanni Rucellai, a nephew of Lorenzo the Magnificent, was also indebted to the Georgics for his poem, *Le Api* (on Bees), in blank verse, of which there is an excellent defence in the introductory lines, quite the most original and pleasing passage in the poem.

Monsignor Giovanni Della Casa acquired an immense reputation in his own age for his works in prose and verse, in Latin and Italian; but as his merit consists exclusively in the finished style—his thoughts not rising above conventionality—he has been neglected for writers combining equal, if not greater, beauty of language with more originality of thought.

Annibal Caro rendered signal service to his country by giving it a spirited translation of the *Æneid,* and his works in prose and verse are all characterised by vigour of style. He rose from a humble origin to considerable wealth and prominence, and he became notorious by reason of a bitter feud with a contemporary critic of the name of Castelvetro. He had written a poem in praise of the House of Valois, "Venite all'ombra de' gran gigli d'oro," and Castelvetro wrote a sharp and acrimonious criticism upon it, to which he retorted in his *Apologia* with almost insane [Pg 58] rancour. Castelvetro was not tardy in replying, and Caro is suspected of having used all his influence to ruin the career of his adversary. But it is painful to dwell upon these ebullitions of spite, unfortunately too frequent in the annals of literature.

Cardinal Bembo was a writer fastidiously elegant. He is reported to have possessed forty portfolios, in the first of which he put the first draft of his works; in the second, the second; and so on until the fortieth revision reached the fortieth receptacle, after which alone would he suffer the work to see the light. His productions are such as might be expected from a man so minutely laborious. He is more intent upon words than upon realities. His poetry is modelled on Petrarch, his prose on Boccaccio. He wrote a *History of Venice* in twelve books, originally in Latin, translating it himself into Italian. A dialogue, entitled *Gli Asolani,* is interesting to English readers from its similarity of title to Browning's *Asolando.* The name is taken from Asolo, a spot on the mainland not far from Venice, whither he loved to retire, as Browning did three hundred years later. His letters are esteemed his best production, being less over-elaborated in style than his other works. His Latin works are entirely modelled on those of Cicero.

Francesco Grazzini, surnamed Il Lasca, was a sort of inferior Berni in his poems, but he is [Pg 59] remarkable as one of the founders of the Florentine Accademia della Crusca.

Bernardino Rota, a Neapolitan, produced some really pathetic poems on the death of his wife.

The Sixteenth Century was remarkable for three poetesses of considerable merit: Vittoria Colonna, Gaspara Stampa, and Veronica Gambara. Vittoria Colonna was the widow of the Marquis of Pescara, and dedicates many of her verses to his memory. Gaspara Stampa, a native of Padua, was deeply in love with Collatino Collalto, and gave utterance to her passion in numerous Sonnets, some of which rise to considerable beauty and dignity. Veronica Gambara, of Brescia, produced some noble verses, especially the fine Sonnet in which she implores, in the name of Christ, Charles V and Francis I, to put an end to their hostilities.

Although he lived until nearly the end of the century, we may for convenience mention Angelo Di Costanzo in this chapter. He was born in Naples, in 1507, of a wealthy and noble family, but in spite of his wealth he had many sorrows. Don Pedro de Toledo, Viceroy of Naples, banished him from the city of his birth. His first wife died in youth; his second wife caused him much unhappiness by her misconduct; and to complete his misfortunes, he lived to deplore the loss of [Pg 60] his two sons. He appealed in vain to be allowed to return to his home. His petitions were rejected, and he died in grief and exile in 1591. Some of his poems are eminently beautiful; his Sonnet on Virgil, "Quella cetra gentil," is justly celebrated. In prose he wrote a history of Naples, frequently reprinted.

On reviewing the poetry of this period, with the brilliant exception of Ariosto, the result is, perhaps, a feeling of disappointment. Certainly, the achievements are not commensurate with the undoubted culture and intellect of the writers. There is nothing (always excepting Ariosto) that has taken hold of the world's attention. How different in this respect are the poets from the painters of the same period! How obscure by the side of Michael Angelo, Raphael, Correggio, Titian, Giorgione, Sebastian del Piombo, Tintoretto, and the whole galaxy sparkling for ever in the heaven of Art! Some powerful minds, such as Vida and Fracastoro, were diverted into the path of Latin poetry; but I think the chief explanation of the inferiority of the poets is their lack of really fine subjects; for how can a poet write nobly if he has no adequate theme for his verse? Their amorous poetry ran too much in the Petrarchan groove; their heroic poetry was too apt to [Pg 61] assume the form of ponderous epics, utterly unreadable without the graces of Ariosto. Religious enthusiasm seems to have been remote from their minds. Another generation had to arise before that fire was again kindled on the shrine of Poetry.

CHAPTER VIII. [Pg 62]

MACHIAVELLI AND THE PROSE WRITERS OF THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY.

Niccolò Machiavelli, the profoundest thinker and the keenest politician of his century, was born in Florence on the third of May, 1469. In 1498 he was made Secretary of State of the Florentine Republic. But this dignity was the cause of his subsequent adversity. When the Medici family was restored to power in Florence, he was imprisoned, fined, and even put to the torture. He profited by an amnesty issued by Leo X on his accession, but he was relegated to poverty and obscurity. Impatient of both, he curried favour with the reigning dynasty, but such was the ill-luck that steadily pursued him through life, that no sooner had he acquired a certain degree of favour than the Medici were again expelled from Florence, and he, as one of their adherents, was regarded by the triumphant party with suspicion and hostility. He did not long survive the wreck of all his hopes, dying on the twenty-second of June, 1527.

In his generation, Italy had fallen on evil days. The invasion of Charles VIII of France opened the flood-gates of a deluge of disasters; and the devastations of the King were succeeded by the crushing despotism of the Emperor. The immense wealth, accumulated during centuries of prosperity, was rapidly melting away. The Republic of Venice lost much of her trade owing to the rivalry of Holland and Portugal, and the stream of commerce was directed from the Adriatic by the discovery of the new passage to India round the Cape of Good Hope. The reckless extravagance of Leo X exhausted the Papal Treasury; a great religious schism cut off abundant supplies from distant countries; and the terrible sack of Rome, with the ruinous ransom demanded from Clement VII, completed, in the year of Machiavelli's death, a long series of disasters. Freedom was crushed by native tyrants and foreign oppressors. The present was ghastly with innumerable wounds, the future looked blacker than the grave. What wonder was it, therefore, that men sought refuge from such horrors in every finesse that diplomacy could suggest? This is the true explanation and the one excuse of Machiavelli's tortuous policy. He is utterly unscrupulous, but it is the unscrupulousness of a patriot at bay who has exhausted all other means of self-defence.

Still, it cannot be denied that Machiavelli is anything but a sympathetic figure. We admire the keenness of his intellect as we admire the keenness of a sharp-edged sword; but where is the love of humanity, the enthusiasm for great ideals, the indignation of a noble mind at the iniquities of an evil age? Wonderful is the penetration of his remarks; unrivalled his insight; above praise the clearness and precision of his thoughts. No historian has ever surpassed him in unrolling a panorama of past events. No politician has ever laid down more sagacious rules for attaining an object in view. No statesman has ever discerned with a keener eye the symptoms of the times.

But if we ask what profit has been derived from the exertions of this most acute and logical of minds, what is the answer? His name has become a byeword as the symbol of a heartless intriguer, and his works glare like a meteor of evil in the dark and troubled sky of his century.

Great praise is due to his *History of Florence.* In the first book, with a concise lucidity which later historians have emulated without surpassing, he surveys the events of ten centuries, and that noble introduction is followed by a work which displays to the fullest advantage the great powers of its author.

The *Discourses on the First Decade of Livy* and *The Art of War* both treat of the same subject; the necessity of a freedom-loving nation to attain and preserve a high standard of military efficiency. The system of hiring venal condottieri had profoundly demoralised the forces of Italy, indeed, it had paved the way for the invasion of France and the dominion of Spain, and its effects were felt even to the middle of the present century, for no other explanation suffices to account for the submission of a nation with such a history as Italy to the oppression of foreign garrisons. So clear-sighted a patriot as Machiavelli could not fail to see the evil and to point out the remedy. His despatches and correspondence are also invaluable for the history of his times.

But the work pre-eminently associated with his name is the treatise, entitled *Il Principe,* a manual for a ruler who desires to keep an unsteady throne and to outwit unscrupulous enemies. He advocates, it is true, a policy regardless of all mercy and morality in the pursuit of its object; but injustice to Machiavelli, we must bear in mind what his object was. He had seen his country desolated for years by cruel and rapacious invaders, and he thought, most justly, that the only chance of Italy against her enemies was the establishment of the dominion of one powerful and politic prince over the whole Peninsula, and it was to establish a standard of conduct for such a prince that he wrote his book.

His story, *Belphegor,* and his plays, among which the *Mandragora* stands pre-eminent, are witty and lively, but they frequently overstep the limits of decorum. All his works are interspersed with innumerable proofs of the keenness of his observation, and the style is clear and forcible, but somewhat wanting in colour. He wrote a few poems, but they are of no great value or interest.

Machiavelli is as undoubtedly the first prose writer of the age as Ariosto is the first poet, Second to him as an historian, though at a wide interval, we may place his friend and fellow-townsman, Francesco Guicciardini, born in 1480, died in 1540. He studied law to such good purpose at Florence, Ferrara and Padua, that at the early age of twenty-two he was chosen to lecture on the Institutes of Justinian, and at the age of thirty-one he was sent as Ambassador to Ferdinand of Aragon, which post he occupied for two years. With the help of that King, Julius the Second forced the Florentines to submit again to the rule of the Medici family. Guicciardini was suspected by the friends of liberty of having a hand in the negotiations between the Pope and the King, and of being a tool of that ambitious dynasty. Such, in truth, he proved himself; and harshness, rancour, and vindictiveness characterised his conduct towards his political opponents. When Leo X visited Florence in 1515, Guicciardini was sent by the Republic to receive him at Cortona. No circumstance could have proved more favourable to the historian's career. Leo X

looked upon him with the utmost favour, and nominated him to high and important offices, which his successor, Adrian VI, continued, and to which Clement VII subsequently added others. When the "Holy League," headed by the Duke of Urbino, was formed against the Emperor Charles V, Guicciardini was one of its leading spirits. But the Imperial arms prevailed; Clement VII had to take refuge in the Castle of St. Angelo, and had the agony of seeing Rome stormed and plundered under his very eyes. Atrocious were the cruelties committed. St. Peter's itself was stained with the blood of the slaughtered. Huge contributions were levied on the citizens, and an enormous ransom exacted from the Pope. Seeing Clement, himself a Medici, deprived of liberty and even in danger of his life, the Florentines took to arms and expelled the obnoxious dynasty. But the unexpected happened. The injured Pope and the tyrannical Emperor became reconciled; and [Pg 68] probably to atone for the atrocities committed by his forces, Charles V lent effective aid to Alexander de Medici in his endeavour to regain his lost dominion over Florence. Guicciardini became the instrument of Alexander, a cruel and relentless tyrant, who was subsequently assassinated by his kinsman Lorenzino. Guicciardini was an active agent in the election of Cosimo I, and when he was reproached for imposing another tyrant on his country, he answered that the more princes were assassinated, the more would arise. But Cosimo was ungrateful when Guicciardini demanded the reward of his services; bitter disappointment was in store for him; he withdrew from public affairs, and lived in retirement at Arcetri, where he died.

It was in the leisure hours of this retirement that he wrote the history on which his literary reputation is founded. It embraces the period from the invasion of Charles VIII to the year 1532. It is a valuable and important work; but, as may be gathered from the details of his life, the author shows no elevation or purity of mind. His view of human nature is low; his estimate of his fellow-creatures harsh and cynical. But if the colours are unpleasing, the picture is valuable, and it would have been a great loss had it not been preserved for posterity.

[Pg 69] Guicciardini is often heavy and prolix, and many ludicrous stories have been told of the sufferings of those readers who conscientiously plodded through the entire work. Thus it is related of the jocular Governor of a Province, that he promised a free pardon to a convict if he would read Guicciardini's History from the first page to the last. The prisoner gladly embraced this opportunity of regaining his liberty. He little knew the task that was imposed upon him. As he turned over page after page of the ponderous tomes, a deadly weariness overpowered him, until at last the endless details of the Siege of Pisa exhausted his patience. "Take me back to the galleys," he exclaimed. "Rather that than the misery of toiling through this awful book."

Agnolo Firenzuola was a good prose writer, out a very inferior poet; indeed, so great is the contrast between the two classes of his works, that it is difficult to believe that they can emanate from the same pen. The most striking of his works is a *Dialogue on the Beauty of Women.*

Pier Francesco Giambullari wrote a *History of Europe* from the accession of Charlemagne to the year 913. The history is unfinished, the author dying in 1555. He was one of the founders of the Florentine Accademia della Crusca. He has been highly praised for the dignity and finish of his style.

[Pg 70] Vasari and Cellini are names renowned in the annals of Art, the former for his invaluable biographies of painters, and the latter as a sculptor and a worker in gold and bronze. His biography is a striking memorial of the man and the age.

Benedetto Varchi had many qualities of an able historian, but as he was in the pay of the Grand Duke Cosimo I, his independence may be more than suspected.

In contrast to him, Jacopo Nardi was a bitter opponent of the Medici family, and in his *History of Florence* from 1494 to 1531 he paints them in the blackest colours. So determined an adversary of the ruling dynasty could not be suffered to remain in Florence. He was driven into banishment, and took refuge in Venice, where he died after the middle of the Century. As a biographer he distinguished himself by his life of Antonio Giacomini.

The Sixteenth Century was fertile in historians, for we have to chronicle the name of another in Bernardo Segni. He wrote the *History of Italy* from 1527 to 1555, or three years before his death. Dealing with contemporary events, he could not treat his subject with the requisite independence, and living a quiet and studious life, it is difficult to see how he could gather reliable information, or have access to important documents.

[Pg 71] Vincenzo Borghini was a laborious antiquarian, who wrote a book on the *Origin of the City of Florence.*

Giambattista Adriani professed to continue Guicciardini's work in his *History of his Own Times,* but it is complete in itself, and has many merits, both of style and subject. Adriani was celebrated in his day as a public speaker, and his *Latin Orations* were so much admired that they were translated into Italian as soon as they were held. He died in 1579.

Camillo Porzio who survived until 1603, wrote several historical monographs concerning the Kingdom of Naples.

Skilful as they were in all the arts of composition, the writers of the Sixteenth Century too frequently indulged in redundant prolixity. Conscious of this defect, Bernardo Davanzati determined to cultivate the opposite quality of laconic conciseness. He was brilliantly successful. He translated Tacitus, that great model of brevity, and boasted that his rendering contained fewer words than the original without sacrificing a particle of the sense. He wrote a book on the Reformation in England, a Funeral Oration on Cosimo I, and several treatises on finance and agriculture.

In reviewing the writers of this Epoch, we are struck with the number and merit of the historians. The other Prose Writers appeal but faintly to modern readers. With the exception of Baldassare Castiglione, who, in his *Cortegiano* gives us a pleasing picture of the more refined circles of Italian society, and of Vasari and Benvenuto Cellini, they do not disclose much of the manners and customs of their age. No Boccaccio arose to portray for future times the men and women of his day.

The stories of Bandello and of Luigi Da Porto have but little to recommend them except the fact that they supplied Shakespeare with some of his plots. Bandello, however, is by no means destitute of vivacity. Straparola, the author of *Tredici Piacevoli Notti,* and Fiorentini, the author of *Il Pecorone,* also had the honour of furnishing hints to the great dramatist. Too often it happens that the extreme prolixity of the writers of the Sixteenth Century drowns their thoughts in an ocean of words. It is strange that the great convulsion of the Reformation did not produce any theological work written in the Italian language. The controversies were all carried on in Latin, but even in Latin nothing was produced in the Peninsula that is now remembered. Indeed, the great Catholic reaction had the effect of making writers fearful of giving offence. It restricted them more and more within academic grooves, thus unhappily fostering that tendency to conventionality and unreality which immersed Italian literature deeper and deeper into a morass of mediocrity.

CHAPTER IX.

BERNARDO AND TORQUATO TASSO.

It is but seldom that poets are as romantic as their poems, or as interesting as the offspring of their imagination. When, therefore, a poet arises gifted with an interesting personality, the attention he excites becomes universal. Such was the fate of Torquato Tasso. It would not be altogether unjust to say that had he not suffered so many misfortunes, his name would not be a household word, for the merit of his poems hardly sustains the dignity of his renown.

His father, Bernardo, a native of Bergamo, was born in 1493, and died in 1569. He was a writer in prose and verse, his chief work being the *Amadigi,* an epic of immense length, well and carefully written, but without any spark of genius. He was attached to the Court of Ferrante Sanseverino, Prince of Salerno, and when his master was driven out of his dominions by the Emperor Charles V, he followed his fortunes, leaving his wife, Properzia de' Rossi, and three children, the youngest of whom was Torquato, born in 1544, to the care of her relatives. His devotion to the fallen fortunes of the Prince of Salerno was the cause of many of the sorrows of his illustrious son. His patrimony was sequestrated, and when he died, he had nothing to leave to his children. Nor was this the greatest of his trials. He never saw his wife again, and when he wished to have her with him in Rome, she was in a dying condition. All she could do, was to send him the little Torquato, whose training was henceforth confided to the father's care.

The youth displayed as much love and more aptitude for poetical composition. When he was eighteen, he published his epic, *Rinaldo,* a wonderfully mature work for so young a writer. Torquato Tasso was one of those poets who produce their finest works in the earlier portion of their career. The works by which alone he is remembered, were all produced before his thirty-second year. His mind attained full mastery over its powers at a very early period, and when, like the voice of a singer, it lost its freshness, it also lost its charm. Corneille and Tennyson resemble him in this peculiarity of producing their masterpieces in comparative youth, but in their case, the division between the two periods is not quite so marked as in his. Corneille produced no really great drama after *La Mort de Pompée,* but some of his later tragedies have occasional flashes of his early fire. Tennyson gave no memorable creation to the world after *Maud,* but his *Idylls of the King* offer some poetical details, and a few lyrics are not devoid of that perfection which characterised his previous poems. But Tasso produced absolutely nothing that could, by any stretch of indulgence, be said to add to his renown after the publication of the *Gerusalemme Liberata.* On the contrary, he rather injured his reputation by yielding to the cavils of his detractors, and re-writing his great work under the title of *Gerusalemme Conquistata,* and producing an epic so feeble and lifeless that it immediately sank into utter neglect.

Precocious as he was in the manifestation of brilliant genius, his father was anxious that such powers should be cultivated to the utmost, and Torquato was sent to study law at Padua. But the law was little to his taste. His *Rinaldo* procured him immense renown, and he found it more agreeable to bask in the sunshine of the brilliant society that courted him in the dawn of his celebrity, than to spend laborious hours in the pursuit of a dry and distasteful science. No poet at so early an age ever had so brilliant a prospect of renown and fortune before him. But the very extent of the admiration he excited laid the foundations of the terrible disasters that were to overtake him ere many years had elapsed.

Cardinal Luigi of Este, attracted by his brilliant reputation, offered him a post in his household and an introduction to the Court of Ferrara. The dazzling offer was accepted by the poet; but the kindness of the Cardinal had results more fatal than could have attended the machinations of his bitterest enemies.

At first all went well. Tasso produced a favourable impression upon the Duke Alfonso and upon his two sisters, Lucrezia and Eleonora. He accompanied the Cardinal on a mission to the Court of

Charles IX of France, and after a year's sojourn in Paris, where he was fêted by the leading authors, including Ronsard, then at the height of his fame, he returned to Ferrara to receive new proofs of the favour of the Duke. But the more he rose in the estimation of his master, the more he excited the jealousy of those who were equally ambitious but less successful. There is, indeed, no truth in the popular legend of his love for the Princess Eleanora. The object of his affections appears to have been a lady of the Court, Leonora Scandiano. The poet Guarini was also in love with this lady, and bitter hostility resulted from the rivalry of the two poets. The malignant envy of his opponents was excited by the brilliant success of his pastoral play, *Aminta,* produced in 1573. So much was that poem talked of, that the Princess Lucrezia, who had meanwhile married the Duke of Urbino, sent for Tasso to read it to her at Pesaro. So pleased was she both with the work and the writer, that she invited him to pass the summer at her palace of Castel Durante. The exquisite beauty of the gardens and the grounds is said to have been in his mind when he described the gardens of Armida in the *Gerusalemme.*

This was the happiest time of Tasso's life. He was honoured with the favour of the highest in the land, and with the admiration of the whole of Italy. He was congenially employed on the completion of the great epic which was to make his name immortal. Never was a poet placed in a more brilliant position, nor more apparently certain of a splendid and triumphant career.

But the seeds of evil were already sown, and the mischief soon became apparent. He completed the *Gerusalemme* in 1575, and from that moment his peace of mind was gone. Whether he overworked himself in that great task, or whether he had secret causes of annoyance and humiliation, of which his biographers know nothing, it is difficult to conjecture, but from that period his temper seems to have become morbidly suspicious and irritable. He was painfully sensitive to criticism, and he harassed himself and others by perpetually altering and correcting passages to which objection had been taken. When at last the poem was published, which was not until some time after its completion, it was attacked by the Accademia della Crusca with considerable harshness and unfairness. The great fault found by the Academy was that the idiom was not always purely Tuscan. The very first line of the first Canto was singled out for censure:

"Canto l'arme pietose e il Capitano."

The poet uses the word "pietose" in the sense of 'pious," whereas the Academy contended that it could never mean anything but "compassionate."

Tasso was not only worried by these minute quibbles, but he was also haunted by the dreadful apprehension that his religious orthodoxy might be impugned, and he himself applied to the Fathers of the Holy Inquisition for an examination and a vindication. In vain the Fathers assured him with unanimous cordiality that such a process was utterly superfluous, and that the purity of his faith had never for a moment been held in doubt; he still professed himself dissatisfied, and he long continued to torment himself with religious scruples.

The Duke of Ferrara, doubtless highly gratified at the success of the masterpiece of his Court Poet, appointed Tasso his private secretary when that post became vacant through the death of Giambattista Pigna in 1577. Probably the arduous duties and the heavy responsibilities of this appointment weighed him down with a fresh load of anxiety, and he may have felt that he had become more than ever the object of malice and envy; whatever the cause, excitability verging on frenzy, and suspicion verging on madness betrayed themselves more and more in his speech and actions. He fancied, perhaps not without reason, that some of his letters had been intercepted; he firmly believed, though with less foundation, that there was a plot to poison him. He had also the annoyance, peculiarly galling to an author, of knowing that spurious copies of his great epic were being circulated throughout Italy, full of mistakes and interpolated passages.

All these causes of uneasiness culminated in frightful violence in the month of June of that fatal year. One evening in the apartments of the Princess Lucrezia, and even in her presence, he drew a dagger and stabbed a manservant whom he suspected of being concerned in the robbery of some missing documents. He was arrested, and the Duke ordered him to be kept a close prisoner. When released from captivity, he was so excited with grief and indignation, that all observers pronounced him mad. He took refuge in a Franciscan Monastery; but when the Duke refused to receive his letters, he dreaded the effects of his master's anger, and fled from Ferrara in a pitiable condition, without his manuscripts, without sufficient clothes, and without a particle of money. He seems actually to have begged his way from Ferrara to Sorrento, near Naples, where his sister was married to Marzio Sersale. It would be difficult to find a more picturesque episode in the life of any poet than that of Tasso presenting himself to his sister in the garb of a mendicant. She received the unhappy wanderer with hospitality and affection, welcomed him in her house, and when he was sufficiently recovered from the fatigues of mind and body to discuss his affairs, gave him the sensible advice never to return to the Court of Ferrara.

Unhappily, this advice was rejected; but to be perfectly just in our estimate of Tasso's conduct, we must bear in mind the position of men of letters of the Sixteenth Century in Italy. The complete absence of copyright law made it impossible for even the most popular writer to derive emolument from his books, for as soon as they acquired any popularity, they were shamelessly pirated all over the Peninsula. Enormously popular as they were, even during their lifetime, it does not appear that either Ariosto or Tasso ever profited to the extent of even one scudo by the sale of their poems. Thus a writer, unless he possessed ample means, or held some lucrative office, was entirely dependent for his bread on the fickle favour of the great. Tasso, in consequence of the reverses experienced by his father and the sequestration of his property, was absolutely devoid of anything he could call his own, and owed even the barest necessaries of life to the bounty of the Prince whom his violent conduct had, it must be admitted, justly offended.

Great as his reputation was, he might well doubt whether any other sovereign in Italy would extend to him even a quarter of similar favour after the reckless and violent conduct of which he had been guilty.

Whatever may have been his motives, he wrote again and again to Alfonso and the Princesses for pardon for his errors and for permission to return. Eleonora alone answered him, and her reply was not encouraging. The mortification of being repulsed was doubtless intolerable to his proud spirit. He deserted Sorrento and the sister whose affection he should have valued above all the favours of princes. He went straight to Ferrara, but the doors of the Palace were barred against him, and to add to his afflictions, the Duke refused to allow his manuscripts to be given up to him. He was lonely and destitute, and the bitterness of his fall was intensified by the jeers of those who, on the very spot of his disgrace, had envied him the brilliancy of his triumph. Without a morsel of bread to eat, or a roof under which to take shelter, he sold some valuable trinkets which had been given to him in happier days by the Princess Lucrezia, and with the proceeds he made his way through Mantua and Padua to Venice. [Pg 83]

In these towns he seems to have been received with the consideration due to his poetical renown; but still the painful question as to where he should find a permanent home occurred to him in moments of anxiety and gloom. Strange to say, help came to him from an unexpected quarter. The Duke of Urbino's marriage with the Princess Lucrezia had turned out most unhappily, and the couple were now separated. It probably occurred to the Duke that the best way of annoying the House of Este would be to show favour to the poet who had been expelled from Ferrara in such deep disgrace, and Tasso owed to rancour and resentment that temporary respite from misfortune which he might have implored in vain from esteem and humanity. [Pg 84]

The Duke in time wearied of the capricious and irritable poet, and Tasso found it expedient to remove to Turin. He received no countenance from the House of Savoy, and again his evil star led him to the Court of Ferrara.

In the month of February, 1579, he returned to Ferrara when it was at its gayest, on the occasion of the Duke's marriage to Margherita Gonzaga, daughter of the Duke of Mantua. But Tasso was looked upon with aversion as an intruder. He wearied those who did not want to see him with long stories of his grievances, and with bitter invectives at princely ingratitude. These invectives waxed fiercer, until, after a culmination of insane violence, the Duke's patience was exhausted, and he had the unhappy poet arrested and thrown into a cell in the madhouse of Ferrara.

Here Tasso languished for more than seven years, until July, 1586. The most zealous admirers of the poet cannot deny that he brought this terrible catastrophe upon himself. The Duke cannot be blamed for having ordered his incarceration; indeed, in the frenzied condition of his mind at the time of arrest, it was probably the best thing that could have happened to him. If not placed under restraint, he might have done himself an injury, or he might even have attacked others. If he had been held in captivity for some weeks, or even months, until the paroxysm of his frenzy had spent itself, the Duke would not have incurred the odium which subsequently blackened his memory. But the peculiar hardship of Tasso's imprisonment was its long duration. A short period of restraint might actually have been beneficial, but seven years of gloomy captivity aggravated the malady which they were intended to cure, and it is no wonder that the patient subsided from wild excitability into sullen despair. [Pg 85]

It is due to his gaolers to say that he was not treated with the inhumanity popularly supposed. Visitors were admitted into his presence, he was allowed occasionally to take walks in the town of Ferrara and the neighbourhood; his manuscripts were restored to him; he was at liberty to receive the letters of his friends, and to beguile with composition the weary hours of captivity. But still the galling fact remained that he was a prisoner, and a mind naturally prone to melancholy was still more darkened by contrasting the stern reality with the brilliant hopes fostered by the triumphs of his youth. He wrote to many of the nobles and princes of Italy, imploring them to use their influence to obtain his release. These letters do not seem to have been either intercepted or delayed. Strong representations were undoubtedly made to the Court of Ferrara to obtain the liberation of one so gifted and so unfortunate. Unhappily for his credit and honour, Alfonso proved inflexible, and what was originally salutary discipline became at last detestable tyranny. [Pg 86]

Many different opinions were expressed as to whether Tasso was really insane. Montaigne, who was travelling in Italy at the time of his incarceration, visited him in his cell and left a pitiable description of the apathetic misery in which he found him, as if his powers of endurance were exhausted by suffering, and nothing but the stupor of despair remained. Others pointed to the poems, the essays, the letters he wrote in captivity, and asked in indignant tones whether the author of compositions so pregnant with thought and so perfect in diction could possibly be insane? Peculiar, he undoubtedly was; but he had expiated his errors by severe suffering, and was it not reasonable to suppose that he had learnt a salutary lesson, and would not, if restored to freedom, repeat the regrettable follies of the past?

