THE SIMPLICITY OF GIOSUE CARDUCCI:
ITALY’S GREATEST MODERN POET: BY RAF-
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HE WAS the greatest poet of modern Italy, yet outside of
of his own country but few knew of him; his name
was not popular, since his works are not easily un-
derstood, nor are they of the character that follow
the odd caprices of the public. In art, in politics, in
private life, he was a rebel. He lived a solitary life
and died as he had lived, an enemy of injustice, of
bargaining, and despising all wealth, display and human vanity.
His youth was one of enthusiasm, of conflicts and victories. During
his early years he tried the most audacious forms of Italian metre;
his enemies derided him as an iconoclast, but Carducci continued his
way, and gradually saw other bold ones gather around him. Many
regarded him as a fanatic, an odd, fantastic writer, half mad, but he
believed in himself and his art. When after many years the historian
of letters seeks the names of the thinkers of modern Italy, he will
find Carducci the true colossus. His poems cover half a century of
history and national life, the dawn of the Renaissance, the fire of
Mazzini, the courage of Vittorio Emanuele and of Garibaldi, the
repression of the Vatican, the new hopes, the new struggles, the
taking of Rome. Dante was the poet of the fourteenth century;
Carducci the poet of modern Italy. The singer of the “Odi Bar-
bare,” and the “Inno a Satana” aroused the indignation of an entire
people. These poems are a mirror of the intellectual, moral and
political life of modern Italy.

Carducci lived for seventy-two years at Valdocastello; his father
was a physician and earned barely seven hundred francs a year.
Wrinkled, vehement, he often frightened his patients, exaggerating
the consequences of their illnesses, and then the peasants would re-
venge themselves by rapping vehemently at his door. The relatives
of the poet were also persecuted wherever they went for political rea-
sons. They finally disappeared when Carducci’s mother died, and
he wrote thus about her death to an editor:

“February thirteenth, eighteen hundred and seventy. This
morning my poor dear mother died, and with her the last sad hour
of my sad youth. Now they will bury her here, at the foot of the
Apennines, far from her husband and her son. And where shall we
end our lives? I do not know. It was she who guided the family to
the best of her ability, and busied herself with everything. I thought
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only of my studies and my ideas. What shall I do now with three children, two of whom are girls?"

On the thirtieth of August, eighteen hundred and ninety, Carducci returned to see his native land, and stopped to read the stone which the peasants had placed in the front of his house. His mother's name was Ghelli, but it had been carved as Celli. "Poor mother," said Carducci to a friend, "they even made a mistake in her name."

An old woman who heard this remark asked: "And are you then the great poet? I am your cousin," and hastened to explain the degree of relationship. Meanwhile rumors of his arrival had circulated all over the countryside, and a warm reception was accorded the poet.

RETURNING to his youth, it must be remembered that his first books were sold for one hundred francs a volume. "I should have been able to earn more money and sooner," he wrote, "but I always wished to do better, or at least the very best that I could. I have never had less respect for the art of writing; nor does anything offend me more than to have such propositions as these hurled in my face: 'Anything that you choose; it will do!' Oh, gentlemen, if it satisfies you, it does not satisfy me."

In Florence, Carducci went to school to the Scolopi Friars, where at once he made himself loved, notwithstanding his violent and rebellious nature. He was a lover of books even to exaggeration. Giuseppe Chiararini, his most intimate friend and accurate biographer, tells this curious anecdote: One day the poet returned home with the poetry of Ugo Foscoli; he ascended the stairs on his knees, and when he had reached his mother's room, he wished that the good woman should kneel and kiss the book. The next morning sitting on his bed, he declaimed the poems, many of which he already knew by heart.

In eighteen hundred and fifty-six, after having completed his studies at Pisa, he went to teach in the Ginnasio of San Miniato. When the cholera broke out he abandoned his books to go to the sick beds, together with his brother and two Sienese youths. Later, Carducci's brother killed himself, and the next year his father also died, leaving him an inheritance of little more than a dollar. Yet this was the most brilliant period of his life; he gave lessons in his house; he wrote articles in the library, as well as books and poetry. When the war of independence broke out, he published his first poems, all fire and patriotic love. Four years later he was still giving
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lessons in literature in the Liceo of Pistoia, and finally the Minister Mamiani called him to the University of Bologna, where he taught until some years ago.

He always lived modestly, in a plain little house nestling close to the historic walls of Bologna. This house and his wonderful library were purchased by Queen Margherita, and given to the city of Bologna. Queen Margherita and Annie Vivanti are the only two women about whom the rebellious poet ever became enthusiastic. Carducci, describing his first visit to court, has a page of enthusiastic admiration for the queen mother, who was always a sincere friend to him. Annie Vivanti, toward the close of last year, related the manner in which she made the poet’s acquaintance. She had presented herself to the publisher Treves, for the purpose of inducing him to publish one of her books of poetry. Treves shook his head and wished to hear nothing of it. “If there were an introduction by Carducci,” he said, “we might talk of it—”

“Carducci? Who is he?” Annie Vivanti asked her brother, who advised her to go to Bologna. She was directed to the house of the poet and there a man opened the door, and asked her to enter.

“What do you want?” the man asked me,—none other than Carducci himself,” said she afterward, in telling of her visit.