This consideration, doubtless, after the lapse of so many years, inclined Alfonso to clemency, and when his brother-in-law, Vincenzo Gonzaga, interceded for the luckless poet, he did not meet with the harsh refusal given to others, but was able to boast that he alone of so many petitioners had obtained Tasso's release. [Pg 87]

The door of the cell where the author of the *Gerusalemme* had languished for so many years was opened, and he was free to go wherever he liked. As may be imagined, he was cured of his wish to figure at the Court of Ferrara, and he left the inhospitable dominions, never to return.

Vincenzo Gonzaga took him to Mantua, where he passed the time immediately following his release. But the re-action, after so long a period of wretchedness, was too trying for his enfeebled frame. He forsook the brilliant circles of Mantua for a quieter retreat at Bergamo with some of his relatives. Here he finished his tragedy of *Torrismondo,* begun many years previously, but thrown aside, at first because he was engaged on the arduous task of his great epic, and then because his own life drifted into a tragedy far transcending the mimic sorrows of the stage.

At Bergamo, he learned that his liberator, Vincenzo Gonzaga, had succeeded to the Duchy of Mantua. Something of his old hope of courtly success revived in the wounded heart of Torquato. He left his provincial abode and hurried to the palace of his benefactor to lay the dedication of *Torrismondo* at his feet. He doubtless indulged in dreams of rich appointments and gratifying distinctions. But, alas! Vincenzo, kind and humane to the captive, seems to have turned a deaf ear to the courtier. Tasso had an unfortunate knack of making his presence irksome to his patrons. His ever keen sense of injury was stung to the quick by the Duke's neglect, and he lost no time in leaving Mantua to repair to Rome. But here new mortifications awaited him. Cardinal Scipio Gonzaga lodged him in his Palace, but was neither cordial nor gracious. Probably the dread that his insanity might burst out again, made people desirous of keeping him at a distance. Sixtus the Fifth, who then occupied the Papal Chair, took no interest in literature, and did not show him any attention, and the example of the Pope was followed by the Society of the capital. [Pg 88]

He left Rome with even greater disappointment than he had felt in leaving Mantua. He hurried to Naples, where he had no cause to complain of the reception that awaited him, for he was overwhelmed with demonstrations of admiration and affection. But sorrow, captivity, and anguish of mind had done their evil work; he was but the wreck of himself, and he could no more endure the sweetness of praise than the bitterness of neglect. He fled from the kindness of the Neapolitans and flitted from place to place in a weary pilgrimage, without happiness and without repose. The wonder is, in his destitute condition, where the money came from to enable him to travel. His mind and his health were in a wretched condition. Distrustful and melancholy, he repelled even those who most admired his genius and pitied his misfortunes, and his ever-ready sense of injury magnified the slightest offence into bitter unkindness. But in spite of agonising thoughts and disturbing peregrinations, his pen never rested. He completed the *Gerusalemme Conquistata,* that unfortunate "improvement" on his masterpiece, which is never mentioned but to be regretted; he wrote a long poem in blank verse on the Creation, and dialogues and essays in abundance and letters innumerable. Indeed, he was throughout his life an indefatigable correspondent, and he seemed never to doubt that the outpourings of his mind about his wrongs and grievances would be as interesting to the recipients as to himself. Some of these letters are noble and affecting, but too many betray a mind sore and festering from constant brooding over his calamities. But in the presence of such misfortune, we can only pity, we cannot condemn. [Pg 89]

Great though his errors were, and wayward as was his temper, he was a man of whom his country had reason to be proud, and it is pleasing to be able to narrate that he was destined to receive a tardy recognition for all the works with which he had enriched the literature of Italy. Cardinal Aldobrandini had been raised to the Papal Chair and had assumed the name of Clement VIII, and he and his nephews were anxious to signalise his Pontificate by reviving the Coronation of Petrarch in the Capitol in favour of a poet not less illustrious and more unfortunate. Accordingly, Tasso was summoned to Rome, and he was met outside the gates by an immense concourse of people and a brilliant galaxy of Cardinals, Prelates, and Nobles. But his frame was worn out, and the excitement of this great reception hardly infused sufficient animation to conceal from the bystanders the rapid approach of death. He was lodged in a noble suite of apartments in the Vatican; the poet who for so many years had been doomed to a madman's cell, found himself an honoured guest in the Palace of the Popes. [Pg 90]

But the state and ceremony with which he was surrounded were more than his ebbing strength could bear. Religious feelings had always held powerful sway over his sensitive mind, and now, when he felt his end drawing near, he retired to the Monastery of Sant' Onofrio, situated on an eminence outside the town. Here, in prayer and meditation, he devoutly awaited release from all his sorrows. The monks tended him with care and assiduity; but it is recorded of him that his old suspicions revived by fits and starts, and on one occasion he made his attendant swallow the medicine he was directed to take in order to have ocular proof that it was not poisoned. [Pg 91]

Worn out by his many sufferings, he passed away peacefully on the twenty-fifth of April, 1595, the day before he was to receive the laurel in the Capitol. But he probably did not regret that death prevented him from enjoying this symbol of greatness. As Leopardi, himself no less familiar with sorrow, beautifully says:

"Morte domanda
Chi nostro mal conobbe, e non ghirlanda."

There is a peculiar fitness in the circumstance that a poet, so singled out for misfortune, was not destined to wear the wreath of a conqueror. Peaceful after so much agitation, calm after such bitter resentment, he sank to rest in that secluded monastery, and for thirteen years he lay in the Church adjoining the quiet cloisters without a stone to mark his resting-place, until Cardinal Bonifazio Bevilacqua raised a noble monument to his memory, which may still be seen by the visitor who wends his way to Sant' Onofrio to pay the tribute of a sigh to so much glory linked to so much misfortune.

Tasso was tall and active; his countenance was handsome, though in later years much clouded by melancholy. In his younger days he was an expert swordsman, and skilled in all bodily exercises. [Pg 92]

The vicissitudes of his life afford such picturesque material for narration and description that we

cannot wonder that it became a favourite theme with poets and biographers. The noble play of Goethe is familiar to all lovers of poetry. Of his biographers the earliest was Manso, a Neapolitan nobleman, who had the singular fortune of being, in the course of his long life, the friend of three renowned epic poets, of Tasso himself, of Marino, and of the greatest of all, Milton, whose acquaintance he made during the travels of the English poet in Italy. Tasso mentions him in the *Gerusalemme Conquistata*:

> "Fra cavalier magnanimi e cortesi
> Risplende il Manso."

Marino did not leave his praises unsung, and Milton addressed him in one of his finest Latin poems. He must have had striking qualities to endear him to men so eminent and so different; but his biography, probably because it was the first, gave rise to many legends which have been repeated down to the present day. He seems to have been somewhat credulous, and to have relied too much on the statements made to him by Tasso himself, without distrusting his informant's wild and heated imagination. [Pg 93]

The Abbé Serassi, in his biography published in 1785, did what Manso had neglected to do. He sifted the evidence and examined the documents; and gave to the world a picture much nearer the truth than had yet been presented; but it was reserved for the indefatigable labours of Angelo Solerti to produce a really exhaustive history of the poet.

It must be confessed that in turning from Tasso's life, so full of passion and romance, to his poetry, we experience a certain sense of disappointment. Had he not been so striking an object of sympathy and interest, it may be doubted whether his works would have arrested quite so much attention as they actually did. Considering the varied panorama of life that had been unfolded before him and the mental sufferings he underwent, he does not sound those depths of impassioned meditation that might be expected. What traces there are of them, will be found rather in his letters than in his poems. This fact is very strange and points to the limitations of his talent. He had materials in his life sufficient to inspire him with great lyric poems, and yet we find nothing in his odes, sonnets and madrigals to compare to the finest passages of Petrarch, or of Leopardi, or even of Filicaia. None of his shorter poems impress themselves indelibly on the reader: none glow with the intensity of lyric fire. [Pg 94]

Not being able to give him the title of a great lyric poet, we proceed to enquire whether he was a great epic or a great dramatic poet.

His narrative poems are four in number; the *Rinaldo,* the *Gerusalemme Liberata,* the *Gerusalemme Conquistata,* and the *Sette Giornate del Mondo Creato,* a long work in blank verse on the subject of the Creation. His *Rinaldo* is remarkable because it was written in such early youth; his *Gerusalemme Conquistata* was admitted even by his admirers to be an utter failure. It has only one striking passage, a prophecy of evil to the house of Bourbon, which seems clearly to foretell the crimes and horrors of the French Revolution, and which deserves to rank among poetical prophecies next to the celebrated prediction of the discovery of America in the tragedy of *Medea* attributed to Seneca. The *Sette Giornate* furnished some hints to Milton when he came to the description of the Creation of the World in *Paradise Lost.* It has, however, no intrinsic merit to recommend it, being heavy and uninteresting to the last degree. These three poems had hardly vitality enough to keep them alive until the close of the Century in which they were written, and to modern readers they are quite dead. And yet the subjects were of sufficient interest to afford brilliant opportunities of displaying the powers of a great writer. We cannot help asking the question, can he be a great poet who allowed such brilliant opportunities to escape? [Pg 95]

His pastoral play, *Aminta,* has much sweetness and freshness of style; his tragedy, *Torrismondo,* has some touches that lead us to think that under happier circumstances and with a mind less pre-occupied with his own distresses, he might have become a fine dramatist; but the shepherds and nymphs of the *Aminta* seem vapid and mawkish to readers of the present day; and the *Torrismondo* has not that convincing power that a tragedy ought to possess.

In all these works, lyric, epic, and dramatic, Tasso's style, though sweet and flowing in the earlier productions, is strangely devoid of originality, and, therefore, of colour; and no writer was more deeply imbued with the conventional phraseology of the poetry of his age. Thought and style are alike devoid of those vivid touches that command admiration and ensure immortality. We are left under the impression that the poet is not fixing all his powers of mind on his verse, and that his attention is largely engaged elsewhere. This absence of full power is the only trace in his poems of the disordered state of his mind. Many poets, whose sanity has never been questioned, have passages far more morbid and eccentric than any that can be found in Tasso's pages. He never indulges in wild flights of fancy, the order of his thoughts is lucidity itself; and there are no incoherent and very few exaggerated metaphors. On the contrary, they would rather gain by a little more irregularity. They are so logically thought out as to become occasionally almost exasperating. [Pg 96]

Thus it will be seen that his claims to rank as a great poet rest entirely on the *Gerusalemme Liberata.*

In considering that celebrated poem, the first thought that must occur to the reader is the extremely happy choice of the subject. It was unhackneyed; it was picturesque; it was noble. We cannot help feeling that Ariosto is sometimes dragged down by the frivolous stories he tells; we cannot help feeling that Tasso is sustained and inspired by the magnificent episodes it is his duty to narrate. He is rather too fond of imitating passages from Homer and Virgil, but such imitation

was universal in his day, and in his case it is skilfully executed. The Oriental colouring of the scenes laid in Palestine and Syria is, perhaps, not very vivid, but it is quite as vivid as his contemporaries expected. On the whole it would be harsh to deny that he has done justice to his subject, and in one respect he deserves the highest praise: he imparts a human interest and an air of reality to his characters that cannot be too highly extolled. Ariosto often treats his characters merely as puppets, and is himself the first to laugh at them. Very different is the attitude of Tasso towards his creations. He believes in them with unshaken sincerity, and he loves them because he believes in them. Erminia, Sophronia, Armida, Rinaldo, Goffredo, Tancredi, all stand before us in the life, moving and breathing. As Goethe says, in his play on the subject of Tasso:

"Es sind nicht Schatten die der Wahn erzeugte;
Ich weiss es, sie sind ewig, denn sie sind.

["They are not shadows by illusion made;
I know they live for ever, for they live."]

This great quality undoubtedly explains the universal popularity of the *Gerusalemme.* That poem even penetrated to classes of the community to whom, as a rule, literary poets appeal in vain. Detached passages were set to music, and sung by the people like ballads. For two centuries the gondoliers beguiled their work with the musical stanzas of the unhappy poet. Who does not remember Byron's lines?—

"In Venice Tasso's echoes are no more,
And silent rows the songless gondolier."

When they first began to be neglected is not recorded. They seem only to have been handed down orally. Alterations would inevitably creep in, and losing their accuracy, they lost also their charm.

Writing in the same stanza as Ariosto, Tasso could not fail to resemble him in some respects. They are both clear, rapid, and musical. But the style of the earlier poet is richer, stronger, more original, and, I think, in spite of an occasional want of tenderness, more truly poetical. Tasso too often indulges in conventions and common-places, hence he becomes feeble and unimpressive. To give samples of the two poets, I will quote a passage from each.

Ariosto.

A ship of the enemy approaches incautiously the fleet of Charlemagne.

"Quivi il nocchier, eh' ancor non s'era accorto
Degl' inimici, entrò con la galea,
Lasciando molte miglia addietro il porto
D'Algieri, ove calar prima volea,
Per un vento gagliardo ch' era sorto,
E spinto oltre il dover la poppa avea.
Venir tra i suoi credette, e in loco fido,
Come vien Progne al suo loquace nido.

Ma come poi l'imperiale augello,
I gigli d'oro, e i pardi vide appresso,
Restò pallido in faccia, come quello
Che 'l piede incauto d'improvviso ha messo
Sopra 'l serpente venenoso e fello,
Dal pigro sonno in mezzo l'erbe oppresso;
Che spaventato e smorto si ritira,
Fuggendo quel ch'è pien di tosco e d'ira."

"Orlando Furioso," c. xxxìx, st. 31 ani 32.

Tasso.

The Saracens hearing from the walls of Jerusalem the chorus of the Crusaders in the distance.

"Colà s'invia l'esercito canoro,
E ne suonan le valli ime e profonde,
E gli alti colli e le spelonche loro;
E da ben mille parti Eco risponde;
E quasi par che boschereccio coro
Fra quegli antri si celi e quelle fronde,
Si chiaramente replicar s'udia
Or di Cristo il gran nome, or di Maria.

D'in sulle mura ad ammirar frattanto
Cheti si stanno e attoniti i Pagani
Que' tardi avvolgimenti, e l'umil canto,
E l'insolite pompe e i riti estrani.
Poi che cessò dello spettacol santo

La novitate, i miseri profani
Alzâr le strida; e di bestemmie e d'onte
Mugì il torrente e la gran valle e 'l monte."

"*Gerusalemme Liberata*," c. xv, st. 11 ani 12.

[Pg 100]

Tasso's style has a pathetic air which is very taking at first sight; but when we examine it minutely, we find certain weaknesses which cannot be detected in the style of Ariosto. The magnificent passage from the *Orlando Furioso* is without a flaw and could not be improved. The same cannot be said of the stanzas from the *Gerusalemme,* musical as they are. We may be sure that Ariosto would never have been guilty of the feeble repetition of the feeble epithet, *"gran nome, gran valle."*

It is owing to his pathos that Tasso loses so much less in translation than Ariosto. All the renderings of the *Orlando Furioso* that I have seen, are somewhat colourless, even the Elizabethan translation of Harrington, and even the careful and accurate translation of Rose. The German translations of Griess and Donner are as admirable as they can possibly be, considering the great difficulties of the task, but even they do not quite succeed in reproducing the exquisite flexibility of Ariosto's style. Tasso, in many respects the most unfortunate of poets, was singularly lucky in the translators who introduced him to foreign nations. He has been translated into many languages with signal success, and with remarkably little loss of spirit and beauty. The earliest English rendering, that of Fairfax, is the best. It is not always scrupulously accurate, but it is [Pg 101] delightfully fresh, vigorous, and musical. I will subjoin one of the most successful passages which will give the reader a favourable idea of the skill of Fairfax, and of the thoughts and conceptions of the illustrious Italian poet, illustrious in spite of the shortcomings which occasionally detract from his qualities.

The Christian Knights in search of Rinaldo, find him in the enchanted Palace of Armida.

(Gerusalemme Liberata, Canto XVI.)

I.

The palace great is builded rich and round,
And in the centre of the inmost hold
There lies a garden sweet on fertile ground,
Fairer than that where grew the trees of gold.
The cunning sprites had buildings reared around,
With doors and entries false a thousandfold.
A labyrinth they made that fortress brave,
Like Daedal's prison or Porsenna's grave.

II.

The Knights passed through the castle's largest gate.
(Though round about a hundred ports there shine),
The door leaves framed of carved silver plate
Upon their golden hinges turn and twine;
They stayed to view this work of wit and state,
The workmanship excelled the substance fine,
For all the shapes in that rich metal wrought,
Save speech, of living bodies wanted nought. [Pg 102]

III.

Alcides there sat telling tales, and spun
Among the feeble troups of damsels mild;
(He that the fiery gates of Hell had won,
And Heaven upheld); false love stood by and smiled.
Armed with his club, fair Iole forth run,
His club with blood of monsters foul denied;
And on her back his lion's skin had she,
Too rough a bark for such a tender tree.

IV.

Beyond was made a sea, whose azure flood
The hoary froth crushed from the surges blue,
Wherein two navies great well-rangéd stood
Of warlike ships, fire from their arms out flew;
The waters burnt about their vessels good,
Such flames the gold therein enchased threw;
Cæsar his Romans hence, the Asian Kings
Thence Anthony and Indian Princes, brings;

V.

The Cyclads seemed to swim amid the main,
   And hill 'gainst hill, and mount 'gainst mountain smote;
With such great fury met those armies twain,
   Here burnt a ship, there sank a bark or boat;
Here darts and wildfire flew, there drowned or slain
   Of Princes dead the bodies fleet and float;
Here Cæsar wins, and yonder conquered been
The eastern ships, there fled the Egyptian Queen.

VI.

Antonius eke himself to flight betook,
   The Empire lost to which he would aspire;
Yet fled not he, nor flight for fear forsook,
   But followed her, drawn on by fond desire.
Well might you see, within his troubled look,
   Strive and contend love, courage, shame and ire;
Oft looked he back, oft gazed he on the fight,
But oftener on his mistress and her flight.

VII.

Then in the secret creeks of fruitful Nile,
Cast in her lap he would sad Death await.
And in the pleasure of her lovely smile
Sweeten the bitter stroke of cursed Fate.
All this did art with curious hand compile
In the rich metal of that princely gate.
The Knights these stories viewed, first and last;
Which seen, they forward pressed, and in they passed.

VIII.

As through his channel crook'd Meander glides
   With turns and twines, and rolls now to and fro,
Whose streams run forth there to the salt sea-sides,
   Here back return, and to their spring-ward go;
Such crooked paths, such ways this palace hides;
   Yet all the maze their map described so
That through the labyrinth they go in fine
As Theseus did by Ariadne's line.

IX.

When they had passed all those troubled ways,
   The garden sweet spread forth her green to shew;
The moving crystal from the fountains plays,
   Fair trees, high plants, strange herbs, and flowers new,
Sun-shiny hills, dales hid from Phœbus' rays,
   Groves, arbours, mossy caves at orice they view;
And that which beauty most, most wonder brought,
Nowhere appeared the art which all this wrought.

X.

So with the rude, the polished mingled was,
   That natural seemed all, and every part.
Nature would craft in counterfeiting pass,
   And imitate her imitator art.
Mild was the air, the clouds were clear as glass,
   The trees no whirlwind felt nor tempest's smart,
But ere their fruit drop off, the blossom comes,
This springs, that falls, that ripeneth, and this blooms.

XI.

The leaves upon the self-same bough did hide,
   Beside the young, the old and ripened fig.
Here fruit was green, there ripe with vermeil side,
   The apples new and old grew on one twig.
The fruitful vine her arms spread high and wide,
   That bended underneath their clusters big;
The grapes were tender here, hard, young and sour,
There, purple, ripe and nectar sweet forth pour.

XII.

The joyous birds, hid under greenwood shade,
Sung many notes on every branch and bough;
The wind that in the leaves and waters played,
With murmur sweet now sang, and whistled now;
Ceased the birds, the wind loud answer made,
And while they sang, it rumbled soft and low;
Thus, were it hap or cunning, chance or art,
The wind in this strange music bore his part.

XIII.

With party-coloured plumes and purple bill
   A wondrous bird among the rest there flew,
That in plain speech sung lovelays loud and shrill,
   Her leden[1] was like human language true;
So much she talked, and with such wit and skill
   That strange it seemed how much good she knew;
Her feathered fellows all stood hushed to hear,
Dumb was the wind, the waters silent were.

XIV.

"The gently-budding rose (quoth she) behold,
   The first scent peeping forth with virgin beams,
Half ope, half shut, her beauties doth upfold
   In their dear leaves, and less seen fairer seems;
And after, spreads them forth more broad and bold,
   Then languisheth and dies in last extremes;
Nor seems the same that decked bed and bower
Of many a lady late and paramour;

[Pg 106]

XV.

"So in the passing of a day doth pass
   The bud and blossom of the life of man,
Nor e'er doth flourish more, but like the gratis
   Cut down, becometh withered, pale and wan;
Oh, gather then the rose while time thou has:
   Short is the day, done when it scant began;
Gather the rose of love which yet thou may'st;
Loving be loved; embracing, be embraced."

XVI.

She ceased; and as approving all she spoke,
   The choir of birds their heavenly tune renew;
The turtles sighed, and sighs with kisses broke;
   The fowls to shades unseen by pairs withdrew;
It seemed the laurel chaste and stubborn oak,
   And all the gentle trees on earth that grew,
It seemed the land, the sea and heaven above
All breathed out fancy sweet and sighed out love.

XVII.

Through all this music rare and strong consent
   Of strange allurements, sweet 'bove mean and measure,
Severe, firm, constant, still the Knights forth went,
   Hardening their hearts 'gainst false, enticing pleasure;
'Twixt leaf and leaf their sight before they sent,
   And after crept themselves at ease and leisure
Till they beheld the Queen sit with their knight
Beside the lake, shaded with boughs from sight.

* * * * * * *

[Pg 107]

XXVII.

The twain that hidden in the bushes, were,
Before the Prince in glittering arms appear.

XXVIII.

As the fierce steed for age withdrawn from war,
   Wherein the glorious beast had always won,
That in vile rest, from fright sequestered far,
   Feeds with the mares at large, his service done:
If arms he sees or hears the trumpet's jar,
   He neigheth loud, and thither fast doth run,
And wisheth on his back the armed knight,
Longing for jousts, for tournaments and fight:

XXIX.

So fared Rinaldo when the glorious light
   Of their bright harness glistered in his eyes;
His noble spirit awaked at that sight.
   His blood began to warm, his heart to rise;
Though drunk with ease, devoid of wonted might,
   On sleep till then his weakened virtue lies.
Ubaldo forward stepped and to him held
Of diamonds clear that pure and precious shield.

XXX.

Upon the targe his looks amazed he bent,
   And therein all his wanton habit spied,
His civet, balm, and perfumes redolent,
   How from his locks they smoked and mantle wide
His sword that many a Pagan stout had shent,[2]
   Bewrapped with flowers, hung idly by his side,
So nicely decked that it seemed the knight
Wore it for fashion sake, but not for fight.

XXXI.

As when from sleep and idle dreams abrayed[3]
   A man awaked calls home his wits again,
So in beholding his attire he played,
   But yet to view himself could not sustain;
His looks he downward cast and nought he said,
   Grieved, shamèd, sad, he would have diéd fain;
And oft he wished the earth or ocean wide
Would swallow him, and so his errors hide.

XXXII.

Ubaldo took the time, and thus began—
   "All Europe now, and Asia be in war
And all that Christ adore and fame have won
   In battaille strong, in Syria fighting are;
But thee alone, Bertoldo's noble son,
   This little corner keeps, exiled far
From all the world, buried in sloth and shame,
A carpet champion for a wanton dame!

XXXIII.

"What letharge hath in drowsiness append[4]
   Thy courage thus? What sloth doth thee infect?
Up! up! Our camp and Godfrey for thee send,
   Thee fortune, praise and victory expect;
Come fatal champion; bring to happy end
   This enterprise begun, and all that sect
(Which oft thou shaken hast) to earth full low
With thy sharp brand strike down, kill, overthrow."

XXXIV.

This said, the noble infant stood a space
   Confused, speechless, senseless, ill, ashamed,
But when that shame to just disdain gave place,
   To fierce disdain, from courage sprung untamed,
Another redness blushèd through his face,
   Whence worthy anger shone, displeasure flamed;
His nice attire in scorn he rent and tore,

For of his bondage vile that witness bore;

XXXV.

That done he hastèd from the charmed fort,
   And through the maze passed with his searchers twain.
Armida of her mount and chiefest port
   Wondered to find the furious keeper slain;
Awhile she feared, but she knew in short
   That her dear lord was fled; then saw she plain
(Ah! woeful sight!) how from her gates the man
In haste and fear, in wrath and anger ran.

[1] Leden—*language.*

[2] Shent—*Iniured.*

[3] Abrayed—*Awaked.*

[4] Append—*Tied-up.*

CHAPTER X.

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MARINO, CHIABRERA, FILICAIA AND OTHER POETS OF THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY.

The Annals of Italy during the Seventeenth Century were not signalised by disasters as terrible as those of the Sixteenth Century. The country was not desolated by the invasion of foreign conquerors. Rome was not sacked for a second time. Florence was not convulsed with civil dissensions. But the nation was sick at heart, and the tyranny of her rulers gave only the choice of submission or death. Lombardy, Naples and Sicily were groaning under the iron yoke of Spain. The petty sovereigns ruled with irresponsible despotism over their dominions. Venice and Genoa boasted that they were free; but the freedom of Venice consisted in the rule of a suspicious oligarchy, guiltless, indeed, of wanton oppression, but upholding its rule by merciless punishment of the slightest disaffection. The Papal States were exhausted in their endeavour to minister to [Pg 111] the splendour of the families of a rapid succession of Popes, for never was nepotism more rampant than in the Seventeenth Century, and the illustrious houses of Rome, the Aldobrandini, the Borghese, the Pamphili, the Barberini, the Chigi, the Altieri, the Odescalchi, the Albani, date their greatness from that epoch. The Catholic reaction subsequent to the Reformation established a rigid code of theology, from which it was fatal to dissent. Leo X had underrated the importance of the Reformation, but his successors made up for the error by exercising unceasing vigilance over their spiritual subjects. The only rising in favour of freedom was that of Masaniello in Naples, which was rather a riot than a rebellion. Still, some great minds pined for happier things, and the finest flashes of poetry in the Century were kindled by the fire of patriotism.

It has always been the policy of despots to supply their subjects with plenty of amusements. Accordingly we find in the Seventeenth Century records of gorgeous pageants and brilliant theatrical entertainments, and the already waning wealth of the nation was further exhausted by reckless prodigality of governments and individuals. Italian Opera took its origin early in the Century, and Rinuccini was the first Librettist. The theatre more and more engaged the attention [Pg 112] of writers, but nothing remarkable was produced, with the exception, perhaps, of the tragedies of Cardinal Delfino, Patriarch of Aquilea, which present here and there touches worthy of a fine poet. The death-scene of his *Cleopatra* bears a striking resemblance to the corresponding scene in *Anthony and Cleopatra,* although he doubtless never so much as heard of Shakespeare's name.

Battista Guarini, who died in 1612, was pre-eminent, by reason of his *Pastor Fido,* among writers of Pastoral Plays; but these insipid and unreal creations have no attraction for modern readers. The *Pastor Fido* is a work of much skill and ingenuity; but it is tainted with that fondness for quibbles and conceits which disfigures so much of the literature of the Seventeenth Century, not only in Italy, but also in other countries. If Italy had her Marino, Spain had her Gongora, France her Benserade, and England her Lyly, Donne, and Cowley. It is curious to remark how a literary fashion spreads from one country to another, and in that age of scanty travel and difficult communication, it is doubly curious. Thus, in the early part of the Nineteenth Century, Byronism became a universal epidemic.

[Pg 113] The love of far-fetched conceits originated in the latter half of the Sixteenth Century. We see much of it in Shakespeare's early comedies, and the traces of it in Tasso gave ground to Boileau one hundred years later to sneer at those who preferred "the tinsel of Tasso to the gold of Virgil."

"A Racan, à Malherbe, préférer Théophile,
Et le clinquant du Tasse à tout l'or de Virgile."