“I want an introduction to my poems.”

A silence followed that made me break out into a cold sweat.

“Ah!” said Carducci finally, ‘you are a poetess. I thought you were the Queen of Sheba. A poetess! What have you read?’ It seemed to me that he should have asked what I had written, and I was silent and abashed.

“What do you know of our great ones? What do you know of Dante?’

‘Dore’s illustrations,’ I stammered, moved by an impulse of sincerity. Carducci laughed, a delightful, unexpected, merry laugh.

‘Sit down,’ said he to me.

And I sat down and told him about Treves, about Miss Gann, and my brother Italo. I drew from my pocket his “Odi Barbare,” and told him that I had believed that he had been dead for three hundred years.

He seemed quite content. But when I gave him the manuscript of the verses his face clouded.

‘Hm!’ he grumbled, turning the first page, ‘what pretty handwriting! I, too,’ he added, looking fiercely at me as though I had contradicted him. ‘I, too, write a pretty hand.’

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THE HOUSE OF THE LATE GIOSUE CARDUCCI, SEEN FROM THE ROAD.
WHERE CARDUCCI PASSED HIS LAST DAYS IN BOLOGNA.
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“Then he began reading: ‘Vieni, amor mio——’ He muttered the first verses in his beard; then read the second strophe louder. The third he recited in a loud voice, accompanying the rhythm with gestures of his right hand, as though beating time.

‘A sfondare le porte al paradiso
È riportarne l’estasi quagghiù!’

There was a moment of silence. Then Carducci struck the paper with his fist.

‘‘Per Dio Bacco, this woman has talent!’ he said.

‘He sat motionless, staring in my face with flashing eyes. I did not know whether to thank him or to deprecate his praise, when suddenly he rose, and worrying his beard, (how well I have learned to know this gesture), said to me roughly: ‘Good-by!’

‘‘Good-by,’ I replied, as though hypnotized, and he opened the door for me. I held out my hand, and felt a great desire to cry.

‘‘Where is your muff?’ he suddenly asked. ‘I do not know,’ I said, and laughed.

‘Carducci wandered absently around the room, looking for it. Then I explained to him that I had brought no muff with me. And he looked at me darkly from beneath his frowning brows, thinking of quite other things. Browning’s lion flashed to my mind:

‘‘You could see by those eyes wide and steady
He was leagues in the desert already.’

‘With joy in my heart, I realized that Carducci was thinking of my verses, and that it was for them that he had forgotten me. Later, when I came to know him better, I learned that he was incapable of thinking of more than one thing at a time. If his thoughts were elsewhere, what happened around him disappeared from his perception.

‘Months afterward, when Treves had published the verses and the preface, I said to Carducci: ‘Why did you ask me that day about my muff?’ ‘What day? What muff?’ said he. I reminded him that he had wandered all around his drawing room, looking for it. ‘You are dreaming,’ he said, impatiently. ‘And you are dreaming confusedly. I never looked for a muff.’”

FROM that day they became friends. Annie Vivanti’s “Rosa Azzura” was performed at the Arena del Sole, Bologna. Carducci, who had for years given up attending theatrical performances, was present at this one. His presence alone sufficed to crowd the theater unusually. The first act was really successful, the
second received some applause, but at the third there was much whistling. Carducci, who had continued to applaud, suddenly rose, rigid and threatening, and shaking his clenched fists at the people, cried many times: "Cowards!" The crowd replied by applauding the poet noisily, but whistled at the comedy. Carducci only continued to applaud. He was never afraid to go against the current of popular opinion, and his brusque manners were never softened.

Once, at a reception given in his honor, he never opened his mouth. One evening in Milan, during a supper, conversation languished, and he felt that some subject must be started. Turning to his neighbor, he asked: "How many children have you?"

The lady, who had already assumed a smile of reverent attention, started: "I am not married," said she, blushing. There was utter silence around the table. For that evening he was left in peace, and he confessed that he never knew what to say to a woman.

In recent times it has been almost impossible to get speech with the old man. Woe to anyone who presented himself at his house or in the office of his publisher, Zanichelli! Everyone had orders not to allow importunate ones to enter. Carducci's third resort was the Caffé Cillario in Bologna; he was accustomed to go there every evening to play a game of chess with his friends, and drink a glass of good wine, for the poet was a great admirer of Bacchus, and also of his liquor. Was this well or ill for him? Possibly ill, but in any case no one could oppose him, or this deeply rooted habit of his, against which all arms would have been powerless.

His inclination to taciturnity was so great that he is said once to have remarked to his students: "He who is able to say a thing in ten words, but says it in twenty, I hold capable of evil deeds!"

Aside from his oddities and extravagances, it is certain that with him vanishes the greatest poet of Italy. With formidable powers of invention, he was a concise and violent polemicist, a fanciful poet, and an austere thinker. D'Annunzio's books have been honored with many translations, not so those of Carducci; because of the difficulty of turning into other languages his verse and prose as well as because of their special nature he did not enjoy the fame he deserved. But a few months before his death justice was done him in the award of the Nobel prize for literature. When the Italian papers undertook a bitter polemic in regard to this recognition, Carducci scornfully tore up everything that was said about him, and told his friends not to trouble themselves about the annoying affair. "I wish no charity!" said he.