It is, however, unjust to blame Tasso for an inordinate profusion of conceits. He presents some, it is true, but they are almost always ingenious and imaginative, and not so far-fetched as to be unnatural.

The poet who really set the fashion of fantastic ingenuity, was Giambattista Marino (or Marini, for both forms of the name seem to have been used by his contemporaries), a Neapolitan, born in

1569, died in 1625. His chief work is the *Adone* an epic poem in twenty enormous cantos on the loves of Venus and Adonis. If it were not for its appalling length, the poem would have much to recommend it. He also wrote other epics, not quite so voluminous: *La Gerusalemme Distrutta, La Strage degl' Innocenti,* on the Massacre of the Innocents, and numerous lyric effusions. When he was at Turin, he had a vulgar dispute with a rival poet of the name of Murtola, and numerous satires and pasquinades were the result. Murtola was so incensed at the biting sarcasms of Marino, that he waylaid him one evening and fired a pistol. The shot killed, not Marino, but a favourite courtier of the Duke of Savoy, who was walking with the poet. Murtola was thrown into a dungeon, but Marino interceded for his fallen rival, and it is a curious illustration of the absolute power of the Princes of those days, that all proceedings against Murtola were stopped, and he was granted a free pardon. Marino had reason to regret his intercession for so unworthy an object. Murtola accidentally discovered a copy of verses written by Marino many years previously, reflecting on the Duke. He lost no time in forwarding them to the Duke, who was so incensed that he would doubtless have inflicted upon Marino the punishment from which he had saved the treacherous Murtola, had not Marino prudently taken refuge in flight. [Pg 114]

He repaired to Paris, where he was enthusiastically received, and Marie de Medici, the second wife of Henry IV, and Regent during the minority of Louis XIII, gave him a large pension and many other tokens of Royal favour. He enjoyed full leisure to complete his *Adone,* and when it was published in 1623, it fully satisfied the expectations of his admirers. He returned to his native city of Naples, where a magnificent ovation awaited him. He did not, however, live long to enjoy his triumph, and Italy had to mourn his loss in 1625. [Pg 115]

Marino exactly hit the taste of his contemporaries, and the praises lavished upon him are almost incredible in their exaggeration. The poet Claudio Achillini wrote to him from Bologna: "There is not a doubt in my mind that you are the greatest poet the world has ever seen." Cardinal Bentivoglio, one of the most brilliant intellects of the age, addressed him in terms hardly less rapturous.

There must assuredly have been something remarkable in Marino's works to produce such a dazzling effect on his contemporaries.

In early youth Marino formed a theory that a poet in order to succeed ought to astonish his readers. In every line he wrote, it was his object to excite astonishment. He fully succeeded. The most ingenious thoughts, the most dazzling metaphors, the most vivid descriptions, are crowded together in his pages to such an extent that it is impossible to deny that he was prodigally gifted by Nature with some of the rarest attributes of thought and imagination. But his works present no human interest, no patriotic fire, and no religious inspiration. They are fantastic and unreal, but then they do not pretend to be anything else. His imagination presented him with an inexhaustible succession of brilliant and striking images, and provided they glittered and sparkled in his verse, he was careless whether they were true to nature or consistent with each other. He is a delightful poet to read in detached passages when the mind wants to indulge in the refreshing vagaries of fancy. He is very even in his style; possessing consummate mastery over his language, the most elaborate difficulties of rhyme and metre present no obstacles to him. I do not think that he is in any respect inferior to Spenser in strength of poetical inspiration, and he is certainly less heavy and slow. But the subject of his principal work is frivolous, and it is, in truth, a mere bubble of the imagination, made to expand, glitter, and burst. But for that purpose it is much too long. Heroic thoughts alone should assume heroic proportions. Even in Ariosto, we have the same effect too often. Much more so in the *Adone.* Marino had nothing of the classical simplicity of Ariosto. He probably disdained it as insipid. But high seasoning involves rapid satiety, and the mind derives no nourishment from condiments so artificial. This circumstance alone solves the problem why Marino has fallen into such neglect. Take each stanza of his poems and consider it separately, and it appears a marvel of fancy, ingenuity, and musical diction. But take his productions as a whole, and it cannot be denied that they are wanting in sustained interest, in human pathos, and in philosophic intention. Indeed, he had nothing of a philosopher. No great problems occupy his mind; no sublime aspirations raise him above sublunary things. He spends the wealth of his intellect, not on noble monuments, but on filigree trinkets. Hence, probably, his popularity. His contemporaries did not want to be shaken with tempestuous sublimity, or led to an abyss of profound meditation. They wanted to be lulled into voluptuous repose by a singer skilful enough to delight their fancy with strains sufficiently beautiful to compensate the absence of higher qualities, and yet not too elevated to soar beyond the range of the limited horizon to which they confined themselves. Hence Marino's brilliant success. But he sacrificed to immediate popularity the admiration and gratitude of future ages, which with his prodigal gifts of song and imagination he might possibly have acquired. [Pg 116] [Pg 117]

As a sample of Marino's style, I subjoin the beautiful opening stanza of the seventh canto of the *Adone.*

"Musica e Poesia son due sorelle,
Ristoratrici delle afflitte genti,
De' rei pensier le torbide procelle
Con liete rime a serenar possenti.
Non ha di queste il mondo arti più belle,
O più salubri all' affannate menti,
Nè cor la Scizia ha barbaro cotanto,
Se non è tigre, a cui non piaccia il canto." [Pg 118]

As Marino aspired to be the first epic poet of his age, Gabriello Chiabrera, of Savona, aspired to be its first lyric poet, and he took Pindar for his model. He obtained much applause, but it may be

doubted whether he was quite so successful as his contemporary. He has nothing like Marino's teeming wealth of imagination, and his more ambitious Odes are often turgid and heavy. On the other hand, it must be allowed that his most successful passages are splendid and sonorous. The *Adone* is the best of the long-winded Italian epics with the exception of the two unapproachable masterpieces, the *Orlando Furioso* and the *Gerusalemme Liberata.* But it cannot be said that Chiabrera comes as near to Petrarch as Marino does to his two illustrious predecessors. He is full of those hackneyed mythological allusions which encumbered poetry up to the end of the Eighteenth Century, nor has he the excuse of indulging in them for the purpose of conjuring up gorgeous and romantic visions. His powers of description are but slight, a remarkable circumstance, as his powers of versification were beyond doubt very extensive. Some of his lighter poems are gay and vivacious, and he wrote a series of epitaphs known to English readers by Wordsworth's noble translation. Not often did Chiabrera indulge in a strain so natural and impassioned as the following:

"Not without heavy grief of heart did he
On whom the duty fell (for at that time
The father sojourned in a distant land)
Deposit in the hollow of this tomb
A brother's child most tenderly beloved!
Francesco was the name the youth had borne,
Pozzobonelli his illustrious house;
And when beneath this stone the corse was laid,
The eyes of all Savona streamed with tears.
Alas! the twentieth April of his life
Had scarcely flowered; and at this early time
By genuine virtue he inspired a hope
That greatly cheered his country; to his kin
He promised comfort; and the flattering thoughts
His friends had in their fondness entertained,
He suffered not to languish or decay.
Now is there not great reason to break forth
Into a passionate lament? O Soul!
Short while a Pilgrim in our nether world,
Do thou enjoy the calm empyreal air;
And round this earthly tomb let roses rise,
An everlasting spring! in memory
Of that delightful fragrance which was once
From thy mild manners quietly exhaled."

The following epitaph on an Admiral is also fine:

"There never breathed a man who, when his life

Was closing, might not of that life relate
Toils long and hard. The warrior will report
Of wounds, and bright swords flashing in the field,
And blast of trumpets. He who hath been doomed
To bow his forehead in the Courts of Kings
Will tell of fraud and never-ceasing hate,
Envy and heart-inquietude, derived
From intricate cabals of treacherous friends.
I, who on shipboard lived from earliest youth,
Could represent the countenance horrible
Of the vexed waters, and the indignant rage
Of Auster and Bootes. Fifty years
Over the well-steered galleys did I rule.
From huge Pelorus to the Atlantic pillars,
Rises no mountain to mine eyes unknown;
And the broad gulfs I traversed oft and oft.
Of every cloud which in the heavens might stir
I knew the force; and hence the rough sea's pride
Availed not to my Vessel's overthrow.
What noble pomp and frequent have not I
On regal decks beheld! yet in the end
I learned that one poor moment can suffice
To equalise the lofty and the low.
We sail the sea of life—a Calm one finds,
And one a Tempest—and, the voyage o'er,
Death is the quiet haven of us all.
If more of my condition ye would know,
Savona was my birthplace, and I sprang
Of noble parents; seventy years and three
Lived I—then yielded to a slow desease."

A poet who may not have equalled Chiabrera in the general excellence of his work, but who far surpassed him in sudden and brilliant flashes of inspiration, was VINCENZIO DA FILICAIA, a Florentine, born in 1642, died in 1707.[1] A few of his very finest verses are so renowned, that when we turn to an edition of his complete works, we are disagreeably surprised to find that the

bulk of his poetry is far from coming up to his most striking passages. He is often conventional and turgid, sometimes heavy and awkward. He has not Chiabrera's technical skill, nor has he the vivacity of lighter poets. Hallam complained of a want of sunshine in his verse, and in truth his elegies are occasionally doleful where they ought to be tragic. The man seems to have been greater than his works; but when a chord of his lyre touches his heart, he breaks forth into song so noble and impassioned that he fully deserves to be acclaimed the greatest Italian poet in the Seventeenth Century. First and foremost stands his celebrated Sonnet on Italy, especially the four opening lines:

"Italia! Italia! O tu cui feo la sorte
Dono infelice di bellezza, ond'hai
Funesta dote d'infiniti guai
Che in fronte scritti per gran doglia porte."

But there is something heavy and slow in the continuation and conclusion.

Superior in general excellence, though not possessing the inimitable pathos of the passage just quoted, is the sonnet beginning:

"Dov'è, Italia, il tuo braccio? e a che ti servi
Tu dell' altrui? non è, s'io scorgo il vero,
Da chi t'offende, il difensor men fero,
Ambo nemici son, ambo fur servi."

Another sonnet on the same subject opens very impressively:

"Vanno a un termine sol, con passi eguali,
Del verno, Italia, e di tua vita l'ore;
Nè ancor sai quante di sua man lavore
A tuo danno il Destin saette e strali."

So does a fourth:

"Sono, Italia, per te discordia e morte
In due nomi una cosa; e a si gran male
Un mal s'aggiunge non minor, che frale
Non se' abbastanza, nè abbastanza forte."

Christina, Queen of Sweden, took up her residence in Rome after her abdication, and delighted in attracting a brilliant circle to her Court. Filicaia does not seem to have left his native city, but she extended her patronage to his sons, and he celebrated her munificence in many odes, and wrote a noble Sonnet on her death. In one of his poems he exhorts Rome to rejoice in Christina's presence:

"Non lungi là dal gelido Boöte
Sorse indi a poco imperiosa Stella,
Ma fausta si, che se mentir non vuoi,
Dire a ragion tu puoi:
Antica Roma, a par di te son bella."

Filicaia received immense praise and universal renown for a series of Odes on the Liberation of Vienna from the Turks by John Sobiesky, King of Poland, in 1683. No lyric poems in the Italian language are more universally known. They are undoubtedly splendid and effective compositions. They inspired Wordsworth with the following Sonnet:

'Oh, for a kindling touch from that pure flame
Which ministered, erewhile, to a sacrifice
Of gratitude, beneath Italian skies,
In words like these: 'Up, Voice of Song! proclaim
'Thy saintly rapture with celestial aim;
'For lo! the Imperial City stands released
'From bondage threatened by the embattled East,
'And Christendom respires, from guilt and shame
'Redeemed, from miserable fear set free
'By one day's feat, one mighty victory.
'Chant the deliverer's praise in every tongue;
'The Cross shall spread, the Crescent hath waxed dim,
'He conquering, as in joyful Heaven is sung;
'He conquering through God, and God through Him.'"

The poems rise to the occasion, but at times they are more rhetorical than poetical, and the constant apostrophes to God to wake up from His sleep are not in the best taste. Filicaia unfortunately devotes almost as much eulogy to the ungrateful Leopold as to the heroic Sobiesky, and the grovelling adulation with which he addresses Royal and Imperial personages, detracts from the loftiness of the whole.

Filicaia was remarkable for tenderness. One of the finest of his sonnets is on Divine Providence:

"Qual madre i figli con pietoso affetto,"

in which thought and pathos are blended with admirable art. Some of his sonnets are strikingly ingenious. Very beautiful is that on the earth-quake of Sicily, in 1683:

"Quì pur foste, o Città; nè in voi quì resta

Testimon di voi stesse un sasso solo,
In cui si scriva: Quì s'aperse il suolo,
Qui fu Catania, e Siracusa è questa!"

Very beautiful are some of his religious verses:

"Avess' io scritto meno, e assai più pianto;
E stil men terso avessi, alma più bella,
Men chiaro ingegno, e cor più puro e santo!"

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The final impression left by Filicaia's poems is that he was a great nature rather than a perfect poet, and that it is owing to the loftiness of his spirit rather than to the mastery of his art, that his pages, too often cumbrous and conventional, are irradiated with flashes so brilliant and striking that they leave an indelible impression on the reader and place the poet on a pedestal more lofty and honourable than many writers, gifted with keener wit and more vivid imagination, can ever hope to ascend.

As Chiabrera took Pindar for his model, so did Fulvio Testi endeavour to appear in the character of an Italian Horace. And, in truth, he had many qualities to justify his undertaking the task. He has wit, ingenuity, clear and pointed expression, and a mind genuinely poetical. He seems to have developed early, and some of his best pieces were written before he was twenty-five. He dedicated an edition of his poems to Charles Emmanuel, Duke of Savoy, and thereby incurred the wrath of the Spanish Governor of Lombardy, and had to take refuge in flight. The Duke of Modena became his patron and gave him a pension, and his successor, Francis I, was even more favourable to the poet, and took him in his suite to Madrid in 1638, when Philip IV of Spain conferred upon him a lucrative office. Testi resembled Ariosto in being made Governor of the Province of Garfagnana, and Tasso in exciting the most intense hatred and jealousy. [Pg 126] For some unexplained reason, he was arrested early in 1646 and thrown into prison, where he met his death on the twenty-eighth of August. It is suspected that he was executed within the precincts of the prison, but nothing certain is known; all is suspicion and mystery. If he has not left anything very memorable, his poems are at least spirited and elegant, and, unlike many of his contemporaries, he is never dull and ponderous. Some of his letters are witty and vivacious.

The great painter, Salvator Rosa, often amused his leisure with writing verses, and if his attention had not been so strongly directed to the sister art of painting, he might have achieved notable success in poetry. Some of his ballads are spontaneous and natural, and his satires show genuine powers of observation and ridicule. That on the painters of his day is, perhaps, the best, and is well worth reading.

Another satirist of merit was Benedetto Menzini. Like Filicaia, he enjoyed the patronage of Christina of Sweden. Never, since the terrible catastrophe of the sack of Rome under Clement VII, did the Eternal City present such a magnificent aspect as in the latter part of the Seventeenth Century. The stately days of Leo X seemed to be revived. Alexander VII signalised his Pontificate by extraordinary splendour. [Pg 127] The colonnade enclosing the square before St. Peter's was erected by Bernini in his reign. Christina vied with the Pope in the magnificence of her Court. The Ambassadors to the Vatican endeavoured to out-shine each other in pomp and luxury. If Menzini who lived in the heart of this splendid society, did not transfer more than a dim reflection of its brilliancy to his pages, he writes at least as a man who has seen and observed much, and he is neither a pedant nor an empty declaimer. He wrote an Art of Poetry—in verse, almost as good as that written in France at the same period by Boileau. His sonnets and serious poems are much more conventional. He was a good Latinist, but the great series of Italian writers of Latin poems closed with the sparkling epigrams of the brothers Amaltei.

Another lyric poet attracted to Rome by the liberality of the Queen of Sweden was Alessandro Guidi. He found a patron not only in that Princess, but also, early in the Eighteenth Century, in Pope Clement XI, whose Latin homilies he turned into Italian verse. Previous writers had, in the composition of their Odes, observed the most rigid rules of metre and rhyme. The same stanza, the same order of rhymes, was maintained throughout each poem. Guidi, whether from want of skill, or from indolence, or from love of originality, was thé first to discard this iron regularity, [Pg 128] and to write Odes in irregular stanzas, even occasionally leaving verses without giving them a succeeding rhyme. This was followed at intervals by other writers, until it culminated in the boundless freedom of Leopardi, who, in his last productions, introduces rhymes so sparingly as to make his metre little more than a modification of blank verse. After Leopardi's imitators had tired the public ear with their slipshod effusions, a reaction set in, and regular stanzas are now more than ever in favour, the long and elaborate stanzas of Filicaia being, however, neglected for the lighter and more pointed quatrains.

By this license, strongly censured at the time, Guidi undoubtedly gained greater freedom of movement, and he is never obliged to force his thoughts and twist his phrases. But it cannot be said that his conceptions are more natural and unconventional than those of his predecessors. He has no great glow of imagination, no rainbow hues of fancy, no depth of thought, nor has he any powers of pathos or tenderness. But he is always tasteful and scholarly, and his works are perfectly free from any taint of coarseness or vulgarity.

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Alessandro Marchetti was remarkable rather for his magnificent translation of Lucretius than for any of his original productions. The book was considered in Italy of a tendency too dangerous to be allowed to pass the censorship, and it had to be printed in London and smuggled surreptitiously into the country of its origin.

Francesco Redi wrote one very celebrated work, *Bacco in Toscana,* a dithyramb, full of fire and

enthusiasm, a species of poem of which there are few examples in the Italian language. He was a physician by profession, and greatly advanced the science of his time. He died in 1698.

Carlo Maria Maggi wrote some pleasing poems in the Milanese dialect, and some of his Sonnets addressed to Italy have the patriotic fire so much extolled in Filicaia.

Felice Zappi and Faustina Maratti, his wife, wrote some noble and spirited Sonnets. One by Zappi on the Moses of Michael Angelo, has most striking beauty and originality.

The Seventeenth Century was not rich in comic poets. The versifiers of the age are mostly distinguished by a rather monotonous seriousness. Two poets, however, are remarkable for their comic inventions, Lorenzo Lippi and Alessandro Tassoni.

The former, a Florentine, was painter as well as poet. He wrote a burlesque poem in Ottava Rima called the *Malmantile.* It is valued as a storehouse of Tuscan phrase, and is, indeed, so full of the slang of the Mercato Vecchio as to be almost unintelligible to Italians themselves, much more to foreigners, without the copious annotations of the commentators. [Pg 130]

Alessandro Tassoni was a native of Modena, born in 1565, died in 1635. He distinguished himself as a Commentator on Petrarch, but more especially by his mock-heroic poem, *La Secchia Rapita,* which may be translated *The Rape of the Bucket.* Like so many other writers of the day, he passed his life in the service of Cardinals md Princes, and he suffered much from the caprice of his masters and the envy of his rivals. But he ended his days peacefully as a pensioner of Francis I, Duke of Modena. His principal work, *La Secchia Rapita,* has much ingenuity of thought to recommend it, but his style is somewhat deficient in colour, and his subject is not very interesting in itself, nor is it made so by its author. Misled by the similarity of the names, Dickens, in his *Pictures from Italy,* attributes the *Secchia Rapita* to Tasso. Among mock-heroic poems of modern times, Boileau's *Lutrin* may be said to be slightly inferior to the *Secchia Rapita,* but Pope's *Rape of the Lock* and Leopardi's *Paralipomeni* vastly superior, both in brilliancy of thought and perfection of style.

[Pg 131] In comparing the poetry of the Seventeenth Century with that of the Sixteenth, we are struck by the curious fact that its authors have a more old-fashioned air than their predecessors. This is partly to be-accounted for by their search for ingenious conceits, which prevents them from being as flowing and natural as the contemporaries of Ariosto and Tasso. Their style, too, is more cumbrous. They are fonder of long and complicated periods than the poets of the Sixteenth Century. But they have many compensating qualities. Their very fault of being too artificial in thought and imagery argues the possession of no little imagination and fertility. A man cannot pervert into strange and fantastic forms his thoughts and conceptions without being at considerable pains to do so. None of these writers spare themselves any trouble, and they often choose the most difficult metres which the language can present. Their great defect is conventionality of phraseology, which began with Tasso and only ended in the Nineteenth Century with Monti. They bedeck themselves with the rags of Ancient Mythology, and do not seem for a moment to suspect that they would look much better in unborrowed garments. Instead of talking of the wind, they talk of Boreas. Instead of mentioning the sea, they mention Neptune and Thetis. All this makes even the best of them unnatural and pedantic to a degree, and it is only [Pg 132] in their very finest passages that they are enjoyable to the modern reader. The intense love for Classical Antiquity had died out with the Renaissance, and the allusions to the Gods of Greece and Rome were but the outcome of habit and convention. Instead of adorning their works, these allusions positively make them dry, for it is only Marino who uses them as they should be used: for the display of brilliant pageants of description and imagery. He conjures up a fairyland of his own as Keats did two hundred years later.

[1] Lord Somers was a great admirer of Filicaia. See Lord Campbell's *Lives of the Chancellors,* and Macaulay's *History.*

CHAPTER XI. [Pg 133]

GALILEO AND THE PROSE WRITERS OF THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY.

In enumerating the Prose Writers of the Seventeenth Century, we are confronted with the illustrious name of Galileo Galilei, which will continue to be remembered as long as Science is cultivated.

This celebrated man was born at Pisa in 1564, and died at Arcetri, near Florence, in 1642. He was Professor of Mathematics at the University of Pisa, and there would be absolutely nothing of note to tell of his life, had he not happened to come into collision with the Inquisition, for maintaining, or rather for his method of maintaining, that the earth revolved round the sun. He was cited to appear before the Tribunal of the Inquisition, but when he arrived in Rome he was treated with consideration, and even with distinction. His place of arrest was the magnificent palace of the Tuscan Ambassador, near the Trinità de' Monti. But it will be more satisfactory to [Pg 134] quote his own statement in a letter to a priest of his acquaintance, Father Vincenzo Renieri.

"From a youth upwards," he writes, "I meditated the composition of a Dialogue on the Two Systems of Ptolemy and Copernicus. My chief inducement was to explain the ebb and flow of the tides by the movement of the earth. That which first acquainted Rome with my opinions on the movement of the earth was a long dissertation which I addressed to Cardinal Orsini, and then I was denounced as a scandalous and impudent writer. After the publication of my Dialogues, I was

summoned to Rome by the Congregation of the Holy Office I arrived in Rome on the tenth of February, 1633, and was confined to the delightful palace of the Tuscan Ambassador on the Trinità de' Monti. Next day I was visited by Father Lancio, Commissary of the Holy Inquisition. He took me with him in his carriage. On the way he asked me numerous questions. He was most zealous in his endeavour to make me repair the scandal I had given to the whole of Italy by maintaining the shocking doctrine that the earth revolved round the sun. To all my arguments, drawn from physics and mathematics, he answered in the words of Scripture: '*Terra autem in æternum stabit, quia Terra autem in æternum stat.*' Occupied in this conversation, we arrived at the Palace of the Holy Office, situated to the west of the magnificent Church of St. Peter. I was immediately presented by the Commissary to Monsignor Vitrici, the Assessor. Two Dominican Monks were with him. They politely requested me to produce my arguments before the full Congregation, so that in case I should be condemned my defence might be heard. The following Thursday I was presented to the Congregation. I produced my proofs, but unhappily they were not appreciated, and all my endeavours failed to make them acceptable. They zealously endeavoured to convince me of the scandal I had given, and the passage of Scripture was always quoted as a proof of my guilt. I remembered opportunely an argument drawn from Scripture. I alleged it, but with little success. I said that it appeared to me that there were passages in the Bible worded in accordance with the popular views of Astronomy current in antiquity, and that the passage which was quoted against me might be conceived in that spirit. I added that in the Book of Job, chapter xxxvii, v. 18, it is said that the heavens are as if they were made of metal and bronze. Elihu it is who utters these words. Thus we clearly see that he speaks according to the system of Ptolemy, and that system has been proved to be absurd by modern philosophy and common sense. If, therefore, so much stress is laid on Joshua stopping the sun, we ought also to consider that passage where it is said that the heavens are composed of so many skies like mirrors. The inference seemed to me to be perfectly logical. Still, it was always slurred over, and I could extract no reply except a shrug of the shoulders, the usual refuge of those who have made up their minds, and who are deaf to argument from excess of prejudice.

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"Finally, I was obliged, as a good Catholic, to retract my opinion, and my Dialogue was placed on the Index of forbidden books. After five months I received permission to leave Rome. Florence was then visited by the Plague, and as the place of my arrest, I was sent, as a great favour, to the abode of the dearest friend I had at Siena, the Archbishop Piccolomini. His company gave me so much pleasure and contributed so much to my peace of mind, that I resumed my studies, and after another five months, when the Plague had lost its virulence in Florence, I was, by the kindness of his Holiness the Pope, allowed to exchange the confinement of that house for the liberty of a country retreat which I so vastly enjoy. Towards the beginning of December of this year, 1633, I returned to the Villa of Belriguardo, and then to Arcetri, where I am now, enjoying salubrious air in the neighbourhood of my cherished Florence."

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This letter, dated Arcetri, December, 1633, gives a plain unvarnished account of what took place. It is obvious, from the expressions used by Galileo, that he thought he was let off with considerable leniency. We cannot fail to agree with him when we think of Bruno and Vanini, who, not long before, had been burnt alive by the same Tribunal, and of Campanella, confined in a dungeon for twenty-seven years.

Thus we see that there is no truth in the popular legend that he was put to the torture, and there is probably as little in the anecdote that on rising to his feet after his retractation, he exclaimed, *"Eppur si muove!"* Doubtless, if he had uttered those words, he would have paid heavily for his temerity.

In his retirement at Arcetri he was at liberty to continue unmolested those researches which have made his name immortal. His invention of the telescope revealed to him many wonders of the Heavens. He discovered the Satellites of Jupiter and the Ring of Saturn, although he did not realise the annular nature of the latter object, a triumph reserved for Huyghens. He observed the spots on the Sun and the Mountains of the Moon. His researches in Chemistry enhanced his renown with many memorable results.

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Nor was it only as a man of science that he claimed the admiration of the world. As a writer, he stands foremost in his age. His prose is clear, unaffected, graceful, and occasionally eloquent and impressive. His scientific treatises are models of lucidity. He himself, when praised for that quality, attributed it in a large measure to his constant perusal of the works of Ariosto. Clearness, indeed, is the especial merit of that great poet. In his youth he wrote an essay to prove the superiority of Ariosto to Tasso. He said Tasso gave us words, and Ariosto, realities. This assertion may be somewhat sweeping, but it has a foundation of truth. Still, he admitted that Tasso had many qualities that please the reader, and that it was only the sharp scrutiny of criticism which he could not sustain.

The works of Galileo are not very voluminous. First and foremost in importance, comes the *Dialogue on the Two Systems of Ptolemy and Copernicus.* His *Saggiatore* is hardly less important. His *Problems* contain descriptions of many experiments, and his Letters are as remarkable for wit and vivacity as for strength and boldness of thought. His Essay on the comparative merits of Ariosto and Tasso has already been mentioned. He took great delight in poetry, and we are assured by his biographers that he knew by heart many passages from Virgil, Ovid, Horace, and the Tragedies attributed to Seneca. In Italian, he derived the greatest pleasure from Ariosto, and next to him, from Petrarch and Berni. Dante is not mentioned, but it would be extraordinary if the most profound and graphic of all poets did not appeal to him, although the vagaries of taste are incalculable. It must be remembered that in the Seventeenth Century the appreciation of Dante had sunk to its lowest ebb.

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Among those who signed the decree condemning the errors of the illustrious Galileo, was Cardinal GUIDO BENTIVOGLIO, who, in spite of that unfortunate circumstance, deserves honourable mention as an historian and writer of Memoirs. He was employed as Nuncio by several Popes in Flanders and in France. Gregory XV raised him to the Roman purple, and when the Conclave met in 1644, after the death of Urban VIII, there is every reason to believe that he would have been elected Pope, had he not fallen ill and died on the seventeenth of September. There is a magnificent portrait of him by Vandyke at Bologna.

He had many qualities of an able, though not of a great, writer. He had the advantage of seeing and observing much, and the impress of his experience is discernible in all he wrote. Ranke [Pg 140] extols his Memoirs as giving an attractive picture of his age, and, in truth, he is one of the few authors, not of French nationality, who approach in merit the great memoir-writers of France. He also wrote an account of his missions as Nuncio, numerous Letters, and a History of the War of Independence of the Netherlands against the despotism of Spain. The *History* is a readable and spirited narrative, and the historian is seldom prejudiced or bitter. Having himself lived so long in Flanders, he is able to give graphic descriptions of the localities he mentions. Ambrosoli censures his style for its monotony, but I cannot say I ever detected that defect. On the contrary, it seems to me to be as flowing and animated as can be desired. A writer on historical subjects cannot be expected to indulge in the fanciful digressions of novelists or essayists. If Bentivoglio had lived to be Pope, he would doubtless have distinguished his Pontificate in a manner worthy of his abilities.

A greater historian than Bentivoglio appeared in DAVILA, a native of Padua. In his youth he served in the French army, and then in that of the Republic of Venice. He was of noble origin, and his ancestors occupied the post of Grand Constable of the Island of Cyprus when it was still under the dominion of Venice. They had the privilege of taking their seat next to the Doge when they [Pg 141] appeared in the Grand Council, and this privilege was accorded to Davila himself, in such high esteem was he held. In 1630, he published his *History of the Civil Wars of France,* the work to which he is indebted for his literary fame. He was appointed in the following year Commandant of the garrison of Crema, but on his way from Venice to that town he was foully murdered in a village named San Michele.

Davila was a man of action rather than of letters, and it is therefore not surprising if his style is less purely Tuscan than that of more elegant scholars. But he had great strength of thought, keen penetration, and no contemptible knowledge of affairs. These qualities, added to the interesting events he narrates, secured great attention and applause for his work. He has, however, some defects. He is not always very skilful in presenting vivid pictures to the imagination and he sometimes Italianizes the names of persons and places until they become hardly recognisable. Thus Elboeuf is metamorphosed into Ellebove.

FRA PAOLO SARPI obtained immense reputation, especially in Protestant countries, for his *History of the Council of Trent* and his bitter pamphlets against the Court of the Vatican. In the great contest between the Republic of Venice and Pope Paul V, he took the part of his native city with [Pg 142] intrepidity not unalloyed by ferocity. He was undoubtedly a man of great abilities, but his abilities were sharpened by his rancour and malignity.

Another historian of the Council of Trent, but one who regarded it from the point of view of the Papal party, was Cardinal SFORZA PALLAVICINO, one of the most brilliant men that ever entered the Society of Jesus. He was so amiable and benevolent that Pope Alexander VII used to say of him "Il Cardinal Pallavicino é tutto amore." He died in 1667. His works comprise, besides the *History of the Council of Trent,* a *Treatise on Christian Perfection,* an *Essay on Style* and a *Biography of Alexander VII.* All these works are remarkable for distinction of style, although he sometimes indulges too much in pointed antitheses. He was very unlike Davila in the care and polish he bestowed upon his compositions.

Another Jesuit, DANIEL BARTOLI, wrote the *History of his Order* and the *Lives of Eminent Jesuits* in a style little short of perfection. He has indeed been accused of elaborating his phrases until they ceased to be natural; and yet in spite of his elaboration, he had his cavillers who pointed out idioms of doubtful correctness, and said *Questo non si può dire, (this cannot be said.)* He replied to them in a witty pamphlet: *The Right and Wrong of the Non Si Può.* "A clever work," says *[Pg 143]* Fontanini; "but the Author's cleverness would have been better displayed in avoiding the errors than in defending them with obstinate ingenuity."

An eminent preacher and divine of the age was FATHER PAUL SEGNERI whose books of devotion are still used in Catholic countries. He, too, was a Jesuit, but his style is not quite so good as that of his two predecessors. It is occasionally too pompous and declamatory; but he had a fertile and vigorous mind and preached and wrote from his heart.

Another writer, less orthodox, but more celebrated, was GIORDANO BRUNO. His works, however, although published on the threshold of the Seventeenth Century, were conceived and written in the Sixteenth. He was burnt alive for his heresies in the year 1601. For some years he took refuge in England, and it would have been well for his prosperity had he stayed there. In these days of greater latitude of speculation, there appears to be little in his works to bring down upon him so terrible a penalty, but the provocation hardly given by the works, seems to have been afforded by the author. He was irritable and vainglorious, and he knew neither prudence nor discretion. His great treatise, *Della Causa, Principio ed Uno,* is an exposition of Pantheism, but [Pg 144] his vague reveries have little foundation in science to recommend them. He also wrote a Comedy, rather more indelicate than should emanate from the pen of a philosopher.

CAMPANELLA, a somewhat kindred spirit, though without the latent Atheism of Giordano Bruno, was

a Dominican Friar, a native of Cosenza. He was suspected of disaffection, perhaps of heresy, and was cooped up for twenty-seven years in a narrow dungeon. He beguiled his weary captivity by writing long philosophical works. They are, however, all in Latin,[1] and therefore do not come within the scope of this volume. I mention them as a sign of the revival of the long dormant spirit of science and speculation. Campanella wrote in defence of Galileo's theory of the rotation of the earth round the sun. Campanella obtained his liberty in 1629 and retired to France, where he met with some kindness from Cardinal Richelieu.

The first Edition of the celebrated *Dictionary of the Accademia della Crusca* was published in 1613. It is curious that with the universal attention it aroused, it did not raise the standard of taste and scholarship, for truth to tell, the average run of inferior writers produced works incredibly bad.

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There was a dearth of really good writers of stories in prose in the Seventeenth Century. The *Stories* of Celio Malaspini are racy and amusing, and give a graphic idea of the manners and customs of the early part of the Century, but they are often indelicate and have few graces of style to recommend them. Trajano Boccalini wrote some vivacious political and literary squibs which had a wide circulation in an age long before the introduction of newspapers, where alone writings on such ephemeral topics now appear.

Florence could boast of a select band of philosophers, Magalotti, Viviani, Redi and Dati, but their influence does not seem to have extended beyond Tuscany. Auton Maria Salvini was a laborious grammarian and one of the chief compilers of the Dictionary above named.

Probably the most eminent man of letters of the last ten years of the Seventeenth Century was Crescimbeni, the historian of Italian poetry, and the founder of the Arcadian Academy, still flourishing in Rome. He was a writer of great talent and judgment, and he was more alive than his contemporaries to the evils resulting from the exaggerated metaphors and wild hyperboles introduced by the followers of Marino. He looked out for a perfect model of poetry, and he found it in the works of Angelo di Costanzo, and certainly that writer's equable sweetness and refinement are unruffled by tempestuous passion or towering sublimity. [Pg 146] Crescimbeni might, we think, with greater propriety have selected Dante, Petrarch, and Ariosto to reform the degraded taste of the age; but still, the beauties of Costanzo are of a high order, and the recommendation bore good fruit.

If it cannot be said of any writer of the Seventeenth Century that he rises to the highest pinnacle of Art, yet, on a review of the whole period, there remains an impression of much ingenuity and much vigour of thought.

[1] His poems, chiefly Sonnets, are in Italian.

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CHAPTER XII.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE WRITERS OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY.

The precepts of Crescimbeni bore good fruit, and both prose and poetry gradually freed themselves from the faults of taste so obvious in the preceding generation. Verse became lighter and more flowing, although there was, unhappily, no diminution of conventional phraseology or of mythological allusion. The comic poets were numerous and gifted. But, on the other hand, there was less seriousness and perhaps less originality. The influence of French Literature began to prevail, and it has not been shaken off even to the present day. The tyranny of governments was not quite so oppressive. Public opinion began to revolt against the most flagrant abuses, and a succession of enlightened sovereigns and statesmen carried into practice the enlightened philanthropy of Voltaire and the sentimental philanthrophy of Rousseau. [Pg 148] Indeed, all over Europe, there was a desire, in the second half of the Eighteenth Century, to promote the welfare of the people, such as was never evinced in the age of Davila or of Filicaia. Louis XVI and Turgot in France, Charles III and Aranda in Spain, Pombal in Portugal, the Grand Duke Leopold in Tuscany, were all zealous in the cause of humanity and enlightenment. It seemed even to acute observers that a golden age was awaiting the human race. Unhappily, the horrors and crimes of the French Revolution rudely dispelled these pleasing visions and produced a reaction, the effects of which threw back the progress of humanity for many generations. It is heart-breaking to think how different the development of Europe might have been, had the extreme section of the French Republicans been kept in subordination and had Roland guided the destinies of France instead of Robespierre.

The conquests of Napoleon completed what the Reign of Terror had begun. Old abuses were swept away, but only to make way for tyranny more hopeless and relentless. The loss of life and treasure was enormous, and the decline in the wealth of Italy became more conspicuous than ever.

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Authors fared somewhat badly during this century. Princes, probably following the example of the frivolous Court of Louis XV, no longer even pretended to encourage science and literature. We hear of no poet receiving even the precarious and capricious patronage bestowed upon Tasso and Ariosto. Metastasio was the only poet who basked in the sunshine of Royal favour, and he owed his prosperity to the Court of Vienna, and not to the Court of Sardinia, or of Naples. The patronage of the great was withdrawn, and that of the public had hardly begun. Thus writers, unless possessed of ample means, had bitter struggles with poverty and obscurity. Some, like

Muratori and Parini, entered the Church and became monks or abbés. Others, like Baretti and Algarotti, sought their fortune in foreign lands. The impudent piracy of books, and the unauthorised performance of plays deprived even popular authors of the reward of their labours. Goldoni, after spending many years in producing comedies that deserved and obtained applause, was glad to find an asylum in France as reader of Italian to the three daughters of Louis XV.

The great merit of the Eighteenth Century, in Italy as elsewhere, was its light-heartedness and humanity; the great defect, its materialism and frivolity. Indeed, it would be hard to conceive a more enervating atmosphere than surrounded many Italian poets, especially in the earlier part of [Pg 150] the Century; and unhappily, the numerous literary Academies, instituted all over the Peninsula, instead of arresting the evil, positively aggravated it, as they devoted their attention, with few exceptions, to subjects and thoughts of the most trifling description. This frivolity is not wholly absent even from the works of Metastasio, one of the most delightful poets that Italy ever produced.

CHAPTER XIII. [Pg 151]

METASTASIO.

Pietro Trapassi was born in Rome on the third of January, 1698. His parents were of humble origin, and he was apprenticed to a goldsmith. He was gifted by nature with a musical voice, and he soon attracted attention, not only by repeating the verses of others, but by improvising verses of his own. A literary man of those days, Gian Vincenzo Gravina, was among those who were interested in the infant prodigy, and so high an opinion did he form of the youth's natural abilities, that he decided to educate him and to start him in life. Never did a benefactor bestow his kindness on a worthier object. Gravina changed the boy's name from Trapassi to Metastasio, and not only taught him Greek and Latin, but also introduced him to the study of the law, in which he himself was a proficient. In his will, he left his protégé fifteen thousand scudi, that he [Pg 152] might have leisure to cultivate his intellectual gifts.

Unfortunately, Metastasio was but young, and his sudden accession to fortune turned his head. The fifteen thousand scudi were soon spent in the company of friends who deserted him the moment they discovered that he was no longer able to entertain them as before. He awoke from his dream of prosperity, and found himself solitary and neglected in the vast wilderness of Rome. To add to his misfortunes, Pope Clement XI had become prejudiced against him by the extravagance of his conduct. He saw that there was no opening for him in Rome, and he determined to fall back upon his legal knowledge and to enter the office of a notary at Naples.

Italian Opera was beginning its brilliant career at that epoch, and Metastasio had, when in Rome, written a drama for music which had obtained much applause. A Neapolitan manager, on the look out for a libretto, heard that the young Roman poet was in the town, and commissioned him to write a work for his theatre. Metastasio produced *Gli Orti Esperidi.* It was brilliantly successful. The celebrated singer, Marianna Bulgarelli, surnamed "La Romanina," appeared as Venus, and a life-long friendship was begun between her and the poet. His next work, *Didom Abbandonata,* [Pg 153] was an even greater triumph, and, wonderful for chose days, the poet derived handsome pecuniary profit from his success. He was able in time to pay off his debts and to return to Rome. Here he took Holy Orders, and was henceforth known as the Abbé Metastasio.

The Emperor Charles VI was a passionate lover of music, and kept not only an Italian company in Vienna, but also an Italian poet to write the words of the operas which his favourite composers received orders to set to music. The poet was entitled "Poeta Cesareo," and enjoyed a liberal stipend. The post was occupied by Apostolo Zeno, a Venetian, who, on retiring by reason of advancing years, recommended the brilliant Metastasio as his successor. Accordingly, in 1730, Metastasio set out for Vienna, and although he lived for fifty-two years longer, he never returned to his native country.

His old friend, Marianna Bulgarelli, died some years after he had gone to Austria, and she left him a large part of her considerable fortune. But he refused to accept it, as he was of opinion that it ought to have gone to her husband, to whom, accordingly, it was handed over.

Metastasio is the only writer of librettos whose works have risen to the dignity of a classic. Indeed, they are still remembered when the composers who set them to music have sunk into [Pg 154] oblivion. Some of his dramas seem to have been used by several composers in succession, and one, *La Clemenza di Tito,* produced in Vienna for the first time with the music of Caldara on the fourth of November, 1734, was many years afterwards used by the illustrious Mozart.

The highest favour of the Imperial family was bestowed upon Metastasio during the reign of Charles VI, and was continued by the Empress Maria Theresa and her son, Joseph II. It was only natural that he should feel the most intense loyalty in return, and when the House of Hapsburg suffered cruel reverses in the War of the Austrian Succession, and later on, in the Seven Years' War, he sympathised acutely with his Imperial mistress.

Alfieri tells us in his *Memoirs* that he might have had an introduction to Metastasio during his stay in Vienna, but that he saw him one day in the park at Schönbrunn making the customary obeisance to Maria Theresa with an air of such cheerful adulation, that he conceived the most supreme contempt for so servile a poet. But surely this is carrying independence to the verge of

churlishness. If Metastasio had not reason to show his gratitude, who had? And the most ardent opponent of tyranny must own that Maria Theresa had qualities that give her a lofty rank among the monarchs, not only of her own century, but of those past and to come. [Pg 155]

Metastasio lived in uninterrupted prosperity in Vienna for half a century, and when he died on the twelfth of April, 1782, he was universally regretted in the country of his adoption and in that of his birth. He amassed a handsome fortune of one hundred thousand florins, which he left to the family of the Councillor Martinez, with whom he had resided since he first came to Vienna.

The popularity of Metastasio's works during his lifetime was unbounded. He is of all Italian poets the easiest for a foreigner to understand. In consideration for the composers, he only selected those words that most readily lent themselves to the purpose of singing. Thus his vocabulary is somewhat limited, and he has a tendency to repeat the same imagery. The construction of his phrases is simplicity itself, and he offers no obscure passages for the reader to solve. He is neither very profound nor very picturesque; he is essentially musical. But he had a beautiful mind, and his tenderness and pathos have the qualities of freshness and purity. The dialogue of his dramas, though musical in versification, is not striking in substance, but every character of importance, before leaving the stage, or at the end of an act, is given a song, and it is by virtue of [Pg 156] these glorious songs that Metastasio continues to charm us even at the present day. They are so musical that they positively sing themselves. They are so clear and pointed in expression, that they easily impress themselves upon the memory. He takes his plots from Ancient History and from Mythology, and for his Oratorios, from the Bible. The local colouring is not always very vivid, and we see too often the powdered hair and the red heels of the age of Rococo. But the stories have plenty of spirit and human interest, and if heroes like Titus and Cæsar sigh too much in the manner of love-lorn swains, they do so in lines so melodious that pardon cannot be withheld. An exquisite selection could be made from the songs in Metastasio's operas, in which we find thoughts tender, beautiful and ingenious, expressed in language delightfully spontaneous, fresh and emphatic. The meaning is so linked with the music of the verse, and that music is so peculiar to the Italian language, that the subtle charm of the original would evaporate in translation.

I will quote a few of the finest.

In the *Didone Abbandonata,* Dido charges her sister Selene, who herself is in love with Æneas, to assure him that she will ever love him. Selene leaves the stage after singing the following song. The passages in brackets are supposed to be asides: [Pg 157]

Dirò che fida sei,
Su la mia fè riposa;
Sarò per te pietosa;
(Per me crudel sarò.)

Sapranno i labbri miei
Scoprirgli il tuo desio.
(Ma la mia pena, oh Dio!
Come nasconderò?)

Dido vindicates her Royal dignity:

Son regina, e sono amante;
E l' impero io sola voglio
Del mio soglio e del mio cor.

Darmi legge in van pretende
Chi l' arbitrio a me contende
Della gloria e dell' amor.

Selene says that every lover fancies that beauty alone makes him fall in love; but it is not beauty, it is a fond desire that rises unexpectedly, that delights us, and we know not why:

Ogni amator suppone
Che della sua ferita
Sia la beltà cagione,
Ma la beltà non è.

È un bel desio, che nasce
Allor che men s'aspetta;
Si sente che diletta,
Ma non si sa perchè.

In the *Artaserse,* Mandane implores of Arbace not to forget her, as she will not forget him: [Pg 158]

Conservati fedele;
Pensa ch' io resto e peno;
E qualche volta almeno
Ricordati di me.

Ch' io per virtù d'amore,
Parlando col mio core,
Ragionerò con te.

In the Oratorio of *Gioas,* Ismaele says that the race of David is not exterminated as was supposed, and compares it to a flower that revives from a languishing condition, and to a torch giving out new light when it seemed to be dying:

Pianta così, che pare
Estinta, inaridita,
Torna più bella in vita
Talvolta a germogliar.

Face così talora,
Che par che manchi e mora,
Di maggior lume adorna
Ritorna a scintillar.

In the *Olimpiade,* Argene, disguised as a Shepherdess, sings with a Chorus of Maidens the praises of the forest:

Coro.

Oh care selve, oh cara
Felice libertà!

Argene.

Qui se un piacer si gode,
Parte non v'ha la frode,
Ma lo condisce a gara
Amore e fedeltà.

Coro.

Oh care selve, oh cara
Felice libertà!

Argene.

Qui poco ognun possiede,
E ricco ognun si crede;
Ne, più bramando, impara
Che cosa è povertà.

Coro.

Oh care selve, oh cara
Felice libertà!

Argene.

Senza custode o mura
La pace è qui sicura,
Che l'altrui voglia avara
Onde allettar non ha.

Coro.

Oh care selve, oh cara
Felice libertà!

Megacle declares that as he followed his friend in prosperity, so will he stand by him in adversity:

Lo seguitai felice
Quand' era il ciel sereno;
Alle tempeste in seno
Voglio seguirlo ancor.

Come dell' oro il foco
Scopre le masse impure,
Scoprono le sventure
De' falsi amici il cor.

Aminta compares himself in his misfortune to a ship-wrecked mariner who gives up all hope and abandons himself to his fate:

Son qual per mare ignoto
Naufrago passegiero,
Già con la morte a nuoto
Ridotto a contrastar.

Ora un sostegno, ed ora

Perde una stella; al fine
Perde la speme ancora,
E s' abbandona al mar.

The Chorus and Semi-chorus implore Jove to pardon a sacrilege:

Coro.

I tuoi strali, terror de mortali,
Ah! sospendi, gran padre de Numi,
Ah! deponi, gran Nume de' re.

Parte del Coro.

Fumi il tempio del sangue d'un empio
Che oltraggiò con insano furore,
Sommo Giove, un imago di te.

Coro.

I tuoi strali, terror de' mortali,
Ah! sospendi, gran padre de' Numi,
Ah! deponi, gran Nume de' re.

Parte del Coro.

L'onde chete del pallido Lete
L'empio varchi; ma il nostro timore,
Ma il suo fallo portando con se.

Covo.

I tuoi strali, terror de' mortali,
Ah! sospendi, gran padre de' Numi,
Ah! deponi, gran Nume de' re.

In the Opera of *Demofoonte* Dircea declares her constancy to Timante:

In te spero, o sposo amato,
Fido a te la sorte mia;
E per te, qualunque sia,
Sempre cara a me sarà.

Pur che a me nel morir mio
Il piacer non sia negato
Di vantar che tua son io,
Il morir mi piacerà.

Creusa contrasts the happiness of primitive ages with the artificiality of the present:

Felice età dell' oro,
Bella innocenza antica,
Quando al piacer nemica
Non era la virtù!

Dal fasto e dal decoro
Noi ci troviamo oppressi;
E ci formiam noi stessi
La nostra servitù.

In the *Isola Disabitata,* Costanza deplores her forsaken condition:

Se non piange un' infelice,
Da' viventi separata,
Dallo sposo abbandonata,
Dimmi, oh Dio, chi piangerà?

Chi può dir ch'io pianga a torto,
Se nè men sperar mi lice
Questo misero conforto
D'ottener l' altrui pietà?

In the *Clemenza di Tito,* Titus declares that if he cannot reign by love, he will not reign by fear:

Se al impero, amici Dei!
Necessario è un cor severo,
O togliete a me l' impero,
O a me date un altro cor.

Se la fe de' regni miei

Con l' amor non assicuro,
D'una fede io non mi curo
Che sia frutto del timor.

The Chorus declares that it is not to be wondered at that the Gods protect a Prince as noble as themselves: [Pg 163]

Che del Ciel, che degli Dei
Tu il pensier, l'amor tu sei,
Grand' eroe, nel giro angusto
Si mostrò di questo dì.

Ma cagion di meraviglia
Non è già, felice Augusto,
Che gli Dei chi lor somiglia
Custodiscano così.

In the *Temistocle,* Rossane admits that she is distracted by jealousy:

Basta dir ch' io sono amante,
Per saper che ho già nel petto
Questo barbaro sospetto,
Che avvelena ogni piacer;

Che ha cent' occhi, e pur travede,
Che il mal finge, il ben non crede;
Che dipinge nel sembiante
I deliri del pensier.

Serse declares that silence is more eloquent than words:

Quando parto, e non rispondo,
Si comprendermi pur sai,
Tutto dico il mio pensier.

Il silenzio è ancor facondo,
E talor si spiega assai
Chi risponde col tacer.

Temistocle fears no tortures, and is proud of dying: [Pg 164]

Serberò fra ceppi ancora
Questa fronte ognor serena;
E la colpa, e non la pena,
Che può farmi impallidir.

Reo son io; convien ch' io mora,
Se la fede error s'appella;
Ma per colpa così bella
Son superbo di morir.

It is a law of nature that we feel for that sorrow which we have felt ourselves:

È legge di natura
Che a compatir ci move
Chi prova una sventura
Che noi provammo ancor;

O sia che amore in noi
La somiglianza accenda;
O sia che più s'intenda
Nel suo l'altrui dolor.

A noble prisoner feels himself superior to his cruel oppressor:

Guardami prima in volto,
Anima vile, e poi
Giudica pur di noi
Il vincitor qual è.

Tu libero e disciolto,
Sei di pallor dipinto;
Io di catene avvinto,
Sento pietà di te.

Adoration of Divinity: [Pg 165]

Te solo adoro,
Mente infinita,
Fonte di vita,
Di verità;

In cui si move,

Da cui dipende
Quanto comprende
L'eternità.

A faithless friend will never make a faithful lover:

Avran le serpi, O cara,
Con le colombe il nido,
Quando un amico infido
Fido amator sarà.

Nell' anime innocenti,
Varie non son fra loro
Le limpide sorgenti
D'Amore e d'amistà.

If the sorrows of everybody could be known, how few would be envied:

Se a ciascun l'interno affanno
Si vedesse in fronte scritto,
Quanti mai ch' invidia fanno,
Ci farebbero pietà!

Si vedria che i lor nemici
Hanno in seno; e si riduce
Nel parere a noi felici
Ogni lor felicità.

The age of gold still lives in the hearts of the innocent: [Pg 166]

Ah! ritorna, età dell'oro,
Alla terra abbandonata,
Se non fosti immaginata
Nel sognar felicità.

Non è ver; quel dolce stato
Non fuggì, non fu sognato;
Ben lo sente ogn' innocente
Nella sua tranquillità.

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CHAPTER XIV.

PARINI.

If the Eighteenth Century was frivolous and luxurious, it was also picturesque and elegant. The age of Dresden china, the age of Watteau and Liotard in painting, must also have left its impress of refined gaiety on poetry. We find that impress in the satires of Pope, in the lighter poems of Voltaire, and in the musical verse of Parini.

Giuseppe Parini was born of humble parents at Bosisio, a hamlet in the district of Milan, near the lake of Pusiano, on the twenty-second of May, 1729. He was educated in Milan at the Arcimboldi Gymnasium, under the direction of the Barnabite Fathers. He showed marked ability and strong inclination for literature. But he had his parents to support, and necessity forced him to become a law-writer. This occupation furnished him with the means of studying Theology, and he entered the priesthood. In 1752 he published his first volume of poems, which, immature as it was, [Pg 168] contained sufficient elements of promise to gain for him many friends and admirers, and he was elected a member of the Academy of the Trasformati of Milan and of the Arcadia of Rome.

Still, he was in great distress, and he was compelled by poverty to become a tutor in private families, and when his father died, he sold the bit of land that came to him in order to supply his mother with the necessaries of life. But, in spite of misfortune, his ambition was not dormant, and he determined that nothing from his pen should see the light until it was brought to the utmost height of perfection. He conceived the plan of his great work, *Il Giorno,* and the first part, entitled *Il Mattino,* was published in 1763, and the second part, entitled *Meriggio,* two years later.

Count Firmian, the Austrian Governor of Lombardy, was induced by Parini's reputation to entrust him with the editorship of an official Gazette, and later on gave him the post of Professor of Literature at the Palatine School at Milan, and after the suppression of the Jesuits he was appointed in the same capacity at the College of the Brera. These appointments made his circumstances a little more comfortable, but his health gradually deteriorated. An affection of the [Pg 169] muscles of the legs seems to have deprived him of che free use of his limbs, and it became so much worse with years, that he ended by being hardly able to walk at all. To add to his misfortunes, his spirit was independent, and his judgment on men and books sharp and even acrimonious. Thus he made many enemies, and when Count Firmian died, he lost his appointments just at the time when he wanted support for his declining years. His sight failed him from overstudy, and at last death came to him as a release on the fifteenth of August, 1799.

His fame as a great poet rests entirely on *Giorno.* The third part, *Il Vespro,* and the fourth, *La Notte,* were not published until after his decease. Although the work occupied him for nearly forty years, it remained incomplete after all, a few lines being wanted to conclude *La Notte.* He was one of those poets who write and re-write their works until they reach the last point of elaboration. His mind was not very fertile, and when a thought occurred to him, it was too precious to be dismissed until it had been adorned with all the resources of his art.

That art, at its best, is brilliantly successful. His blank verse attained a perfection which had never yet been witnessed in the Italian language. Indeed, his blank verse is immeasurably superior to his rhymes. His sonnets and odes are hardly preferable to the better class of similar productions in his day, but the moment he returns to blank verse, he regains all the powers of his mind and is seen to the greatest advantage. The only defect of his style is that it occasionally becomes stiff and heavy, probably the result of over-elaboration. Its peculiar merit is its picturesqueness. It is impossible to read fifteen or twenty consecutive lines in his compositions without coming across a picture which a painter might reproduce on his canvas.

This quality of picturesqueness is peculiarly observable in his best work *Il Giorno,* a mock-heroic poem in blank verse, describing a day in the life of a Milanese nobleman. It must have had some truth as a satire of manners, for one leader of Milanese Society, Prince Belgiojoso, was so struck with the resemblance of its hero to himself, that he hired some ruffians to waylay the author one evening and beat him severely.

Parini's experiences as a tutor in noble families do not appear to have been very happy, and his bile was excited against a class which, even at its best, is apt to be frivolous and self-indulgent. The great merit of the poem is its picturesqueness and its originality; the great defect, its monotony of style, though not of thought or imagery. It is all on one note, that of elaborate irony. He pretends to venerate profoundly things which he most utterly despises. The difficulty of sustaining this tone is often painfully apparent. Another defect is that the poem, unlike the *Rape of the Lock,* offers no connected story. It accompanies the hero from the morning toilet to the midnight ball. Never leaving this one character, a certain monotony is the result, which the author has modified, though not removed, by a few happy digressions. If the irony were not always so obviously insisted upon, it would be at once more effective and more artistic.

As a sample of Parini's style, we may quote the exquisite passage from the first part of the *Giorno,* where the hero, after taking his snuff-box, adorns himself with his rings, his watches (for in the age of Parini it was the fashion to wear two of everything), and the crystal locket containing the portrait of his love.

"Ecco a molti colori oro distinto,
Ecco nobil testuggine, su cui
Voluttuosi immagini lo sguardo
Invitan degli eroi. Copia squisita
Di fumido Rapè quivi è serbata,
E di Spagna oleoso, onde lontana,
Pur come suol fastidioso insetto,
Da te fugga la noia. Ecco che smaglia,
Cupido a te di circondar le dita,
Vivo splendor di preziosa anella.
Ami la pietra ove si stanno ignude
Sculte le Grazie, e che il giudeo ti fece
Creder opra d' Argivi, allor ch'ei chiese
Tanto tesoro, e d' erudito il nome
Ti compartì, prostrandosi a tuoi piedi?
Vuoi tu i lieti rubini? O più t' aggrada
Sceglier quest' oggi l'indico adamante
Là dove il lusso incantata costrinse
La fatica e il sudor di cento buoi
Che pria vagando per le tue campagne
Faccean sotto a i lor piè nascere i beni?
Prendi o tutti o qual vuoi; ma l'aureo cerchio
Che sculto intorno è d'amorosi motti
Ognor teco si vegga, il minor dito
Prémati alquanto, e sovvenir ti faccia
Dell' altrui fida sposa a cui se' caro.
Venganе alfin de gli oriuoi gemmati,
Venga il duplice pondo; e a te dell' óro
Che al alte imprese dispensar conviene
Faccia rigida prova. Ohimè che vago
Arsenal minutissimo di cose
Ciondola quindi e ripercosso insieme
Molce con soavissimo tintinno!
Ma v' hai tu il meglio? Ah sì; che i miei precetti
Sagace prevenisti. Ecco risplende,
Chiuso in breve cristallo, il dolce pegno
Di fortunato amor: lunge, o profani!
Chè a voi tant 'oltre penetrar non lice."

This is a style chiselled and finished to the last degree of perfection; but it is somewhat wanting

in ease, and its stiffness is perceptible even in this quotation, much more in the extent of the whole poem. [Pg 173] Parini was somewhat deficient in tenderness, and that want casts a dryness over portions of his work.

In this lack of tenderness he was very unlike Pope, with whom he had otherwise many points of resemblance. Both were poets of the highly elaborate civilization of their century. Both were intensely satirical by nature. Both lived in cities, Pope seldom deserting London and its neighbourhood, Parini seldom being seen beyond the precincts of Milan. Both suffered from delicate health and deformity. Both were intensely admired by their contemporaries, and regarded as masters of the Art of Poetry. Pope, however, was singularly prosperous in the course of his life, and Parini singularly unfortunate. The Italian poet had a mind far less fiery and impetuous. He was also far less prolific and versatile. Pope produced eight or ten masterpieces, each of which alone would perpetuate his fame; Parini only one. Pope's mind often seems as it were on fire, so ardent and brilliant are the emanations of his genius. The light of Parini's verse is softer and mellower, and if he does not dazzle us with the blinding splendour of Pope at his best, he fills the ear with musical lines, and gratifies the imagination by conjuring up pictures, finished like the finest miniatures, infinitely pleasing and precious to a cultivated taste.

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CHAPTER XV.

ALFIERI.

Italy had produced splendid epics, noble lyrics and spirited satires, but up to the middle of the Eighteenth Century she had not produced a single tragedy which could be placed beside the tragic masterpieces of other nations. At last, in 1749, at Asti in Piedmont, the poet was born who was destined in a certain measure to supply the want.

Vittorio Alfieri was born of noble and wealthy parents. His father died soon after his birth, and his mother married again and survived until 1792. He has left us in his Autobiography a complete picture of his life and times. His relatives looked down upon learning and science, and he was taught to feel thankful that he had no need to study. He learnt a little Latin and a good deal of French, and that was practically all that he took away with him from college. He entered the Piedmontese Army, [Pg 175] but he found the routine of military duties so irksome that he asked and obtained leave from the King to travel in foreign countries. He was presented to Louis XV at Versailles and to Frederick the Great at Potsdam. He visited Sweden and Russia, Holland and England, Spain and Portugal. He liked the Dutch and the English best, and found in their countries the beneficial effects of that liberty which he loved and to which he consecrated the fruits of his genius. The development of his intellectual powers was, however, phenomenally slow. He had practically forgotten his own language and had to acquire it all over again. He was gifted with a fiery and impetuous nature and intense vigour of thought, but the fertility of his imagination was not commensurate with his other powers, Thus he had to wait until study and observation had furnished him with sufficient materials to enable him to write. This is the true explanation of the torpid condition of his intellect for so many years.

A lady of Turin to whom he was much attached, fell dangerously ill, and whilst he was sitting with her during the tedious hours of convalescence, his eye fell upon some tapestries in her room, representing the history of Anthony and Cleopatra. It occurred to him that a fine tragedy could be written on the subject of their loves, and he endeavoured to make the attempt. [Pg 176] He liked the occupation, and his ambitious spirit was fired by the hope that he might at last prove to the world that Italy could produce a great tragic poet as well as Greece, France, and England. He persevered, and by dint of labour and study he overcame the difficulties of his task, not the least of which was his inability to express himself in his native language, so that he was at first obliged to write down his ideas in French, then to translate them into Italian prose, and finally to alter the prose until it became verse. His heroic industry was crowned with a measure of success, and if he did not become an Italian Shakespeare or Sophocles, he enjoys, at least, the distinction of being the first Italian writer of tragedies who deserves serious consideration from the literary historian.

His ample wealth enabled him to indulge in pleasures and pursuits which often diverted his attention from his poetical labours. He was especially fond of riding and horses, and he made several pilgrimages to England to replenish his stud. English literature does not seem to have occupied much of his attention. In his Autobiography he mentions the works of Pope, and he says that he looked into Shakespeare and became fully aware of his faults. It would have been well if he had been equally alive to his beauties, and if he could have caught a reflection of their [Pg 177] rainbow hues to irradiate his own statuesque tragedies.

In later years he made the acquaintance of Louisa Stolberg, Countess of Albany, wife of Charles Edward, the Young Pretender, and she took refuge with him from the brutality of her drunken husband. They went together to Paris, and there he published his tragedies in four volumes, in 1789. They remained in Paris, convulsed as it was with the frenzy of the Great Revolution, up to the very last moment compatible with safety; and in 1792 they returned to Italy, just in time to escape the massacres of September. They took up their abode in Florence, where he amused himself with learning Greek and translating some of the tragedies of Euripides. He died in 1803, and the Countess of Albany had a magnificent monument by Canova erected to his memory in the Church of Santa Croce.

Alfieri was a fertile writer, as was to be expected from the unwearied industry which was one of his most salient characteristics. He wrote numerous poems and satires, nearly thirty tragedies, several comedies, translations from the Greek and Latin, political tracts, and his Autobiography. His fame rests entirely on his Tragedies, his Autobiography, and, I think, his Satires, some of which are very racy and original, especially the piece descriptive of his travels in foreign countries. His Autobiography gives us a vivid picture of the Italy of the Eighteenth Century, of its torpor and frivolity. He reveals himself with a complete absence of reserve, and his Life is the only work in which he gives us vivid descriptions, all his other productions being rather colourless from the lack of descriptions.

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Want of colour is, indeed, the great defect of his poetry, as well as of his prose. He had little eye for the beauties of Nature, and less for the beauties of Art. He has nothing of the sweetness of Metastasio; he has none of the exquisite details of Parini. Indeed, the details of his works are singularly devoid of charm. To do them justice, we must consider them as a whole, and not dwell on detached passages.

The best of his Tragedies, to my mind, is one of the earliest, the *Filippo,* on the subject of Philip the Second of Spain and Don Carlos. One of the most striking passages in Alfieri is the laconic dialogue, terrible in its fierce abruptness, between Philip and his confidant Gomez, after they have overheard the interview between the lovers.

Filippo— Udisti?
Gomez— Udii.
Filippo— Vedesti?
Gomez— Io vidi.
Filippo— Oh rabbia!
Dunque il sospetto?...
Gomez— E' omai certezza.
Filippo— E inulto
Filippo è ancor?
Gomez— Pensa...
Filippo— Pensai ... Mi segui.

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Nothing could be more spirited and effective, and had Alfieri often written like that, very few tragic poets would have surpassed him. But unfortunately, he is seldom seen to such advantage, and his inability to cast the charm of imagination over his works makes them dry and stony. He is a strict adherent of the French school in so far as scrupulous observation of the three unities of time, place, and action is concerned. But unlike the French dramatists, freedom, and not love, is the mainspring of his tragedies. He brings as few actors on the stage as possible. Some of his tragedies have only four characters. It would be impossible for even the most skilful dramatist to make so few persons fill up five acts without monotony and repetition, and unfortunately Alfieri is anything but a skilful dramatist. His powers of construction are but slight, and in many of his plays it is curious to observe that the first act and the last are by far the best, the three intervening acts being filled up with conversations that do not greatly advance the action. He had, however, some power of delineating character and some power of expressing passion, and his blank verse has often a stern and rugged ring, impressive in its noble severity. Thus it happens that some of his creations have proved effective in the hands of great actors. Ristori achieved a brilliant triumph in his *Mirra.* Salvini often appeared in *Saul* and *Timoleon.* His *Saul* has been extolled above all his other works, but I think *Virginia,* the *Congiura de' Pazzi,* and *Filippo* are quite as fine. The *Antigone* and the *Agamemnon* are terribly dry and colourless compared to the creations of Æschylus and Sophocles. The *Abele,* on the subject of Cain and Abel, endeavours to enchant the reader with lyrical beauty, but the poet's want of imagination is more painfully apparent than ever.

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The great qualities of the poet are vigour of thought and tenacity of purpose, thus he is seen to the greatest advantage in those plays that deal with the aspirations of freedom and the downfall of tyrants. But, unfortunately, these subjects do not admit of much variety, and when we have read four or five of Alfieri's tragedies, we have practically read them all. In perusing his plays, we have the impression as if we were standing in a temple, bare and stern, adorned with only a few statues. But, assuredly, the rigid grandeur of Alfieri's genius is better and more worthy of praise and honour, than the meretricious ornaments of too many of his contemporaries. He sounds an heroic note, and arouses his hearers to noble deed and to magnanimous desire. There is nothing low, nothing vile, in his works. He bids us ascend, not grovel. Every line in his Tragedies was written with the desire of inspiring freedom and patriotism. He hated oppression and he loved justice, and for that he deserves honour and glory, and for that his Tragedies will ever hold their own in the annals of literature, even though their creator does not give us characters as human and varied as those of Shakespeare, or compositions as perfect and splendid as those of Sophocles.

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CHAPTER XVI.

OTHER POETS OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY.

The three great writers whose works we have just examined, tower above their contemporaries at an immeasurable height. Still, many able poems were produced, and many authors are worthy

of mention.

The first of these in point of time is Eustachio Manfredi, of Bologna, who died in 1739. He was a mathematician and an astronomer, and he added poetry to his other accomplishments. He was in love with a lady of the name of Giulia Vandi, but she became a nun, and she was as much lost to him as if they had been severed by death. He expressed his sorrow in many sonnets and odes. He laboured sedulously to do justice to his noble subject, but he had not the magic gift of genius which alone confers immortality. His lines are not particularly melodious, and though everything is good, nothing is enchanting.

[Pg 183] Niccolò Fortiguerra occupied many high posts in the Roman Curia. He rose to great dignities, but it is said that he wished to rise higher, and that his death in 1736 was caused by grief at not being made a Cardinal. He amused his leisure hours with the composition of poetry, and he gained the distinction of being the last poet to produce a long epic in the style of Ariosto. This poem, called the *Ricciardetto,* although the last in point of time, is by no means the last in point of merit. He had a truly poetical mind and a genial disposition, and there is a pleasing gaiety about his work that only wants to be expressed in a style more rich and vigorous to achieve absolute greatness. It is said that he made a wager that he would write his epic in as many days as it contained cantos, and that he won his bet. The cantos are so long that it is scarcely credible that he could have written each in a day. Pope Clement XII took great interest in the work, and probably that interest inspired the poet with the ambition of being raised to the Roman purple. He published the *Ricciardetto* under the pseudonym of "Carteromaco."

Carlo Innocenzo Frugoni was born in Genoa in 1692, and died at Parma as Court Poet in 1768. [Pg 184] *Frugonian* poetry has become a bye-word to indicate abundance of so-called eloquence, poverty of thought, and cheap and hackneyed imagery. But Frugoni himself was by no means a man devoid of talent. He had wit, he had imagination, he had fertility. But he was without austerity of judgment. Whatever he wrote delighted him, and he thought it would delight his readers. He did .not stop to correct or to condense. He gave everything with perfect self-satisfaction to the world. His verse is often most flowing and musical, such as Metastasio might have written in his boyhood. He is successful in his sonnets, chiefly because the strict symmetry of that kind of composition prevents him from indulging in his favourite foible of prolixity. Some of his lyric poems have fancy and elegance to recommend them, but these good qualities are drowned in an ocean of verbiage. He delighted in blank verse, and one of his funniest compositions in that metre is entitled *L'Ombra di Pope,* written on the birth of a son of Lord Holderness, British Ambassador to the Venetian Republic. The Ghost of Pope, in answer to Frugoni's prayers, arises and prophecies the future of the noble infant and sings the praises of its lovely mother. After paying many compliments to Frugoni's poetical talents the ghost finally vanishes at break of day.

[Pg 185] Alfonso Varano was a more earnest and impassioned spirit than Frugoni, and he deserves the credit of having, both by precept and example, drawn attention to the neglected beauties of Dante. His principal work is his *Book of Visions,* written in the metre of Dante and redolent of his style. Varano resolutely discarded the hackneyed mythological allusions that disfigure the works of his contemporaries. He is strictly Christian, and he endeavours to be medieval. But he has hardly sufficient foundation to go upon, his Visions are about nothing in particular, and his style is not sufficiently flexible and picturesque to delight readers who cannot help being reminded of Dante.

The Marquis Giambattista Spolverini, of Verona, born in 1695, died in 1763, is remarkable for one extremely well-written poem in blank verse on the cultivation of rice. The subject, as may be imagined, had not previously been treated in poetry, and the author made himself complete master of the technicalities of his theme. He devoted himself to the perusal of the great models of poetry, and to writing verses himself in order to acquire the necessary flexibility of style. He laboured for many years over the details of the one work by which he hoped to be remembered, and at last, in the memorable year 1758, he gave *La Coltivazione del Riso* to the world. But, alas! the world paid no heed to the slender volume and went its way as usual. Deep was the [Pg 186] mortification of Spolverini. He could not realise that a poem so important to himself, should appear so insignificant to the public. His health and spirits gave way, and he died, unnoticed and unlamented, in 1763. The utter neglect of his contemporaries was neither discerning nor creditable, and later years did justice to the numerous, though unobtrusive, beauties of the poem. He has the merit, rare in his age, of going straight to life and nature, and what he observes he is able to record in spirited verse. But the subject does not appeal to the general reader, and hence probably the utter indifference with which it was received.[1]

Giambattista Pastorini, a native of Genoa, wrote a noble sonnet on the city of his birth.

Tommaso Crudeli wrote some pretty fables. He languished for years in the dungeons of the Inquisition, and died at the age of forty-two in 1745.

Paolo Rolli is remarkable for having translated *Paradise Lost* into Italian. He lived for many years [Pg 187] as teacher of Italian in London where he seems to have been well received. He returned to Italy in 1747 and chose Todi in Umbria as his residence, where he died twenty years later aged eighty.

Cassiani of Modena, produced some spirited Sonnets; so did Onofrio Minzoni of Ferrara, and Prospero Manara may be mentioned for the same reason.

Pignotti and Bertola were good fabulists, and Bertola enjoyed the further distinction of being the first to introduce German Literature into Italy.

Some of Ludovico Savioli's poems are musical in diction, but no poet of the age revels more in the threadbare mythology of poetasters.

Gian Carlo Passeroni wrote a burlesque *Life of Cicero* in one hundred and one Cantos and in Ottava Rima, full of comic digressions, by no means without wit and sprightliness, but quite spoilt by the preposterous length to which the poem is spun out. His career bears much similarity to that of Parini. Like the greater poet, he was a priest, he lived in Milan, and he suffered many privations owing to poverty. He seems to have carried not only disinterestedness, but utter indifference to his affairs, to a culpable extent.

The Abbe Casti was another poet who spoilt his wit by his prolixity. He wrote the *Animali Parlanti* and a collection of stories in verse, less poetical and more indelicate than the prose of Boccaccio, [Pg 188] and finally a bitter satire on Catherine the Second of Russia. He had wit in abundance and a coarse and ready style. His feuds with rival poets were frequent and bitter, and Parini wrote some stinging verses against him. In spite of his disreputable character he was nominated by the Court of Vienna "Poeta Cesareo" after Metastasio's death, and the appointment caused universal surprise and reprobation. After Casti the post was discontinued. He died in Paris in 1503.

Giovanni Fantoni was an elegant, but somewhat conventional, imitator of Horace. At the outbreak of the French Revolution, he nearly lost his reason from excessive zeal for liberty, and his advanced opinions brought down upon him many persecutions.

Lorenzo Mascheroni, a mathematician and a man of science, is remarkable for a pleasing poem called *L'Invito a Lesbia Cidonia.* A lady of Bergamo, the Countess Paolina Secco Suardo Grismondi, was known in the Arcadian Academy as "Lesbia Cidonia." She was invited to visit Rome when Mascheroni wished her to come to Pavia where he was living, and he tried to induce her to do so by writing his poem full of descriptions of the beauties of Pavia and of the treasures of its Museum. This pleasing and original poem was much admired in its day. Mascheroni wrote [Pg 189] other poems in Italian and Latin, but nothing to equal this little masterpiece. He was born in 1750 at Castagnetta, a small village near Bergamo, and died in 1800 in Paris, whither he had retired during the political storms that convulsed his country.

In reviewing the poetry of the Eighteenth Century the most striking fact is the remarkable advance in the art of writing blank verse. Spolverini, Parini and Alfieri produced works in that metre more masterly than those of former ages. These poets know how to vary their cadences, how to sustain the melody, how to produce an impressive close; and if Spolverini is at times a trifle prolix and Parini a trifle heavy, Alfieri skilfully Avoids both faults, and as far as rhythm is concerned, his verse is absolutely perfect; but only his blank verse; his rhymes, like those of Parini, are vastly inferior and not nearly so gratifying to the ear.

[1] The work was dedicated to Elizabeth Farnese, widow of Philip V of Spain. The fact of her accepting the dedication must have given it some importance in the eyes of the world. Ambrosoli is my authority for its cold reception. A copy of the second edition, published 1764, is in my possession. The editor says the poem was received with universal admiration, but perhaps his motive was to induce the public by that statement to buy his edition. Probably the fact of the author's death, as is so often the case, drew attention to his poem.

CHAPTER XVII. [Pg 190]

PROSE WRITERS OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY.

The Prose Writers of the Eighteenth Century need not detain us long, for with the exception of the Comedies of Goldoni, few works have any sort of vitality. Some authors, especially writers of Memoirs, wrote in French, like Casanova and Goldoni himself, whose Autobiography is in that language. Indeed, for some years, the danger seemed to be imminent that French would be as much used as Latin had been in former ages.

Goldoni is a delightful writer, and some of his best comedies still keep the stage. Those who have read Goldsmith's *Good-natured Man* and *She Stoops to Conquer,* can form an accurate idea of what Goldoni was. There is the same geniality, the same broad humour, the same light, but effective delineation of character, and the same sparkling and ingenious dialogue. If Goldoni has a fault, it is that his plots are sometimes too thin, and that his comedies occasionally betray the [Pg 191] haste in which they were written. A few of his plays are in verse, and some are in the Venetian dialect in which he is always racy and spirited. He was a very fertile writer, and if many of his works are inferior to his best, they all bear testimony to the fertility and originality of his mind, and he deserves to be celebrated as the best writer of comedy that his country has produced.

The performance of Goldoni's Comedies may still be witnessed with pleasure, and his masterpiece, *La Locandiera,* has recently been seen in London with the celebrated Eleonora Duse as Mirandolina. The character of the heroine and the art with which she keeps her forward lovers at bay, are admirably conceived. *Il Burbero Benefico* is hardly inferior. It deals with a man who, under a rough surface, hides a tender heart.[1] *Le Donne Curiose* has many amusing situations, brought about by the prying curiosity of some women. *Il Poeta Fanatico,* gives a laughable idea of the third-rate literary academies of his day, and the character of the poet who is always at a loss for a rhyme, is amusingly drawn. *La Famiglia dell' Antiquario,* offers a ludicrous exposure of the gullibility of collectors and amateurs who have neither taste nor knowledge. *Le Smanie per la* [Pg 192] *Villeggiatura* takes for its theme the passion of Venetian families for spending some months of the year in villas on the mainland. *L'Impresario* has some delightfully comic scenes between an Operatic Manager and his company. *L'Avaro* treats the same topic as Molière in one of his

comedies, and with hardly less success. *Il Ventaglio* is ingenious in plot and vivacious in dialogue. *I Rusteghi, Le Baruffe Chiozzotte, Sior Todero Brontolon,* and several other Comedies, are in the Venetian dialect, in which he is quite it home, and in which he shows a vivacity and originality worthy of all praise. As his works contain nothing immoral or in any way indelicate they have always been in use at educational establishments for theatricals in those classes where Italian is taught. Goldoni is neither a philosophical nor a very profound writer, but he is delightfully vivacious, and there is hardly one of his comedies that the reader would not like to peruse a second time.

The brothers Gasparo and Carlo Gozzi were Venetians, like Goldoni, but they were his rivals, and not his friends. Gasparo was a good literary essayist, and he wrote the *Osservatore,* a sort of imitation of Addison's *Spectator.* He also defended Dante against Bettinelli's attacks. Carlo produced some fantastic and imaginative plays, one of which Schiller adapted for the German Stage, under the title of *Turandot, Princess of China.* He has plenty of imagination, but his poetical talents are hardly powerful enough to give adequate expression to his really brilliant and original ideas. [Pg 193]

A very different writer from these vivacious Venetians was the learned Muratori, for many years Librarian to the Duke of Modena. He was a man of immense erudition and indefatigable industry. His works in Latin and Italian fill more than one hundred volumes. His *Annali d'Italia* constitute his most valuable work. He also wrote a treatise, *Della Perfetta Poesia.* He died in 1750.

Saverio Bettinelli, a Jesuit, may, perhaps, be taken as the most perfect embodiment of the Italian literary man of the Eighteenth Century. He had the light and easy style, the narrow canons of taste and judgement, and the humane and benevolent spirit that characterised his contemporaries. Although a Priest, he was a correspondent of Voltaire, and the Italian Jesuit joined with the French Philosopher in condemning the extravagant conceptions of those dreadful barbarians, Dante and Shakespeare. In Dante he could discover absolutely no merit, and he wrote long essays to convert his countrymen to his views. As a poet, he is not without fluency and elegance, qualities which are also conspicuous in his prose, which may still be read with pleasure, though hardly with profit. His Tragedies appear very poor by the side of those of Alfieri. He had plenty of learning and some acuteness, and the tone of his mind is eminently judicious, but he could hardly rise to the appreciation of conceptions greater than his own, and the shrine at which he worshipped was that of academic elegance and delicate refinement. He was inspired with genuine patriotism which led him to write not only his chief historical work, *Risorgimento d'Italia,* but also some of his most spirited poems. His death took place in 1808, at the great age of ninety. [Pg 194]

Antonio Magliabecchi was one of the greatest marvels of erudition that ever lived. He was a goldsmith by trade, but his heart was in his books, and through the patronage of Michael Ermini, Librarian to Cardinal Medici, he obtained access to a library extensive enough to quench even his thirst for knowledge. When his friend Ermini died, he became his successor as Librarian. All day long he locked himself up in his house, reading from morning till night, and only after dark did he open his door, and then only to admit men of taste and learning in order to indulge in erudite conversation. His habits were almost those of a hermit. He wore an old coat which served him as an apparel by day and a blanket by night. A straw-bottomed chair acted as table for his frugal meals, and another chair, hardly more comfortable, was his bed in which he sat up at night reading, reading, reading until he fell asleep from sheer fatigue. The marvel is that such industry, coupled with such privations, did not undermine his health, but we hear nothing of injurious results. He was very kind and benevolent in character, always ready to assist the inquiring with his knowledge and the needy with his money. He died in 1714. He was a Florentine by birth, and he left his library to the Grand Duke of Tuscany, and also a sum of money, the interest of which was to be used for the purpose of making valuable additions to the volumes already collected. This library is still open to the public in Florence. Magliabecchi both by precept and example, gave an impetus to learning and research, but he did not offer to the world any works of his own, contenting himself with editing the lucubrations of others. Although he never travelled, he was well acquainted, by catalogues and descriptions, with the libraries of other cities. There is an anecdote of an acquaintance asking him how many copies were known to be extant of a book noted for its rarity. "Only three," was Magliabecchi's reply. "One belongs to me; one is in the Vatican, and the third at Constantinople in the library of the Grand Turk; you will find it in the third room, on the bottom shelf to the right as you enter, where it is the seventh volume." [Pg 195] [Pg 196]

A noble family of Verona, the Maffei, gave two eminent men to the Italy of the Eighteenth Century. The Marquis Alessandro Maffei entered the services of the Elector of Bavaria, and rose to be Field Marshal. He was instrumental in gaining the great victory over the Turks at Belgrade in 1717. He died in Munich in 1730, and left *Memoirs* which are both well-written and valuable as illustrating the history of his times. His brother, Scipione Maffei, was born on the first of June, 1675. Scipione entered the Army and served under his brother during the War of the Spanish Succession. His first work was a book against the practice of duelling. When he returned to his native city, he published a literary journal in conjunction with Apostolo Zeno and Vallisnieri. He wrote a comedy, *La Ceremonia,* and a tragedy, *Merope,* which became widely celebrated throughout Europe as the prototype of Voltaire's tragedy on the same subject. Voltaire dedicated his *Merope* to Maffei, but he was in reality jealous of the reputation the Italian work had acquired, and under a thin disguise he published letters laying bare its foibles and defects. The task was not very difficult, for Maffei's *Merope,* beyond the fact of emanating from the pen of an elegant scholar, has little to recommend it. The characters are not very vividly drawn, and the blank verse is rather languid and unimpressive. His best and most enduring work is the *Verona* [Pg 197]

Illustrata, a magnificent contribution to the history of his native town. He died in 1755.

The Jesuit Tiraboschi produced a voluminous *History of Literature* and his work has both judgement and research to give it permanent value.

The humanitarian tendencies of the Eighteenth Century found an eloquent exponent in the Marquis Beccaria, a native of Milan. From a youth he was inclined to the study of Philosophy, and he was much influenced in his intellectual development by the contemporary French writers, especially by Montesquieu. The first work with which he appeared before the public was a pamphlet on the state of the Currency. In conjunction with some friends, he published a journal called *Il Caffé* which advocated the humane and enlightened principles to which he was devoted. But the great work by which he is remembered is the treatise *Dei Delitti e delle Pene,* published in 1764. In this book he ventured to proclaim the doctrine that the penalty should not exceed the offence. Barbarous sentences were passed in that age, not only in Italy, but all over the world, for misdemeanours which do not call for greater rigour than a few months' imprisonment. Criminals were broken on the wheel, prisoners were tortured on the rack. All these frightful abuses were attacked by Beccaria with the eloquence of burning indignation, and he had the satisfaction of finding an abundant harvest follow the sowing of the seed. Torture was abolished in France shortly after the accession of Louis XVI, and even in the worst excesses of the Reign of Terror nobody dared to suggest its revival. Many judicial murders were committed, but none of the victims were tortured. It is frightful to think what atrocities might have been perpetrated if that odious and irrational practice had still been in force. Beccaria died in 1793.

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Gaetano Filangieri resembled Beccaria in his ambition to improve the laws, and his great work, *La Scienza della Legislazione,* obtained an immense reputation for its author. He was the scion of a noble Neapolitan family, and the Minister Tannucci showed some inclination to carry out his ideas. But he died when he was only thirty-six in 1788. Perhaps he was fortunate in not living to see the evil times in store for his country.

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Francesco Algarotti may be described as a sort of diluted Bettinelli, but he had the merit of introducing Foreign writers to the Italian public and of spreading the knowledge of Italian in Foreign countries. Frederick the Great, who took delight in patronising the literature of every nation except his own, received Algarotti hospitably at Potsdam and conferred upon him the title of Count. He was a most fertile writer and he took pleasure, not only in literary criticism, but also in scientific investigation, and he was the first to make the discoveries of Newton familiar in the Peninsula. His poems make but a faint impression upon the modern reader, but they were such as the age of Frugoni admired. In character he was discreet and amiable, hence his personal popularity. His health gradually failed him and he died of consumption at Pisa, in 1764, at the age of 51. Frederick the Great had a handsome monument erected to his memory.

Antonio Cocchi was a fertile writer on scientific and miscellaneous subjects, but it is the melancholy fate of scientific writers to be superseded by their successors, however well they may have written. He was born in 1695, and died in 1758.

Girolamo Tagliazucchi was Professor of Greek at the University of Turin, and did much to spread the study of good literature.

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Giovenale Sacchi, a Barnabite Monk, wrote books on music, dancing, and poetry in a style of great purity and elegance. He was, however, charged by the more austere spirits of his Order with devoting his attention to subjects too frivolous and profane, and he had to endure many persecutions. He died in 1789.

Antonio Cesari, a Priest of the Oratory, was born at Verona on the sixteenth of January, 1760. He was an ardent admirer of the prose writers of the Fourteenth Century, and it was his constant endeavour to purify the Italian language from the Frenchified idioms it had contracted in his day. Unlike Bettinelli, he was a devoted adherent of Dante, and he wrote a book to point out his beauties, but he dwells more upon the merits of the poet's style than upon the grandeur of his conceptions. Cesari was a good translator, and he was particularly successful in his rendering of the Comedies of Terence. In all his works we find a deep and fervent spirit of patriotism, a fore-runner of the wave of independence and devotion to their fatherland that swept over the Italians of the Century that must now engage our attention.

[1] *Burbero Benefico* was originally written in French and afterwards translated into Italian.

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CHAPTER XVIII.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE WRITERS OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY.

The tremendous cataclysm of the French Revolution produced vibrations and convulsions throughout the civilized world, nor is it a subject of surprise that Italy responded more vehemently than any other country to the voice of France. In its inception, the French Revolution was, undoubtedly, a necessity, and not an evil. Nobody can tax Necker, Mirabeau, and the Girondins with any other desire than the amelioration of France and of humanity. But when, owing to the utter inability of the leading statesmen to control the legislative assemblies they had convened, the direction of affairs slipped out of their hands into those of men to the last degree vindictive and unscrupulous, and when the great movement became stained with crimes so appalling and atrocities so inhuman as to find no parallel in history, it is no wonder that the

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Sovereigns of Europe combined to stamp out a devastating conflagration. But an event which no sagacity could foresee, destroyed all their plans and made them powerless even in their own dominions. One of the greatest generals the world has ever seen, rose to supreme power in France, and the Sovereigns who hoped to overawe Robespierre had in time to tremble before Napoleon. If, after the Peace of Amiens, the great soldier had known how to moderate his ambition, Europe might have been spared many sorrows and calamities; but unhappily, he did not rest content with the glory he had acquired; he soared in hope to universal dominion, and Europe was convulsed for more than a decade with struggles such as the world has never yet witnessed, and the loss of blood and treasure was immense. At last he was defeated, but not until he had practically defeated himself; for the greatest generals of his opponents were powerless against him for many years, and they only prevailed when he had exhausted the resources at his disposal. He fell from power never to rise again, and the triumphant Allies inaugurated a reaction, the effects of which were felt throughout the Nineteenth Century. The demons returned to their dwellings, and the second habitation was worse than the first. The one great Bastille had indeed been pulled down, but each country had innumerable little Bastilles of its own. Austria seized Venice and recovered Lombardy, and the mild and philanthropic rule of Firmian was replaced by the iron despotism of Metternich. In Naples the philanthropy of Filangieri had to make way for the ferocity of Bomba. But the nations had tasted liberty, and the old spirit of submission, more or less unwilling, had died out for ever. Secret societies sprang up all over the Peninsula, and the Carbonari continued what the Philosophers had begun. The old clemency of Joseph II and Leopold II was replaced by angry suspicion and ruthless severity. Men of stainless character were suspected of disaffection and subjected to rigours which should be reserved only for the worst of criminals. Shameless tyranny aroused the indignation of an enlightened age, and a dynasty, remarkable for the politic and steadfast character of its Princes, with rare sagacity took advantage of the situation to achieve at once the liberation of Italy and its own supremacy in the Peninsula. The House of Savoy triumphed, not only over the Vatican and the Bourbons, but also over Mazzini and Garibaldi and their visionary and enthusiastic followers.

It is not for the literary historian to enter into the details of that great struggle. But one remark must be made. No statesmen were more thoroughly imbued than Victor Emmanuel and Cavour with the conviction of the folly committed by those victorious factions who make martyrs of their political opponents. If Charles I had not been beheaded, Charles II would probably never have ascended the throne of his ancestors. If Louis XVI had not been guillotined, Louis XVIII would probably never have been able to return to France. If Napoleon had not shed the blood of the Due d'Enghien, he would probably never have aroused the relentless enmity of his opponents. These examples seem always to have been present to the minds of the Councillors of the House of Savoy. And, in truth, if they had made a Louis XVI of the King of Naples, if they had made a Marie Antoinette of his Queen, if they had made a Boniface VIII of Pius IX, such a reaction would have swept over the Peninsula as would have destroyed the fruits of the labours of two generations of patriots. Fortunately for Italy and themselves, they knew how to use their victory with moderation. Doubtless there were some fierce and vindictive spirits who would have clamoured for a Reign of Terror if they had dared; but they were firmly kept in check, and the country is now reaping the benefit of the policy or of the humanity of its liberators. Disappointments there have undoubtedly been, especially is the grinding weight of taxation to be deplored that is requisite to keep up a huge Army and a powerful Navy; but the discontented spirits who clamour for a return to the old state of things, are so few and far between, that they can be treated with contemptuous forbearance. Such symptoms of reaction as may appear, are so mild as to be positively beneficial in keeping up a spirit of criticism and control over the Executive, which would else, owing to the easy-going character of the populace, be allowed to slumber. Indeed, it may be laid down as an axiom, that the more light-hearted a nation is, the greater is its liability to acquiesce, perhaps unconsciously, in the misgovernment of its rulers.

The Eighteenth Century was remarkable for the paucity of eminent Prose Writers; the Nineteenth Century, on the contrary, can show a brilliant array of philosophers, historians, and novelists; and it would probably be more extensive had not the rapid development of journalistic enterprise drawn many able men to the daily Press, who would in former ages have devoted themselves to the writing of books. Their articles in newspapers ind magazines perished after the day of appearance, with the exception of those rare cases where a writer, or his friends, made a collection to be published in book form. Thus, many keen and powerful minds laboured for the enlightenment of their generation, but no record remains of their productions. The unbounded popularity of fiction caused greater attention to be bestowed on that branch of Literature, and memorable works were given to the world. For nearly seventy years the chief inspirer was patriotism, as was only natural in the Century that witnessed the liberation of the Peninsula from foreign oppression. The Literature of England and Germany began to be studied, and the romantic movement introduced an entirely new style of subject and treatment. The old conventions of mythological allusions are at last consigned to merited oblivion, and we find poets expressing themselves in a direct and natural manner. The former timidity of philosophical and religious speculation is exchanged for boundless liberty, often coupled with intense hatred of Christianity. Strong originality marks the writers of the Nineteenth Century, but that originality is often purchased at the price of harmonious development and serenity of mind. They have reason to envy the intellectual complacency of Ariosto and Metastasio. This discord of the mind is more marked in Leopardi than in any other writer, although he was almost the first to display it. In truth, the Nineteenth Century was for Italy a period of transition. The old forms of thought, as well as the old forms of government, were gradually overcome and destroyed, and perhaps it would be premature to say what definite form they are likely to assume. One thing is certain; the old methods can never be revived, and the efforts of pedants to infuse new life into their effete

decrepitude can only result in ignominious failure. Self-reliance and originality must be the watch-words of the future, and it is gratifying to observe that the best and most promising of the younger generation of writers are, consciously or unconsciously, opening out new forms of art and fresh vistas of ideas. That some mistakes have been made, cannot be denied. Extreme realism has claimed its victims in Italy as elsewhere. From excessive desire to be exact, some writers have ceased to be natural. In their endeavour to avoid superstition, other writers have advocated gross and vulgar materialism. Some have shewn repulsive want of decency; others, utter disregard for beauty and purity of style. There has been a tendency to indulge in glaring, tawdry effects, from which the Eighteenth Century was commendably free. But, on the whole, it would be unjust to deny that the Nineteenth Century offers a striking panorama of stirring events and great and memorable authors.

CHAPTER XIX.

LEOPARDI.

It is not often that a writer towers so immeasurably above his contemporaries, that we can point him out, without fear of contradiction, as the greatest of his century. We can, however, unhesitatingly do so in the case of Leopardi. The works to which he owes his immortality are, indeed, few in number and short in extent, but their perfection gives them a dignity which more voluminous productions might emulate in vain.

Giacomo Leopardi was born at Recanati, a town of the March of Ancona, on the 29th of June, 1798, the eldest son of Count Monaldo Leopardi and Adelaide, his wife, daughter of the Marquis Antici. He had three brothers, Carlo, Luigi, and Pierfrancesco, and one sister, Paolina. His father was a man of literary tastes and had a magnificent library, in which the future poet quenched his thirst for knowledge with as much ardour as did Magliabecchi, in a former age, in the library of Cardinal Medici. He soon outstripped in learning the priests who were entrusted with his education. His eager and independent mind spurned direction and disdained moderation. He acquired many languages, and he soon endeavoured to put on paper the result of his studies. Some of his injudicious admirers tried to make an infant prodigy of him, and the stimulus of vanity was added to his passion for knowledge. He toiled day after day in his intellectual quarry, with no relaxation except the absolute necessities of food and sleep. The result may be imagined. His sight failed him from the merciless strain put upon it by reading till late hours of night, often by a flickering candle burnt down to its socket. His spine became curved from constantly bending over the huge folios that formed the staple of his reading. His lungs craved in vain for dilation in his cramped chest and for the freshness of the open air. His nerves gave way, his food failed to nourish him, and his strength at last collapsed so completely that he could neither read nor write, nor even think or speak. From the age of sixteen to twenty-one the mischief was done. The duty of his parents was plain. They should from the beginning have sternly forbidden the overwork, and have compelled him to take requisite exercise and rational amusement. Unhappily, they seem rather to have encouraged the overwork, and actually to have discountenanced all amusement and all intercourse with the outer world. They cannot be acquitted of grave errors of judgment, but it would be harsh to charge them with cruelty. Monaldo was devotedly attached to his children, but it would have been better if he had sent them to school and college, where they would have knocked about with companions of their own age, instead of being left to solitary brooding with their minds preying upon themselves. They would then have returned home, fresh and buoyant, and happy to be again with their parents.

Monaldo had been extravagant in his youth, his estates were considerably encumbered; motives of economy probably made him rejoice that his children were actually learning more at home than could be expected from pupils of the most famous seminaries. In later life, whilst willing and happy to keep them in a handsome style in his ancestral home at Recanati, he found it impossible to supply them with sufficient funds to live in Rome or Florence or Naples in the style to which they had always been accustomed. Therefore, he strongly opposed their desire to see the world. He was perfectly contented with his own surroundings, and he neither understood nor sympathised with Giacomo's longing to widen his sphere of experience.

Painful misunderstandings were the result. Giacomo, owing to the utter prostration into which he had fallen, was obliged to remain a whole year without reading or writing, and he was thrown back upon his melancholy thoughts. He had already received sufficient praise to fire his youthful ambition and he chafed at the bondage in which he was kept. Pietro Giordani was the first literary man of eminence whose acquaintance he made, and long letters passed between the friends, letters full of admiration on the part of Giordani, full of impatience and despair on the part of Leopardi. That he exaggerated the horrors of his condition cannot for a moment be doubted. Many youths would have been thankful to take his place in a handsome and dignified home; but then few youths could possibly have been tormented by such bitter melancholy and such overweening ambition.

At last a desperate resolve occurred to him. Permission to leave home was denied him; he would act on his own responsibility and take refuge in flight. He made preparations for secret departure, and wrote a long letter to his father explaining the motives of his desperate measure. Happily, the insane project was abandoned, but the letter was preserved by his brother Carlo, and it is deeply to be regretted that it was published some years ago. Far better would it have

been to draw a veil across the eccentricities of a great mind and the misunderstandings between natures noble and upright, but painfully divergent in thought and action. However, the letter exists and must be dealt with. There is nothing discreditable in it either to the poet or to his father, but much that is inexpressibly painful.

The letter was written in the month of July, 1819. He begins by saying with perfect sincerity that he always loved his father, that he always would love him, and that he deeply grieved at being the cause of giving him pain. "You know me," he continues, "and you know what my conduct has been up to now. You will see that in all Italy, and I may say in all Europe, no other person of my rank and even younger than I am, and perhaps with intellectual gifts inferior to mine, could be found who would show one-half of the circumspection, abstinence from all the pleasures of youth, obedience and submission to his parents that I have shown. However poor your opinion may be of the few talents that Heaven has bestowed upon me, you cannot altogether refuse to credit the many estimable and famous men who have passed the judgement upon me which you know and which it is not for me to repeat. It was the marvel of everybody who knew me that I should still be [Pg 213] buried in this town, and that you alone should be of an opposite opinion, and should inflexibly persist therein. It is certainly not unknown to you, that there is not a youth of barely seventeen years of age who is not taken in hand by his parents to be placed in a position for his future advantage. I say nothing about the liberty accorded to all young people of that age in our position in life—liberty of which not one-third was accorded to me at the age of twenty-one. It was only recently that I began to ask you to provide for my future in the manner indicated by the opinion of all who knew me. I noticed several families of this town, probably less well off than we are, making heavy sacrifices in order to start their sons in life, however faint the indications of promising talent might be.

"Many people were of opinion that my intellect showed much more than a faint indication; but you were of opinion that I was quite unworthy of a father's solicitude or of any sacrifice on his part, nor did you think that my present or future welfare was of sufficient importance for you to make any alteration in your domestic arrangements.

"I saw my parents make light of the posts which they obtained for others from the Sovereign Pontiff, and hoping that they would take the same trouble for me, I asked that at least some [Pg 214] means of living might be obtained that would enable me to live in a manner suitable to my position without being a drag upon my family. I was answered with derision, and you did not think that your influence should be used to obtain a decent competence for your son. I was well aware of the projects you were forming for us, and how, to secure the prosperity of what you call our '*house*' and *'family,'* you exacted from Carlo and from me the sacrifice of our inclinations, of our youth, and of our whole life. Being quite certain that neither Carlo nor I would ever humour you in that, I could not possibly entertain the idea of those projects. You know only too well the most wretched life I have led through the effects of my horrible melancholy, and the torments I have endured from my strange imagination. You cannot have been blind to the fact that there was no other remedy for my suffering health since I fell into this wretched debility, but powerful distractions, and, in short, everything that could not be had in Recanati.

"In spite of all this, you suffered a man of my character, either to consume the remnant of his strength in suicidal studies, or to bury himself in the most terrible ennui with its attendant melancholy. These evils were aggravated by the surrounding solitude, and by the empty and [Pg 215] unoccupied tenour of my life, especially in the last months.

"It did not take me long to find that no arguments could move you, and that the extraordinary firmness of your character, disguised under a mild exterior, was such that I could not entertain even a shadow of hope. All these circumstances and my reflections on human nature persuaded me that I should rely upon nobody but myself, although I was destitute of everything. And now that by law I am my own master, I will no longer delay to take upon myself the load of my destiny. I know that human felicity consists in contentment, and that I could more easily be happy begging for bread like a mendicant, than surrounded in this abode by all the material luxuries it may present. I hate that vile prudence that freezes and binds us and makes us incapable of every great action, reducing us to the level of the animals who apply themselves placidly to the preservation of this unhappy life without any other thought. I know that I shall be held to be insane, as all great men have been held before me. And even as the career of almost every great genius has begun with despair, I am not dismayed at mine beginning so too. I would rather be unhappy than obscure; I would rather suffer than languish in miserable ennui which to me is the fruitful mother of deadly melancholy and black thoughts of wretchedness, more agonising than [Pg 216] all discomforts of the body. Parents, as a rule, judge their children more favourably than others, but you, on the contrary, judge your children more harshly, and therefore you never would believe that we were born for anything great; perhaps no greatness appeals to you that cannot be measured with geometrical precision.

"Having, to the best of my ability, given you my reasons for the step I am about to take, it only remains for me to ask your pardon for the distress it may cause you. If my health were less uncertain, I would rather beg from house to house that touch a pin that belonged to you. But feeble as I am, and hopeless of getting anything from you, I have been obliged, in order not to die on the road, to take what is absolutely necessary for my existence. I am deeply grieved, and it almost makes me waver in my resolution when I think of the sorrow I shall cause you, knowing your kindness of heart and all your endeavours to make us contented with our lot. For those endeavours I am grateful from the bottom of my heart, and it is agony to me to think that I shall appear infected with the vice of ingratitude which I abhor more than anything else. Only the difference in our principles which was in no way to be overcome, and which would necessarily [Pg 217]

end either in my dying here of desperation, or in my taking to flight as I am doing, has been the cause of all my unhappiness. It has pleased Heaven for our punishment that the only young men in this town who had thoughts above the ordinary level of Recanati, should be born to you to try your patience and that the only father who looked upon such sons as a misfortune, should be allotted to us. That which consoles me is the thought that this is the last annoyance I give you, and that it will free you from my unwelcome presence. My dear father, if you will allow me to call you by that name, I kneel down before you, and pray you to pardon one so unhappy by nature and by circumstances. I would that my unhappiness were my exclusive property and that nobody might share it with me, and so I trust it will be in the future. If fortune ever makes me the possessor of anything my first thought shall be to replace what I have now taken from you. The last favour that I ask of you is that if ever you recall to your memory your wretched son who has always venerated and loved you, you will not curse him; and that if you cannot praise him, you will, at least, bestow upon him that compassion which is granted even to malefactors."

 Such, abridged in a few passages, is the memorable letter which reveals the troubles of Leopardi's mind. It is a curious medley of wounded vanity, of imaginary wrongs and of genuine grievances. It is passing strange that Leopardi should have been so anxious about his future. He was his father's eldest son, and as such, heir to ample, if somewhat encumbered, estates. I think he mistook his own feelings, and what he thought solicitude for his livelihood, was in reality the agony of unsatisfied ambition. The fatal mistake that his father made was to coop up so ardent and aspiring a young man in the restricted routine of a somewhat cloistral home. Monaldo and Adelaide had a genuine fear of their children becoming contaminated by undesirable associates; and to avert this evil, neither the poet nor his brothers were allowed to go out unaccompanied. The young prisoners naturally resented this surveillance, especially Leopardi who, at a time when his literary renown was spreading all over Italy, was still under the restrictions of the nursery. "Everybody treats me as a child," he writes, "except my parents who treat me as a baby." No wonder that flight had its romance and its attractions; but where would he have gone to if he had run away? Doubtless, the utter inability to answer this question made him abandon the idea. Carlo and Paolina noticed something peculiar in his demeanour; they watched him, and we may safely assume that their affection extorted from him his secret, that he showed them the letter intended for his father and that they persuaded him to abandon the wild and desperate scheme. It would have been well if the letter had been burnt, and the whole unhappy episode consigned to oblivion. It makes the poet appear wild and visionary and the father a more obdurate tyrant than he really was. He utterly failed to enter into the ideas of his illustrious son, and posterity has censured him with a harshness he was far from deserving.

Leopardi abandoned the idea of flight and resigned himself as best he could to the melancholy life he was compelled to lead. His home was dull, but it was not, it could not have been, the Hell upon earth that Montefredini, one of his biographers, would have us believe. There was no domestic discord; not a trace of strife is discernible. The style of living in Monaldo's house was handsome and even luxurious, but neither his father nor his mother seem to have encouraged visitors or to have entertained as might be expected from their rank. Of Leopardi's acquaintance with Pietro Giordani they were undoubtedly apprehensive. Giordani, although a Priest, had the reputation of being a freethinker at heart, and they trembled lest he should infect the poet with his opinions. It is even suspected that many letters between the friends were intercepted. But others not only reached their destination, but have been preserved and published, and they now form a noble memorial of confidence and friendship. Leopardi was able at intervals to devote himself to his favourite pursuit of literature and he published some of his earlier poems; but their patriotic character frightened the apprehensive Monaldo. He was afraid his son would be regarded as a sympathiser with the Carbonari, and Leopardi had to distribute the copies surreptitiously and to speak of them as little as possible.

He was abandoning his labours in the field of Classical Antiquity and turning his attention to original and stirring themes, full of life and actuality. But, unhappily, the more his intellect expanded, the more his health deteriorated. The blackest melancholy never left him, and it became daily intensified by his persistent habits of introspection. He complains in a letter to Giordani of utter weakness of his whole body and especially of the nerves. We hear nothing of doctors being called in to arrest the evil, nor does the patient himself seem to have asked for them. Things were allowed to drift until it was too late. "I am lying," he says in one of his letters to Giordani, "under a mountain of sorrows, and not a ray of hope can be seen." "I speak from my heart and I do not pretend," he exclaims. The great poet is already a great pessimist.

In 1821 the tone of his letters became a trifle more cheerful and he was interested in the engagement of his sister Paolina, and he wrote a poem on her marriage. But the negotiations were broken off and the wedding never took place.

Conscious of the immense reputation he already possessed of vast erudition, his parents formed the hope that he would embrace the ecclesiastical career and rise to high dignities in the Roman Curia. When at last their consent was obtained for his departure from home in the hope that change would benefit his shattered nerves, it was to Rome that he was sent, doubtless with the desire that he should make acquaintances useful to him in the future. He resided with his maternal uncle, the Marquis Carlo Antici. But no sooner had he arrived in Rome than he regretted Recanati, and it became apparent that wherever he went, one of his most striking oddities was an intense horror of his place of residence, an utter loathing which he neither moderated nor concealed. If he called Recanati a dungeon, he called Rome a gigantic sepulchre. His shattered nerves could ill bear the concourse of people around him, and he saw in society, not its vivacity and animation, but its frivolity and emptiness. For the literary men of Rome he

entertained immeasurable contempt. He despised them for their devotion to Antiquarian minutiæ. But this reproach came with ill-grace from Leopardi, who had himself devoted years of laborious study, who had even squandered the precious possession of health in laborious elucidation of grammatical and philological problems, hardly more important than the coins and inscriptions of Roman Antiquarians.

He made, however, some agreeable acquaintances, pre-eminent among whom was the historian Niebuhr, at that time Prussian Ambassador to the Vatican. Niebuhr conceived the most intense admiration for his genius and spoke of him in the highest terms to Cardinal Consalvi, Secretary of State to Pius VII. The Cardinal offered him the prospect of valuable preferment, but only on condition that he should embrace the ecclesiastical career. To this, however, Leopardi offered invincible repugnance. Neither his own interests nor the persuasion of friends could induce him to yield. Pius VII died in 1823, and Consalvi retired from the direction of public affairs. So favourable an opportunity never returned. Niebuhr offered Leopardi an appointment in Prussia, but he refused, dreading the long journey and the severe climate of Berlin. Great as his reputation was, no other opening offered itself. It is curious to reflect on the vicissitudes of [Pg 223] literary fame. Leopardi is now valued for his lyric poems and for his dialogues and thoughts in prose; but his laborious studies in philology, studies to which he sacrificed health and happiness, are rapidly sinking into oblivion. When he first went to Rome, he had hardly written a line of that which has conferred immortality upon him. All the esteem he enjoyed was lavished upon him for the fruits of his juvenile industry. The grammarian who could solve the most difficult passages in the ancient writers of Greece and Rome, who was as well versed in the Talmud as in the Bible, who knew the obscurest Italian writers of the Fourteenth Century as intimately as his contempories knew Petrarch, was valued and extolled; the melodious poet and the profound philosopher was not ignored or despised, because he was not even suspected to exist.

In 1823, after five months sojourn in Rome, he returned to Recanati. He had seen the world he so longed to explore, and disenchantment was the result. His health was not improved, on the contrary, it was rather injured, by the inevitable exertions of travel, sight-seeing and society. He remained at Recanati for two years, and during part of this period he was occupied in publishing a volume of poems. They were well received, but they were published secretly, without the [Pg 224] knowledge of his parents. The passion for overwork did not desert him even after the warning already given to him by his shattered health. "I work day and night as much as my strength will allow. When I break down, I walk up and down my room daily for months." He would have done better to walk up and down in the open air.

Having seen so much in Rome of the incompetence and frivolity of literary people, he despaired of finding due appreciation for the elaborate finish which it was his ambition to bestow upon his productions and without which he did not care to write. But still his ambitious spirit commanded him to persevere, and among the signs of encouragement he received was the homage paid him by Niebuhr of the dedication of one of his works. When Niebuhr left Rome he enjoined upon his successor Bunsen to value the great merit of Leopardi, and Bunsen proved himself the poet's friend through life.

In 1825 he received an offer from the Milanese publisher Stella to superintend an edition of the complete works of Cicero and to reside with him while the sheets were passing through the press. He gladly accepted. He set out for Milan in July, staying at Bologna for a month to avoid the fatigue of travelling during the great heat. Bologna was one of the few places that he really [Pg 225] liked. He enjoyed the company of Giordani and other friends, and he was loth to part with them. When he reached Milan, he pined to return to Bologna; everything seemed to him repulsive and even hostile; he made no friends; his duties with regard to the edition of Cicero seemed to him intolerably irksome; and he even disliked the gaieties of Milan, gaieties in which he was at times too unwell and at other times too melancholy to join.

"He carried with him his misfortune wherever he went," says Ambrosoli, who met him at this epoch; "and he could not remain happy for long in any place. He could not obtain any suitable post in Italy, and out of Italy he would not accept one. When in 1825 he came to Milan to stay some months with the publisher Stella, he was already an object of compassion, so young, and with such a reputation for genius and learning, and yet visibly hastening to his end. In his conversation, as well as in his writings, he was so simple, so remote from any ostentation, that few might suspect that he was an extraordinary man; but by degrees the flashes of his wit and the treasures of his knowledge revealed the powers within him."

[Pg 226] At last he carried out his intention of returning to Bologna, but the second visit was not so pleasant as the first. When the winter came, it was bitterly cold, and his health suffered in proportion. He would willingly have returned to Milan, but he did not receive another invitation. He was occupied with a Commentary on Petrarch, a labour which he did not undertake very readily, but which was pressed upon him by Stella. It was a great success, and Stella had reason to congratulate himself upon his acumen in getting the work done by so gifted a writer. He entrusted Leopardi with the editing of a selection from the best works of the best authors, and this task was still occupying him when he returned to Recanati, in November, 1826.

It would appear that during his sojourn at Bologna he had not been insensible to the attractions of love; but love could be for him nothing but a source of torment; and as his first return home was signalised by the wreck of hope, so was his second by the blighting of affection. He seemed, like the hero of the *Pilgrim's Progress,* to be writhing in the grasp of Giant Despair; and from the day of his arrival to that of his departure, in the following April, he was not once seen in the streets of Recanati.

He sought a remedy for his sorrows by returning to Bologna, but in vain; and on the 20th of June, 1827, he removed to Florence where he enjoyed the society of Giordani; but an acute inflammation of the eyes confined him to the house and long prevented him from inspecting the treasures of art that overflow the Tuscan city. At this epoch he published his *Operette Morali,* a series of dialogues and essays, offering, according to the best critics of his country, the most perfect specimen of prose in the Italian language. [Pg 227]

In the autumn he somewhat recovered, and wishing to continue the improvement, he avoided the cold of Florence by wintering at Pisa. Florence, as a residence, he did not like, but with Pisa he was enchanted. The improvement, however, was but slight, and his nerves were in such a weak state that any sort of application or study was out of the question. In April, 1828, he was able to apply himself again to composition, and he seemed to be reviving, when the death of his brother Luigi afflicted him profoundly. From June to November he was again at Florence, but his yearning for home made itself felt after the recent bereavement.

He started on the 12th of November for Recanati in the company of a young man afterwards known to fame as Vincenzo Gioberti. He found his birthplace darkened by the shadow of death, which seemed to him the herald of his own. His former gloom returned, but in a more terrible shape; he saw only annihilation before him; and he took the last glance of life in his superb *Ricordanze,* the most richly coloured, the most deeply pathetic, the most unfathomably profound of all his poems. [Pg 228]

In 1830, his Florentine friends, wishing to have him once more in their midst, urged his return to their city. Accordingly, in May he took leave of his family, little thinking he should never see them again. It would be curious to enquire what made him so wretched when at home, and yet, when absent, always longing to be there. His brother Carlo said many years later to Prospero Viani, the editor of his correspondence, that none of his poems written elsewhere had the beauty of those composed at Recanati; and when Viani mentioned the *Ginestra,* Carlo replied that in substance even the *Ginestra* was conceived at Recanati. Some biographers say the *Risorgimento* was written at Pisa; but Ranieri, who was probably well-informed, says it was written at Recanati, and this assertion is, I think, borne out by internal evidence. The *Canto Notturno* seems also to have been written in his birthplace. Thus, Carlo's statement would be correct. It is observable that the poems subsequent to the *Canto Notturno,* with the exception of *Aspasia* and the little poem *To Himself,* have an air of languor, foreign to his earlier productions. This languor is perceptible even in the sublime *Ginestra,* and it is not absent from passages of the *Pensiero Dominante, Amore e Morte,* and the long, mock-heroic *Paralipomeni.* The repose, sepulchral as it may have seemed to him, of Recanati, and the exquisite beauty of its scenery, bordered in the distance by the blue waters of the Adriatic, were conducive to the exercise of the imagination. Nor must we forget that he spoke of other places (except Pisa and Bologna) with equal bitterness. The climate seems really to have worked havoc on his delicate frame. He allowed its inhabitants only one merit, that of speaking Italian with purity and elegance. [Pg 229]

His stay in Florence, which extended from May, 1830, to October of the following year, was made memorable by the publication of another edition of his Poems, with many pieces added and with a dedicatory epistle to his Tuscan friends. At this period, he made the acquaintance of Ranieri, a Neapolitan with literary talents, who was to be his intimate friend and future biographer.

In October, 1831, he suddenly vanished from Florence and appeared in Rome, why, none could tell. He wrote to his brother Carlo on the subject, begging him not to ask for the details of a long romance, full of pain and anguish. It has been conjectured that he fixed his affections upon an unworthy object and was bitterly undeceived. Whatever the circumstances may have been, it is certain that in Rome his mental misery, always great, rose to an intolerable height, and that for a time he harboured thoughts of self-destruction. But the strength of his character overcame the strength of his affliction, and he gradually softened to a serener mood. At this time the Florentine Accademia della Crusca elected him a member, a worthy tribute to his genius and eloquence. After five months sojourn in Rome, he returned to Florence, where he fell so dangerously ill that the rumour was spread of his decease. The doctors urged him to try a milder climate, and in September, 1833, he set out for Naples, accompanied by Ranieri. [Pg 230]

In Naples and its vicinity the remainder of his life was destined to be passed.

The natural beauties of the surrounding country were delightful to one so appreciative of their charm. His health improved after a time, and he was able to display the riches of his intellect by writing the *Paralipomeni,* many detached thoughts in prose, like the *Pensées* of Pascal and the *Maxims* of La Rochefoucauld; and above all, his philosophic and immortal poem, the *Ginestra,* of which it may be said that had he written nothing else his fame would be perpetuated by that production alone.

[Pg 231] In March, 1836, he who had formerly sighed so deeply for death and who had invoked it in such exquisite verse, felt so greatly improved in health that he imagined he had many years before him. But this was only the last flickering of the flame before it went out for ever. The Cholera was raging in 1837, and the prospect of falling a victim to a mysterious and terrible disease, filled him with horror. The great German poet Platen who had resided in Naples previous to his departure for Sicily, where he died, was the first to instil him with alarm on the subject.

Leopardi was thoroughly unhappy, and his strange aversion to the places where he lived revived with unreasonable violence. He wrote of Naples as a den of barbarous African savagery. He yearned for home and pined for his family, and the last letter he sent to his father (three weeks before his decease), was full of plans for returning to Recanati as soon as his infirmities and the Quarantine would allow. He had not been able to write his letters for some years, owing to failing

sight, and was obliged to dictate them to an amanuensis.

"If I escape from the Cholera," he says in this letter which was to be his last, "and as soon as my health allows, I will do my utmost to rejoin you, whatever time of year it may be; because I must hasten, persuaded as I am that the term prescribed by God to my days, cannot now be distant. [Pg 232] My physical sufferings, incessant and incurable, have in course of time attained such a degree that they cannot get worse, and I hope that when at last the feeble resistance of my dying body is exhausted, they may conduct me to that eternal rest which I pray for daily, not from heroism, but from the intensity of the agonies I suffer."

His earthly sorrows were indeed drawing to a close, and he died suddenly at Capo di Monte, when preparing to go out for a drive, at five o'clock in the afternoon on the fourteenth of June, 1837, aged thirty-nine years all but a fortnight. "His body," says Ranieri, "saved as by a miracle from the common and confused burial place enforced by the Cholera regulations, was interred in the suburban Church of San Vitale on the road of Pozzuoli, where a plain slab indicates his memory to the visitor." He was slight and short of stature, somewhat bent and very pale, with a large forehead and blue eyes, an aquiline nose and refined features, a soft voice and a most attractive smile. His father survived him ten years; his mother, twenty years; his sister Paolina, thirty-two years; and his brother Carlo, nearly forty-one years. His youngest brother, Pierfrancesco, who died in 1851, also at the age of thirty-eight, was alone destined to continue the family. Carlo was twice married, but had only one daughter, who died young, by his first wife. [Pg 233] I am indebted to the kindness of the Count and Countess Leopardi for several interesting works relating to the poet.

Mr. Charles Edwardes has translated with great skill Leopardi's Prose Works; I have translated his Poems, so that readers who may not be acquainted with Italian, can now obtain an idea of his philosophy and of his poetry. Equally as a thinker and as a poet, he is distinguished by depth. As a Prose writer, he bears a striking resemblance to Pascal. In both there is the same gloomy power of imagination, the same method of profound meditation, and the same intensity of pessimism. As a poet he displays the most marvellous variety of thought and of expression. His mock-heroic poem, entitled *Paralipomeni della Batracomiomachia,* is, as the name indicates, a sort of continuation of the Greek Poem describing the War of the Frogs and the Rats. The subject is wretchedly chosen and it is obvious that the narrative serves only to introduce the digressions, and it is in these digressions that the poet's brilliant imagination and felicity of style are displayed. Indeed, in the style alone can the work be said to have any merit. It is the longest of his poetical productions, and it is greatly to be regretted that he did not bestow the labour wasted on so frivolous a subject upon a theme worthier of his genius. Still, there are some fine [Pg 234] passages, as, for instance, a most poetical description of Night, of which I subjoin a translation:

"The star of Venus in the Heavens high
  Appeared before the other stars or moon;
Silent was all; no breath was heard, no cry,
  Unless the murmur of a far lagoon,
And buzzing gnats who from the forest fly
  When veiling shades replace the glare of noon;
The lovely face of Hesperus serene
Was in the lake in pure reflection seen.

The poem also offers an exquisite description of the Cuckoo, which may be compared to Wordsworth's poem on the same subject:

In fragrant May, when love and life are bound
  In closer links, we hear the Cuckoo far,
Mysterious bird, who in the woods profound
  Gives vent to sighs that almost human are,
Who, like a ghost nocturnal, all around
  Deludes the shepherd following from afar;
Nor long is heard the voice: it wanes and dies,
Though born in Spring, when Summer heats arise."

But Leopardi's universal renown is founded upon the forty-one poems and fragments of poems published under the collective title of *Canti.* Thirty-four of the pieces are complete and original poems, seven are either fragments or translations.

[Pg 235] We find in reading Petrarch's Odes and Sonnets a certain sameness, whence it is difficult to keep the greater number of the poems distinct from each other in the memory, beautiful though they may be. The same cannot be said of Leopardi's *Canti.* There each poem has a distinct individuality of its own, and makes an indelible impression upon the reader. I will quote a few of the finest, and will begin with one of his most admired masterpieces in which, under the disguise of Sappho before taking the fatal leap from the promontory of Leucadia, he deplores his own physical afflictions.

THE LAST SONG OF SAPPHO.

(*Ultimo Canto di Saffo*).

Thou peaceful night, thou chaste and silver ray
Of the declining Moon; and thou, arising

Amid the quiet forest on the rocks,
Herald of day; O cherished and endeared,
Whilst Fate and Doom were to my knowledge closed,
Objects of sight! No lovely land or sky
Doth longer gladden my despairing mood.
By unaccustomed joy we are revived
When o'er the liquid spaces of the Heavens
And o'er the fields alarmed doth wildly whirl
The tempest of the winds, and when the car,
The ponderous car of Jove, above our heads [Pg 236]
Thundering, divides the heavy air obscure.
O'er mountain peaks and o'er abysses deep
We love to float amid the swiftest clouds;
We love the terror of the herds dispersed,
The streams that flood the plain,
And the victorious, thunderous fury of the main.

Fair is thy sight, O sky divine, and fair
Art thou, O dewy Earth! Alas! of all
This beauty infinite, no slightest part
To wretched Sappho did the Gods or Fate
Inexorable give. Unto thy reign
Superb, O Nature, an unwelcome guest
And a disprized adorer doth my heart
And do mine eyes implore thy lovely forms;
But all in vain. The sunny land around
Smiles not for me, nor from ethereal gates
The blush of early dawn; not me the songs
Of brilliant-feathered birds, not me the trees
Salute with murmuring leaves; and where in shade
Of drooping willows doth a liquid stream
Display its pure and crystal course, from my
Advancing foot the soft and flowing waves
Withdrawing with affright,
Disdainfully it takes through flowery dell its flight.

What fault so great, what guiltiness so dire
Did blight me ere my birth, that adverse grew
To me the brow of fortune and the sky?
How did I sin, a child, when ignorant
Of wickedness is life, that from that time
Despoiled of youth and of its fairest flowers,
The cruel Fates wove with relentless wrath
The web of my existence? Reckless words
Rise on thy lips; the events that are to be, [Pg 237]
A secret council guides. Secret is all,
Our agony excepted. We were born,
Neglected race, for tears; the reason lies
Amid the Gods on high. Oh cares and hopes
Of early years! To beauty did the Sire,
To glorious beauty an eternal reign
Give o'er this human kind; for warlike deed,
For learned lyre or song,
In unadornèd shape, no charms to fame belong.

Ah! let us die. The unworthy garb divested,
The naked soul will take to Dis its flight
And expiate the cruel fault of blind
Dispensers of our lot. And thou for whom
Long love in vain, long faith and fruitless rage
Of unappeased desire assailed my heart,
Live happily, if happily on earth
A mortal yet hath lived. Not me did Jove
Sprinkle with the delightful liquor from
The niggard urn, since of my childhood died
The dreams and fond delusions. The glad days
Of our existence are the first to fly;
And then disease and age approach, and last,
The shade of frigid Death. Behold! of all
The palms I hoped for and the errors sweet,
Hades remains; and the transcendant mind
Sinks to the Stygian shore
Where sable Night doth reign, and silence evermore.

The Infinite.

I always loved this solitary hill
And this green hedge that hides on every side
The last and dim horizon from our view.
But as I sit and gaze, a never-ending [Pg 238]
Space far beyond it and unearthly silence
And deepest quiet in my thought I picture,
And as with terror is my heart o'ercast
With wondrous awe. And whilst I hear the wind
Amid the green leaves rustling, I compare
That silence infinite unto this sound,
And to my mind eternity occurs
And all the vanished ages, and the present
Whose sound doth meet mine ear. And so in this
Immensity my thought is drifted on,
And to be wrecked on such a sea is sweet.

To Sylvia.

Sylvia, rememberest thou
Yet that sweet time of thine abode on earth,
When beauty graced thy brow
And fired thine eyes so radiant and so gay,
And thou, so joyous, yet of pensive mood,
Didst pass on youth's fair way?

The chambers calm and still,
The sunny paths around,
Did to thy song resound,
When thou, upon thy handiwork intent,
Wast seated, full of joy
At the fair future where thy hopes were bound.
It was the fragrant month of flowery May,
And thus went by thy day.

I, leaving oft behind
The labours and the vigils of my mind
That did my life consume
And of my being far the best entomb,
Bade from the casement of my father's house [Pg 239]
Mine ears give heed unto thy silver song
And to thy rapid hand
That swept with skill the spinning thread along;
I watched the sky serene,
The radiant paths and flowers,
And here the sea, the mountain there, expand.

What thoughts divinely sweet,
What hopes, O Sylvia! and what souls were ours!
In what guise did we meet
Our destiny and life?
When I remember such aspiring flown,
Fierce pain invades my soul
Which nothing can console
And my misfortune I again bemoan.
O Nature, void of ruth!
Why not give some return
For those fair promises? Why full of fraud
Thy wretched offspring spurn?

Thou, ere the herbs by Winter were destroyed,
Led to the grave by an unknown disease,
Did'st perish, tender blossom. Thy life's flower
Was not by thee enjoyed;
Nor heard, thy heart to please,
The admiration of thy raven hair
Or of the enamoured glances of thine eyes;
Nor thy companions in the festive hour
Spoke of the raptures of impassioned love
Or of its burning sighs.

Ere long my hope as well
Was dead and gone. By cruel Fate's decree

Was youthfulness denied
Unto my years. Ah me! [Pg 240]
How art thou past for aye,
Thou dear companion of my earlier day,
My hope so much bewailed!
Is this the world? Are these
The joys, the loves, the labours and the deeds
Whereof so often we together spoke?
Is this the doom to which mankind proceeds?
When dark reality before thee lay
Revealed, thou sankest, and thy dying hand
Pointed to death, a figure of cold gloom,
And to a distant tomb.

The Calm After the Tempest.

The storm hath passed away; the birds rejoice;
I hear the feathered songsters tune their notes
As they again come forth. Behold! the sky
Serenely breaks through regions of the West
Beyond the mountain-ridge; the country round
Emerges from the shadows, and below,
Within the vale, the river clearly shines.

Each heart rejoices; everywhere the sound
Of life revives and the accustomed work;
The artizan to see the liquid sky,
With tools in hand and singing as he comes,
Before the door of his abode appears;
The maiden with her pitcher issues forth
To seize the waters of the recent rain,
And he who traffics in the flowers and herbs
Of Mother Earth, his daily cry renews
In roads and lanes as he again proceeds.
See how the Sun returns! See how he smiles
Upon the hills and houses! Busy hands
Are opening windows and withdrawing screens [Pg 241]
From balconies and ample terraces;
And from the street where lively traffic runs
The tinkling bells in silver distance sound;
The wheels revolve as now the traveller
His lengthy journey on the road resumes.

Each heart rejoices. When is life so sweet,
So welcome, as it now appears to all?
When with like joy doth man to studies bend,
To work return, or to new actions rise?
When doth he less remember all his ills?
Ah, truly, Pleasure is the child of Woe;
Joy, idle Joy, the fruit of recent Fear
Which roused with terror of immediate death
The heart of him who most abhorred this life;
And thus the nations in a torment long,
Cold, silent, withered with expectant fear,
Shuddered and trembled, seeing from Heaven's gate
The angry Powers in serried order march,
The clouds, the winds, the shafts of living fire,
To our annihilation and despair.

Oh bounteous Nature! these thy present are,
These are the joys on mortals thou doth shower;
To escape from pain is happiness on earth.
Sorrows thou pourest with abundant hand;
Pain rises freely from a fertile seed;
The little pleasure that from endless woe
As by a miracle receives its birth,
Is held a mighty gain. Our human race
Dear to the eternal Rulers of the sky!
Ah! blest enough and fortunate indeed
Art thou if pain brief respite gives to thee
To breathe and live; favoured beyond compare
Art thou if cured of every grief by Death. [Pg 242]

The Villagers' Saturday Night.

From copse and glade the maiden takes her way
When in the west the setting sun reposes;
She gathered flowers; her slender fingers bear
A fragrant wealth of violets and roses,
And with their beauty she will deck her hair,
Her lovely bosom with their leaves entwine;
Such is her wont on every festive day.
The aged matron sits upon the steps
And with her neighbours turns the spinning wheel,
Facing the heavens where the rays decline;
And she recalls the years,
The happy years when on the festive day
It was her wont her beauty to array,
And when amidst her lovers and compeers
In youth's effulgent pride
Her rapid feet through mazy dance did glide.

The sky already darkens, and serene
The azure vault its loveliness reveals;
From hill and tower a lengthened shadow steals
In silvery whiteness of the crescent moon.
We hear the distant bell
Of festive morrow tell;
To weary hearts how generous a boon!
The happy children in the open space
In dancing numbers throng
With game and jest and song;
And to his quiet home and simple fare
The labourer doth repair
And whistles as he goes,
Glad of the morrow that shall bring repose.

Then, when no other light around is seen,
No other sound or stir,
We hear the hammer strike, [Pg 243]
The grating saw of busy carpenter;
He is about and doing, so unlike
His quiet neighbours; his nocturnal lamp
With helpful light the darkened workshop fills,
And he makes haste his business to complete
Ere break of dawn the heavenly regions greet.

This of the seven is the happiest day,
With hope and joyaunce gay;
To-morrow grief and care
The unwelcome hours will in their progress bear;
To-morrow one and all
In thought their wonted labours will recall.

O merry youth! Thy time of life so gay
Is like a joyous and delightful day,
A day clear and serene
That doth the approaching festival precede
Of thy fair life. Rejoice! Divine indeed
Is this fair day, I ween.
I'll say no more; but when it comes to thee,
Thy festival, may it not evil be.

Aspasia.

Again at times appeareth to my thought
Thy semblance, O Aspasia! either flashing
Across my path amid the haunts of men
In other forms; or 'mid deserted fields
When shines the sun or tranquil host of stars,
As by the sweetest harmony awoke,
Arising in my soul which seems once more
To yield unto that vision all superb,
How much adored, O Heaven! of yore how fully
The joyaunce and the halo of my life! [Pg 244]
I never meet the perfume of the gardens
Or of the flowers that cities may display,

Without beholding thee as thou appearedst
Upon that day when in thy splendid rooms
Which gave the perfume of the sweetest flowers
Of recent Spring, arrayed in robes that bore
The violet's hue, first thine angelic form
Did meet my gaze as thou, reclining, layest
On strange, white furs, and deep, voluptuous charm
Seemed to be thine, whilst thou, a skilled enchantress
Of loving hearts, upon the rosy lips
Of thy fair children many a fervent kiss
Imprintedst, bending down to them thy neck
Of snowy beauty, and with lovely hand
Their guileless forms, unconscious of thy wile,
Clasping unto thy bosom, so desired,
Though hidden. To the vision of my soul
Another sky and more entrancing world
And radiance as from Heaven were revealed.
Thus in my heart, though not unarmed, thy power
infixed the arrow which I wounded bore
Until that day when the revolving earth
A second time her yearly course fulfilled.

A ray divine unto my thought appeared,
Lady, thy beauty. Similar effects
Beauty and music's harmony produce,
Revealing both the mysteries sublime
Of unknown Eden. Thence the loving soul,
Though injured in his love, adores the birth
Of his fond mind, the amorous idea
That doth include Olympus in its range,
And seems in face, in manner and in speech
Like unto her whom the enchanted lover [Pg 245]
Fancies alone to cherish and admire.
Not her, but that sweet image, he doth clasp
Even in the raptures of a fond embrace.
At last his error and the objects changed
Perceiving, wrath invades him, and he oft
Wrongly accuses her he thought he loved.
The mind of woman to that lofty height
Rarely ascends, and what her charms inspire
She little thinks and seldom understands.
So frail a mind can harbour no such thought.
In vain doth man, deluded by the light
Of those enthralling eyes, indulge in hope;
In vain he asks for deep and hidden thoughts,
Transcending mortal ken, of her to whom
Hath Nature's law a lesser rank assigned,
For as her form less strength than man's received,
So too her mind less energy and depth.
Nor thou as yet what inspirations vast
Within my thought thy loveliness aroused,
Aspasia, could'st conceive. Thou little knowest
What love unmeasured and what woes intense,
What frenzy wild and feelings without name,
Thou didst within me move, nor shall the time
Appear when thou canst know it. Equally
The skilled performer ignorant remains
Of what with hand or voice he doth arouse
Within his hearers. That Aspasia now
Is dead, whom I so worshipped. She lies low
For evermore, once idol of my life;
Unless at times, a cherished shade, she rises,
Ere long to vanish. Thou art still alive,
Not merely lovely, but of such perfection
That, as I think, thou dost eclipse the rest.
But now the ardour, born of thee, is spent;
Because I loved not thee, but that fair goddess
Who had her dwelling in me, now her grave. [Pg 246]
Her long I worshipped, and so was I pleased
By her celestial loveliness, that I,
Even from the first full conscious and aware
Of what thou art, so wily and so false,
Beholding in thine eyes the light of hers,
Fondly pursued thee while she lived in me;
Not dazzled or deluded, but induced

By the enjoyment of that sweet resemblance,
A long and bitter slavery to bear.

Now boast, for well thou may'st. Say that alone
Of all thy sex art thou to whom I bent
My haughty head, to whom I gladly gave
My heart in homage. Say that thou wert first
(And last, I truly hope), to see mine eyes'
Imploring gaze, and me before thee stand
Timid and fearful (as I write, I burn
With wrath and shame); me of myself deprived,
Each look of thine, each gesture and each word
Observing meekly; at thy haughty freaks
Pale and subdued; then radiant with delight
At any sign of favour, changing hue
At every glance of thine. The charm is gone;
And with it shattered, falls the heavy yoke,
Whence I rejoice. Though weariness be with me,
Yet after such delirium and long thraldom
Gladly my freedorh I again embrace
And my unshackled mind. For if a life
Void of affections and of errors sweet,
Be like a starless night in winter's depth,
Revenge sufficient and sufficient balm
It is to me that here upon the grass
Leisurely lying and unmoved, I gaze
On sky, earth, ocean, and serenely smile.

On the Portrait of a Beautiful Woman

Engraven on Her Tomb.

Such was on earth thy form,
But the unpitying storm
Of Death resolved thy beauty into dust.
Dumb witness of the flight of ages here,
This image of thy perished loveliness
Stands all unmoved, as though it held in trust
The guardianship of memory and pain,
Above the ashes that alone remain
Of those sweet charms that did thy being bless.
That tender gaze, thrilling as though with fear
The eyes it pierced, as now it seems to do;
Those lips, abundant with the wealth of pleasure;
That neck, encircled by desire's fond arms;
That hand, Love's richest treasure,
Which when it clasped, responsive pressure knew;
And that fair bosom whose celestial charms
Gave those who saw a wan and pallid hue
From the excess of their adoring passion:
Once were as lovely as these sculptures fashion;
But all that now is left on earth of thee
Is dust and ashes which we may not see;
Thy monument to ages that ensue
Conceals the mournful vision from our view.
Thus Fate doth touch and crumble into dust
Whatever must unto our minds appear
Image of Heaven most precious and most dear.
Oh mystery eternal of the world!
Now fount and treasure of stupendous thought,
Beauty appears in majesty sublime,
Even as a Queen in regal robes empearled,
And seems on earth a heavenly splendour brought
From fairer realms beyond the bounds of time;
She seems to give us hope

Of fates that can with mortal sorrow cope,
Of happier homes and planets more divine
Where golden splendours shine;
But on the morrow, feeble though the blow
Which struck her so that she declines and dies,
Dreadful to see and abject in our eyes
Becomes that peerless beauty which before
Seemed like the Seraphs who in Heaven adore
The radiant throne of the celestial Sire;

And all the wondrous dreams she did inspire
Their colours lose and wane
And in our yielding souls no longer reign.
Strange, infinite desires
And visionary fires
Doth wondrous music in our fancy wake,
And we then take through a delightful sea
A wondrous voyage far
Like some undaunted sailor of the deep;
But if a discord crush
Our spirit's rapturous rush,
The spell is broken and our souls are free
A lonely vigil unrelieved to keep:
So slight a break that solemn bliss can mar.
O Nature, say, if thou art wholly vile,
If dust and ashes symbolise thy being,
How canst thou be so lofty and far-seeing?
And if thou art so fair
That sacred dreams thy children can beguile
With art and wisdom, their appointed share,
Why by a cause so slight
Are all thy fond aspirings put to flight?

Exquisite is the picture in "La Vita Solitaria" *of silent meditation.*

At times I seat me in a lonely spot,
Upon a hill, or by a calm lake's bank,
Fringed and adorned with flowers taciturn.
There, when full mid-day heat informs the sky,
His peaceful image doth the sun depict,
And to the air moves neither leaf nor herb,
And neither ruffling wave nor cricket shrill,
Nor birds disporting in the boughs above,
Nor fluttering butterfly, nor voice nor step,
Afar or near, can sight or hearing find.
Those shores are held in deepest quietude:
Whence I the world and even myself forget,
Seated unmoved; and it appears to me
My body is released, no longer worn
With soul or feeling, and its old repose
Is blended with the silence all around.

Very noble is the conclusion of the "Epistle to Count Carlo Pepoli":—

Thou lovest song and poets charm thy mind;
Thy task it is that rarest gift to find,
That beauty of the soul, amid mankind
So seldom seen, so fugitive and frail,
That we its absence rather than its loss bewail.
Thrice happy he who never lost the flame
Of rich imagination when he came
To the autumnal tinting of his years,
In whom the freshness of the heart appears
For ever pure and tender! Blessed he
Whom Nature still in holy liberty
Preserves and keeps that he may deck her brow
With all the treasures that his thoughts allow.

Such be the gift by Heaven on thee conferred!
May sacred Poesy by thee be heard
When snowy age hath marked thee as her own
And on thy head her silvery signs are shown.

I feel in me all blest illusions wane
That did my youth and dawn of life sustain;
I loved them much, and to the bitter end
I shall with tears their fond remembrance tend.
When comes the time that frozen quite and hard
My soul shall be, nor in the Heavens starred
The clustering splendours give my spirit joy,
My wondering thought in vague surmise employ;
Nor sunny hills and lonely places smile,
Nor warbling birds with early notes beguile
My weary heart; nor, sailing in the sky,
The queenly Moon be welcome to mine eye;

When Art and Nature shall to me be dumb,
And tender feelings like a stranger come:
Then other lore, though less endeared, I'll choose
That I the sense of bitter life may lose.
My weary mind the wonders shall embrace
That scholars seek and questioning sages trace,
The bitter truth and dark reality,
The goal of life that we so dimly see;
Why brought to light and why surcharged with woe
The countless generations here below;
What Fate and Nature have for us in store;
What laws ordain, what guides direct us o'er
The perilous gulfs of Nature and of Time;
These be the fountains of my thought sublime,
The lofty theme of many a pensive rhyme.
Thus I shall live; unhappy though it be,
There are some charms in sad reality.
But if my song unwelcome be or strange,
I shall not grieve; for in its boundless range
My spirit hath outsoared the love of Fame;
She is a goddess only in her name;
Than Fate and Love that rule our humankind
So vaguely, so unwisely, she is far more blind.

These extracts will enable the reader to form an idea of the power of thought and depth of feeling that characterise Leopardi's Poems, although the beauty of his diction may not be reproduced in all its purity and sweetness. Never was there a poet who knew how to handle the Italian language with greater skill, or to give it more enchanting melody or more varied cadences. If he has a fault, it is that he is sometimes too indifferent to ornament, and that his simplicity now and then degenerates into poverty and bareness. But when we remember what Italian poetry had become in his time, how artificial, how overladen with meretricious ornaments, we shall think him worthy of praise, rather than deserving of censure. His earlier poems are the most ornate, and it was only by degrees that he attained that crystal clearness of style for which we find no parallel in the Italian language. His frequent use of a capricious succession of rhymed and unrhymed lines allows him to develop his thoughts with perfect freedom; indeed, so easy is the metre, that were it not for his happy selection of words and exquisite variety of cadence, it would border dangerously on the slipshod; indeed, it does so in the works of his imitators, and of recent years it has been, probably for that reason, abandoned by poets in favour of systems more rigid and perhaps more epigrammatic.

Leopardi had every characteristic of a great lyric poet. If his pessimism is sometimes too pronounced for many readers, it must be admitted that the evils of life are sufficiently numerous to justify his elegies; and he atones for any excess of gloom by the most exquisite pictures of nature and of love. The world appears more beautiful, though more terribly and darkly beautiful, in his poems than in reality. He has a rare power of musical diction which delights the ear even in his most melancholy passages. Indeed, the secret of his power lies in the unique and exquisite contrast between the gloom and bitterness of his thoughts and the sweetness and radiant beauty of his style.

He has also the rare power of concentrating in a few lines a whole world of thought and emotion. Thus, in the *Risorgimento*:

"Meco ritorna a vivere
La piaggia, il bosco, il monte;
Parla al mio core il fonte,
Meco favella il mar.

In the poem *To Sylvia* quoted above, he calls her "his hope so much bewailed," "mia lacrimata speme." In the *Ricordanze* he calls Nerina "his eternal sigh." Numerous other instances could be adduced. Take, for example, the lovely passage in the *Canto Notturno,* where the shepherd apostrophizes the Moon:

"Pur tu, solinga, eterna peregrina,
Che si pensosa sei, tu forse intendi,
Questo viver terreno,
Il patir nostro, il sospirar, che sia;
Che sia questo morir, questo supremo
Scolorar del sembiante,
E perir della terra, e venir meno
Ad ogni usata, amante compagnia."

His pathos and tenderness, expressed in language of the most perfect purity and sweetness, and adorned with the rainbow hues of his vivid imagination, produce an effect more poetical than words can describe. I know of no lyric poet who keeps the mind of his reader under a more potent spell. Others, like Horace and Alfred de Musset, may be more entertaining, others, again, like Keats and Shelley, may delight us with airier and more brilliant flights of fancy, but Leopardi leads us to the brink of abysses and shows us their unfathomable depth.

He always writes from his heart, a rare quality, for we may find twenty poets who write from the

head for one who writes from the heart. He never attempts a task for which he is unfitted. His powers of reasoning in verse are very great, but his argument never becomes unpoetical, never becomes dryly didactic. If his works have a fault, it is that now and then the poems have a tendency to fall off towards the end, and in his later works there is a certain languor of style, probably the result of ill-health. He is a great master of blank verse, and only in one of the poems in that metre, the *Palinodia,* does he become heavy and prolix. Sometimes, when he is not sustained by any great thought, his extreme simplicity degenerates into poverty. Very few poets could venture to be as simple as Leopardi. [Pg 254]

His works have the effect of growing upon the reader. The second perusal pleases better than the first, and the more they are read, the more they are admired. In quantity of verse produced, he is surpassed by many writers; but in quality, by none.

His prose works, like his poems, are few in number and short in dimension. They comprise dialogues (a form of which he was very fond), a few essays, and over one hundred detached fragmentary thoughts. They make only a small volume of most unimposing bulk, but the beauties of thought and style are so great that many critics have extolled them as the most perfect production of Italian prose. [Pg 255] They all set forth his pessimism and his melancholy, but with so much art and variety, that while they convince us of the world's misery, they also enchant us with its beauty. Leopardi made a profound study of the great prose writers of the Fourteenth Century, and he alone succeeds in reproducing to perfection the freshness and harmony of their style. Some passages are so magnificent that they cry out aloud to be put into verse. In his prose we find less of his heart (that wonderful heart that embraced the whole world in its sympathy) and more of the vivacity of his fancy than in his verse.

His *Operette Morali,* as his Prose Works were not very appropriately entitled, did not receive that cordial welcome which their extraordinary beauties should have commanded. In his youth he was extolled up to the skies for his laborious erudition, but when he offered the public works of real originality and value, both in prose and verse, his gift was appreciated only by very gradual degrees. This may be partly explained by the fact that a great wave of Utilitarianism was passing over the country, a tendency against which he exclaims in a letter written to Giordani from Florence in 1828. "I am weary," he says, "of the haughty contempt which people here profess for the beautiful and for literature, especially as I do not think that the summit of human wisdom consists in the knowledge of politics and of statistics. [Pg 256] On the contrary, when I consider philosophically the utter uselessness of the endeavours to obtain perfection of governments and happiness of nations, even from the days of Solon to our own, I cannot help smiling at this mania for political and legislative schemes and calculations, and I humbly ask how the happiness of nations can be obtained without the happiness of individuals? We are condemned to unhappiness by Nature, and not by our fellow-creatures or by Fate; and to console us for this inevitable unhappiness, I think nothing is better than the study of the beautiful, the cultivation of che affections, the flights of imagination, and the pleasures of our illusions. Therefore, I consider that all that pleases the mind is useful beyond ordinary things of use, and that literature is more truly useful than all those dry subjects which, even if they fulfilled their objects, would little help the true felicity of human beings, who are individuals, and not masses; but when do they really fulfil their objects?. . . . . . I hold (and not accidentally) that human society has inborn and necessary principles of imperfection, and that its condition can be more or less bad, but never perfect. From every point of view, to deprive men of that which is most delightful to the mind, [Pg 257] appears to me the infliction of a real injury upon the human race."

These words may be taken to heart at the present day as much as at the time when they were written. There are far too many people ready to cry down the pursuits of art and poetry, and it would be well to answer them with these arguments of one of the most powerful and original intellects that the human race has ever produced.

CHAPTER XX. [Pg 258]

MANZONI.

Alessandro Manzoni, the most popular writer of the first half of the Nineteenth Century, was born at Milan on the seventh of March, 1785. His mother was the daughter of Beccaria, whose philanthropic endeavours to abolish the worst abuses of criminal procedure have received recognition in a previous chapter. He received his education from the Fathers of the Somaschi Order, and in 1805 he accompanied his mother to Paris. There he had the advantage of mixing with the most brilliant and intellectual Society that France could produce. At that epoch he seems first to have attempted composition, and a poem he wrote on the death of a friend obtained sufficient encomiums to encourage him in further efforts.

In 1808 he returned to Italy and married Mademoiselle Blondel, daughter of a banker of Geneva.

She was a Protestant, but soon joined the Church of Rome, and ere long filled her husband, who [Pg 259] had hitherto been indifferent to religion, with the fervour that animated her soul. As in Paris, so in Milan, he enjoyed the society of those most eminent for their intellectual powers, and he was a frequent visitor in Monti's house. Silvio Pellico and Tommaso Grossi were among his friends, and Luigi Tosi, afterwards Bishop of Pavia, did much to confirm him in the ardent piety instilled by his wife. Winter and Spring he passed in Milan, Summer and Autumn at a beautiful villa of his at

Brusiglio, four miles out of the town.

In 1812 he began writing his Sacred Hymns, and if they do not rise above a spirited, though somewhat conventional, piety, they are nevertheless an enormous advance on the mythological platitudes that formed so long the staple of Italian poetry.

In 1819, he finished his tragedy, *Il Conte di Carmagnola,* which had occupied him for more than three years. Manzoni entirely abandoned the trammels of the unities of time and place to which Alfieri rigidly adhered; his play has consequently much of the picturesqueness and variety of Shakespeare and the Elizabethans; and it is distinguished by that thoroughness of historical study which marked everything he wrote; but on the other hand, it must be admitted that he is [Pg 260] not inspired by the genuine spirit of tragedy in nearly so high a degree as Alfieri, nor has he his predecessor's remarkable gift of writing sonorous and impressive blank verse. His verse is clear and flowing, but rather wanting in colour. His characters say what they ought to say, but they do not say it in a striking manner. Even more than for its merits as a play, it deserves to be read for the accurate picture it presents of the Venice of the Fifteenth Century.

In 1820 he wrote the most spirited verses he ever produced, *Il Quinto Maggio,* a poem on the death of Napoleon, full of fire and originality.

In 1822 he published his tragedy *Adelchi.* As *Carmagnola* gave a picture of the Oligarchy of Venice, so does *Adelchi* give us a picture of the rule of the Lombard Kings. It is written with as much care as its predecessor, and with more fire ind energy. But even here he is far indeed from displaying Alfieri's mastery over blank verse. Appended to this tragedy we find a long and valuable essay on the Lombards in Italy.

Manzoni contemplated a third tragedy. It was to have been on the subject of Spartacus, but not more was written than an introductory Chorus.

These works procured a high reputation for the poet, a reputation which became even European when he published in 1826 his celebrated historical romance, *I Promessi Sposi—The Betrothed.* [Pg 261] No prose work in the Italian language has been received with greater enthusiasm in foreign countries than this. Translations appeared in every European language; edition after edition was called for, both of the original and of the renderings. The daily papers teemed with laudatory notices; the author was overwhelmed with tokens of esteem and admiration, and his countrymen hailed in him with rapture an Italian Scott.

His reputation reached its zenith in 1830. But if his admirers expected that he would display the fertility of his Caledonian prototype, they were doomed to disappointment. He was renowned as the writer of two able tragedies, of one of the most brilliant lyrics in any language, and of the most successful novel that Italy had ever produced. He was rich and comfortable, two strong incentives to indolence. He had acquired fame so great that it would be impossible to add to it; what need was there for him to labour and toil in producing works that could not by any possibility approach the marvellous success of their predecessors? Accordingly, we find that Manzoni wrote but little after the appearance of the *Promessi Sposi,* and that little is not of great importance. In his *Storia della Colonna Infame,* he protests, like a true descendant of Beccaria, against the horrors of the rack; in his *Morale Cottolica,* he displays considerable powers of [Pg 262] observation and of argument.

He had numerous children, but many of them predeceased him. His eldest daughter married Massimo d'Azeglio.

After the Italian victories of 1859, he was elected a member of the Senate assembled at Turin, but he only attended its debates on two occasions, probably owing to advancing age. He was offered high dignities and the medals of many Orders; but he refused them all, and lived in simple retirement, sufficiently distinguished by his renown, and by the esteem accorded to his amiable and benevolent character. He died on the 22nd of May, 1873, and Milan accompanied her poet to the grave with magnificent obsequies.

Turning from the man to his works, we find both his prose and his poetry characterized by a noble spirit of repose. There is nothing stormy or angry in his writings, for there was nothing to disturb or to embitter his mind. He resemble Goethe in the cloudless serenity of his intellect, though he may not equal him in the rarer attributes of genius. It was probably this very repose that militated against his success as a dramatist, for if they did not present so faithful a picture of an historical epoch, his two tragedies would hardly deserve the attention they received.

[Pg 263] This happy peace of mind enabled him to reproduce very clearly what he observed and imagined. It is, therefore, no cause for wonder that when he devoted the powers of his mind to the production of an historical novel, he should have given a masterpiece to the world. The story is interesting. We follow the vicissitudes of the lovers with breathless attention. The subject is well fitted to the author's powers. He writes of localities among which he lived, and of times, the history of which he had profoundly studied. The descriptions never fail to be vivid and accurate, and the skill with which he masses together great events cannot be too highly extolled. Nothing could be finer than the description of the plague of Milan, and of the popular disturbances. Nor is he less admirable in the delineation of character. The portrait of the Friar would be alone sufficient to show his mastery in that line. The style has its beauties, but even in this most successful work of the Nineteenth Century we notice the same peculiarities as in his dramas; the characters say what they ought to say, but they do not always say it in a striking manner. Little as he resembled Leopardi, he was like him in a certain indifference to ornament which sometimes degenerates into poverty.

In reading Manzoni's works we become aware how much the romantic movement benefited literature. A new life is infused into prose and poetry; fresh thoughts arise in the writer's mind, and the wretched conventionalities of phraseology are done away with for ever. [Pg 264]

Above praise though the *Promessi Sposi* may be, it is not possible to extol Manzoni very highly as a poet. With the exception of the magnificent *Cinque Maggio,* his lyrics do not glow with vivid fire, nor do they haunt the reader with their melody. The extremely comfortable circumstances of the poet's life prevented him from being torn with passion and harrowed by despair. His genius had nothing wild or impetuous about it to spur him on to a passionate outpour of song. Nor had he the gaiety of convivial, or the acrimony of satirical, verse. Therefore, it is not strange that he has left us nothing quite worthy of his renown in the lyric line, always excepting the poem on the death of Napoleon.

His powers of versification are not very remarkable. He is deficient in the delicate cadences of a truly great poet. His blank verse has a tendency to become flat. His rhymes are stronger, but the metre, though effective, is not modulated and varied with the consummate skill that can alone satisfy a cultivated ear. But all his poems are the emanation of a truly noble mind, and if we [Pg 265] search the pages of Manzoni, whether in his prose or in his verse, for lofty thoughts and elevating influence, we can truly say that we never search in vain.

CHAPTER XXI. [Pg 266]

SILVIO PELLICO.

A work hardly inferior in popularity to the *Promessi Sposi* was *Le Mie Prigioni,* an account of all that he suffered in Austrian prisons, by Silvio Pellico.

The author of this celebrated book was born at Saluzzo, in Piedmont, in 1788. He spent his youth in France, but shortly after he came of age, he returned to Italy and settled in Milan. He supported himself for a while as a tutor, and then as a journalist. He wrote several tragedies, the best of which is *Francesca da Rimini,* and a spirited translation of Byron's *Manfred.*

In conjunction with a few friends, he published a paper, *Il Conciliatore.* Some articles excited the displeasure of the Austrian Government, and the paper was forbidden to appear. The disturbances in Piedmont in 1820 aroused the fears of the Authorities, and he was arrested with some of his companions and taken to Venice, where he was first of all confined in the "Piombi" in [Pg 267] the Doge's Palace, and then in the prison on the Island of San Michele. He and his confederates were sentenced to death, but the capital sentence was commuted to fifteen years imprisonment in a fortress for Pellico and twenty years for his friend Maroncelli. Both victims were removed in 1822 to the Spielberg, near Brunn, in Moravia, and confined in subterranean dungeons. They were treated with the utmost rigour. Heavy manacles were fastened to their limbs; coarse and scanty fare alone was provided for them. Pellico's health was never strong, and it broke down utterly under such rigorous treatment. He fell dangerously ill, and a certain relaxation was made in order to save his life. But no sooner was he on the way to recovery, than the former severities were revived and even aggravated. He was no longer allowed to beguile his wretched captivity with reading and writing, and all that he could do was to brood in his wretched dungeon over his sorrows and to wonder whether he would live until the day appointed for his release. His wounded spirit took refuge in the consolations of a somewhat mystic piety. In later years the demand for a United Italy brought the patriots into collision with the Papacy, whose adherence to the claim of temporal power for the Pope was inflexibly maintained, and the collision resulted in [Pg 268] bitter hostility to Christianity; but for at least the first forty years of the Century nearly every patriot was a fervent Catholic, whose religious enthusiasm was fostered by the romantic movement, with its attendant love and veneration for the Middle Ages. Pellico was emphatically the incarnation of this type of patriot. He looked upon all free thought with horror, and any doubts as to the tenets of his Church never seem to have entered his mind. His cruel captivity made him cling all the closer to the promises of the Church to her faithful, and after his liberation his frame of mind continued the same.

That liberation came sooner than was expected. Pellico and his friend Maroncelli were released on the first of August, 1830.

Count Pralormo, Envoy of the Court of Turin to Vienna, interceded frequently for the unhappy poet, and it was probably in a large measure owing to him that Pellico was released so soon. The Revolution of July broke out on the very day the Emperor Francis signed the order for the release. It was considered a fortunate circumstance for the prisoners that the order was signed before the Emperor had heard of this event, or he might not have been so inclined to clemency.

The prisoners were conducted under escort to Vienna, but Silvio was in so feeble a state of health that the exertion of travelling threw him on a sick bed. He tells us that on his recovery he was taken drives and excursions, and one day, when he and Maroncelli were walking in the park at Schönbrunn, the approach of the Emperor was announced, and he and his companion were ordered to go aside lest his Majesty should be depressed by the sight of their pale and emaciated faces. [Pg 269]

When Pellico was allowed to return to Italy, he took refuge at Turin with his sister. He beguiled his time by writing *Le Mie Prigioni* and numerous tragedies and poems; but his health was quite

ruined by the hardships he had endured, and he languished in much suffering. He died unmarried in 1854.

Why Silvio Pellico was treated with such rigour and cruelty by the Austrian Government is inexplicable, for he was the very reverse of a dangerous and turbulent spirit. Even his imprisonment did not rouse him to frenzy, and *Le Mie Prigioni* is less an outpouring of wrath than a chronicle of all the tears he shed. Indeed, it would have been better for his fame as an author if he had possessed something of the cruel indignation that devoured the heart of Swift. His works are tender and pensive, but they are sadly in want of fire. He gives us mild elegies when we expect passionate invectives. [Pg 270]

It was hard to suffer so much, but had he suffered less, he would not now be remembered among the authors of his country. A pure and noble spirit he would always have been, but his star would not have shone with sufficient brilliancy to be distinguishable from the galaxy around it.

"After writing twelve tragedies," he tells us, "eight of which alone have been published, I ceased to write for the stage, as I felt that I had not sufficient resources to enable me to depict a great variety of characters. In my youth I had a wild hope that I might in time occupy a place not distant from Alfieri, but with years I awoke from that illusion in spite of the applause that was lavished upon me. Now I take pleasure only in lyric and narrative poetry, in which I admit that I do not rise to any great height; but those branches of poetry have a strong attraction for me; I love to make of them the instruments to express my sentiments, and especially my religious emotions. I often feel the want of praying, as it were, in verse; and thus I produce sometimes an ode, sometimes an elegy, in which I pour out my heart to God, and that suffices to give me back my spiritual serenity. I should like to see poets arise greater than myself, that they might increase the number of sacred compositions, diffusing the love of God and of virtue, and elevating their intellect and that of their fellow creatures, with the holy union of noble thoughts and fervent religion. We have a few such poets, but very limited in number, and too often the divinest of arts is dedicated to frivolous, or what is worse, to despicable subjects." [Pg 271]

These words give a clear idea of the spirit in which he wrote, and it cannot be denied that he comes up to his noble conception, even though a certain want of fire prevents him from occupying a high rank in Italian literature. His two best tragedies are *Francesca da Rimini* and *Thomas More.* In both he rises to considerable dignity, and nothing better can be found out of Alfieri. His *Francesca* was produced by the celebrated actress Carlotta Marchionni with brilliant success.

His lyric poems are a mirror of his tender and pensive soul, but the fatal want of fire is more apparent than in his tragedies which are sustained by the interest of the story.

Far and away the most important of his works is *Le Mie Prigioni,* the record of his weary years of cruel captivity. The book was a prodigious success, and was read wherever freedom was loved and tyranny detested. No literary production of the age was more welcome to Italian patriots, [Pg 272] because it furnished them with so forcible a justification for rising against their oppressors. Indeed, the marvel is that a nation like the Italian bore the yoke of foreign invaders so long. Italy was not like Poland, without natural frontiers to act as a barrier against the aggression of powerful neighbours. Nor was she, like Poland, distracted by internal faction and discord. Why, therefore, did she submit so long? The only answer, in my opinion, is that the system in the Middle Ages of hiring venal condottieri and their followers to fight their battles demoralised the Italians until they failed to realise their own inherent strength. When once the nation resolved to be free, the task was not so stupendously difficult. It was a fortunate circumstance for Italy that neither Spain nor Austria ever attempted to effect settlements of their own subjects on her soil, as England did in Ireland and as Russia is now doing in Poland. Thus, when the hour of freedom struck, the Italians had only to overcome hostile garrisons, they had not to uproot a settled population.

The style of Silvio Pellico is eminently clear and direct, and his work is on that account a great favourite with foreigners beginning the study of the language. He has considerable powers of description, and he succeeds admirably in reproducing the colouring and the atmosphere of the scenes he went through. He is occasionally too sentimental, and the tears he sheds are out of all [Pg 273] proportion to the fortitude he displays. But a great wave of sentimentality was passing over Italy at that time, and it was perhaps wanted to bring men back to nature after the artificiality of the past.

His gaolers seem to have been as kind to him as they dared; but the rules of the prison were terribly rigorous, and they were not relaxed for Silvio and his confederates, blameless though their characters were known to be. Maroncelli had to submit to the amputation of a leg owing to the mortification resulting from the friction of his heavy fetters, and Pellico himself was prostrated by illness from his excessive hardships, so that for a while his life was in danger, and great indeed would have been the loss to Literature had a fatal termination prevented him from leaving to posterity the record of a cruel captivity and of a lofty and unsullied patriotism.

[Pg 274]

CHAPTER XXII.

POETS OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY.

The most conspicuous, though not in reality the most eminent, of the Italian poets in the early part of the Nineteenth Century, was VINCENZO MONTI. The inexhaustible fluency of his verses attracted universal attention, and even Leopardi worshipped at his shrine. But he was only an idol, not a divinity. The feet of clay soon became apparent. He veered round with shameless apostacy from one political party to another. Beginning his career by flattering Pius VI, he continued it by extolling the French invaders, and concluded it by grovelling before the Austrian tyrants. He wrote odes without enthusiasm, and tragedies without dignity, and he translated Homer without knowing sufficient Greek to read the original. An epigram was suggested for his portrait: [Pg 275]

"Questo è Monti, poeta e cavaliero,
Gran traduttor dei traduttor d'Omero."

But it would be unjust to deny that he had great flexibility of style and full command over all the resources of the language. He is always elegant and flowing, and his works, such as they are, never sin against the canons of good taste. Perhaps the most pleasing of his shorter poems is a very beautiful sonnet on the portrait of his daughter.

A far more masterful and daring spirit was UGO FOSCOLO. His poem *I Sepolcri* attracted universal attention, but it can hardly be said that the promise of this poem was fulfilled by later works. He had brilliant gifts, but he was inclined to fritter them away on learned trifles. As a prose writer he exercised a wider influence. His *Lettere di Jacopo Ortis,* were to Italy much what Goethe's *Werther* was to Germany. He was an admirable critic, and his essays on Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio are valuable even at the present day. He took refuge in England, and some of his best articles were written in English, being subsequently translated into his mother-tongue. He died at Turnham Green, near London, in 1827.

MELCHIORRE CESAROTTI translated Macpherson's *Ossian,* and was a powerful promoter of the romantic movement. [Pg 276]

IPPOLITO PINDEMONTE wrote many poems distinguished by a gentle pensiveness, and he translated the *Odyssey* with considerable success.

GIOVANNI BERCHET of Milan, contributed largely by his verses to kindle the fire of patriotism, but vigorous and stirring though they be, they have hardly sufficient finish and delicacy to rank as works of art.

GIUSEPPE GIUSTI was a satirist of amazing raciness and originality. He attacked the tyrannical Governments of his day, and he knew neither fear nor discretion. Those who can form an idea of what Mr. Gilbert's inexhaustible powers of grotesque versification would produce if directed towards political satire, may conceive what Giusti's poems are. He died of consumption in 1850.

FELICE BELLOTTI, of Milan, rendered noble services to the literature of his country by his magnificent translation of the *Lusiad* of Camoens, the *Argonautica* of Apollonius Rhodius, and the tragedies of Æschylus, Sophocles and Euripides.

GIAMBATTISTA NICOLINI was the author of numerous tragedies, but his tendencies were as much political as poetical, and his poetry suffers in consequence.

JACOPO VITTORELLI was musical and flowing in his verse, and some of his best lines are worthy of the pen of Metastasio. [Pg 277]

The poems of GIUSEPPE PUZZONE have a tender sentimentality that is both moving and pleasing,

GIUSEPPE BORGHI translated Pindar, and wrote poems of his own with considerable fire and originality.

LUIGI CARRER, a Venetian, had the merit of opening up new sources of ideas in his poems, and he has much pathos and command of language.

GABRIELE ROSSETTI, the father of a celebrated family, was inspired by patriotism in almost everything he wrote. Some of his patriotic hymns have inimitable fire and energy. He took refuge in England, where he died in 1854.

The poems of ALEARDO ALEARDI are remarkable for strength of imagination, but his powers of execution are not considerable.

GIOSUE CARDUCCI ranks very high among the poets of the Nineteenth Century, but his endeavours to revive the mythology of which the world had become utterly weary were not very judicious, although in his case they were redeemed by great learning and much force of imagination. He tried to introduce the metres of Horace into Italian, but the result is not very musical.

ENRICO PANZACCHI is a true poet, and his imagery is always graceful and in good taste. [Pg 278]

The same cannot be said of OLINDO GUERRINI who, under the pseudonym of LORENZO STECHETTI, published poems remarkable for freshness and melody of style, but also, unhappily, for coarseness and indecency. He is very successful in the art of making the verses sing; they really come from the heart of the poet and go straight to the heart of the reader.

The Sicilian RAPISARDI produced some fine works, among others a long poem on the afflictions of Job. It is full of imagination, but it would be difficult to conceive a more unnecessary work; the book of Job is so sublime in itself that any reproduction, not a literal translation, is either a dilution or a "gilding of refinéd gold."

GIOVANNI PRATI had great powers of thought and genuine inspiration. His *Armando* is a very noble work, but it is somewhat wanting in skilful construction, and in everything he wrote his beauties

are rather heaped together than skilfully displayed.

Pietro Cossa produced some tragedies very unlike those of Alfieri, full of crude colours and startling contrasts, by which he obtained an immense vogue, but it is doubtful whether they will stand the test of time.

Ada Negri, of Milan, has published some lyrics full of the most extraordinary fire and brilliancy, and if she continues as she has begun, she cannot fail to produce something great. [Pg 279]

The Abbe Zanella has published poems which have been much admired. He is reported to be the favourite poet of Leo XIII.

Madame Rachele Botti Binda has written numerous poems, characterised by strength and originality of thought; indeed, it is delightful to find in almost all the poets enumerated in this chapter that the old sameness and conventionality have utterly disappeared and that freshness and versatility are everywhere apparent. This circumstance cannot fail to be of good augury for the future and to infuse new life into a literature which was sadly in need of freshness of thought and unconventionality of style. If some writers have been indelicate and others inartistic, these are faults that are immediately seen and easily avoided, and in view of the greater interest and appreciation bestowed by the public of late years on poetry, there is every reason to hope that the next century will witness the appearance of poets in no respect unworthy of the Country of Dante and Ariosto.

CHAPTER XXIII.

[Pg 280]

PROSE WRITERS OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY.

Pre-eminent among the historians of the Nineteenth Century are Cesare Balbo and Cesare Cantu. They were both indefatigably laborious and they both devoted themselves to the elucidation of the history of their native land. Manin's *History of Venice* has research and minuteness of detail without wearisome prolixity to recommend it.

Tommaso Grossi was highly successful with his historical romance *Marco Visconti,* but he has a tendency to become very tearful and sentimental.

The plays of Alberto Nota procured considerable reputation for their author, but they are not quite amusing enough for comedies and not quite Strong enough for dramas, so that they have fallen into neglect in spite of their delicacy and refinement. The Italian Stage in this Century depended too much on French importations, as did the average fiction of the day. [Pg 281] Even at the present time, the poorest rubbish of the Boulevards has a better chance of attracting attention than the best works of indigenous authors. Extreme concessions have been made of late years to vulgar realism, but it cannot be denied that realism has called forth life-like characters and accurate descriptions. Matilde Serao has been particularly successful as a novelist.

But the most brilliant novelist of the present day is undoubtedly Gabriele D'annunzio. His poems are well-conceived, though not particularly musical in diction, but as a novelist he is quite the first. He excels in descriptions. Nowhere else can such word-painting be found, with the possible exception of the books of travel of Edmondo De Amicis. Tullio Giordana has written a most interesting monograph on Gabriele d'Annunzio's *Trionfo della Morte,* but perhaps the best works he has produced as yet are *Il Piacere* and *Giovanni Episcopo.* He is not always particularly happy in his choice of subjects; but if he exercises discretion in that respect, there is no saying to what height he may not in future ascend.

In Italy, as elsewhere, the extreme popularity of the novel has overshadowed every other branch of literature. To enumerate the various authors and their works would be like counting the sands of the sea-shore and the stars of the Heavens, suffice it to observe that everywhere skill and [Pg 282] ingenuity are manifest, and if some authors become repulsive from excess of realism, others, and those the most recent, have, in emulation of Gabriele d'Annunzio, thrown over their realism the garb of fancy and imagination, thus presenting a happy augury for the future.

CHAPTER XXIV.

[Pg 283]

CONCLUSION.

In this History of Italian Literature I have endeavoured, to the best of my ability, to trace its progress and development. That it has progressed, cannot, I think, be denied. Poetry has freed itself from conventionality. Prose has given birth to works which former ages could not even have conceived. Compare the magnificent creations of Gabriele d'Annunzio to the stories of Bandello and the *Novelline* of Masaccio. The advance is prodigious. Much, however, remains to be done. Italy has not yet given the world a philosopher so profound as Kant or Schopenhauer, or a tragic poet so great as Sophocles or Shakespeare. There is still room for an Italian Burns, for a really original and striking poet in dialect. The Sicilian Giovanni Meli is, perhaps, the nearest approach to such a writer, indeed, he is the most genuine poet that Sicily has ever produced. There is every [Pg 284] reason to hope that the free and united Italy of the present will see writers as brilliant as those of

the enslaved and divided Italy of the past.

THE END.

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