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Giacomo Leopardi.

By MARY BRADFORD WHITING.

"ONE day," wrote Leopardi to his friend Michelet, "I saw a child, gloomy and pitiful, with a look timid, dissembling, miserable, though for all that there was an ardour about him. His mother, who was a very stern woman, said to me, "No one knows what is the matter with him." "But I know, madame," I said, "it is that he has never been kissed!"

This sad little story may be taken as a description of Leopardi's own life. Miserable, pitiful, yet possessed of the divine flame of genius, his spirit knew no sunshine of love, no sunshine of happiness, and it is not to be wondered at that it sank at last beneath impenetrable gloom.

Giacomo Aldegarde Francesco Salesio Pietro Leopardi, to give him his full name, was born at Recanati, a small town about fifteen miles from Ancona, on June 29, 1798. His parents were both of noble blood, his father, the Count Monaldo Leopardi, having married the Marchesina Adelaide Antici. Monaldo was only twenty-two years old when his eldest son was born, but he had already given such proofs of his incapacity for business, that in the year 1803 he was interdicted from any further control over his affairs, which were transferred to the management of his wife. Devoted to study, he set himself to collect a valuable library, and shut himself away from the annoyances of everyday life among his beloved books.

It was from his father that Giacomo inherited his aptitude for learning; his teachers were soon left behind, and at the age of eight he was able to lay aside his Greek grammar and begin the task of reading the classical authors in chronological order. From this time forward he gave his life entirely to study, and when he was only seventeen he wrote an essay on the Errors of the Ancients, in which he cited more than four hundred authors.

It may seem at first sight as though the circumstances of

the poet's youth were entirely favourable to his development, but there was another side to the question. Monaldo was naturally a narrow-minded and obstinately conservative pedant, while his wife, who ruled the house, was hard and unsympathetic in disposition and completely absorbed in her economies. The strongest evidence against his parents may be found in a book which was apparently intended to uphold their cause—the "Biographical Notes on Leopardi and his Family," by the widow of Leopardi's brother, Carlo.

In this book, which was published in Paris, Madame Leopardi defends her mother-in-law by saying that as heroic mothers who sacrifice their children to their country have been glorified in all ages, she cannot understand why the Countess Adelaide should be blamed for having been forced by circumstances to deprive her children of many things which they would otherwise have enjoyed. She goes on to describe the wonderful achievements of the Countess in the restoration of the family fortunes, ruined by the incompetence of her husband. This task was finally accomplished about the time of Giacomo's death, when ease and comfort were no longer of any use to him. But in spite of her defence, the writer cannot deny that the Countess was a cold-natured woman who expended no tenderness on her children. She loved them, we are told, in an austere manner, pushing reserve and self-restraint to an extreme, and making it a matter of principle to exhibit no signs of affection—"She gave her children her hand to kiss, and never pressed them to her breast."

One result of her want of solicitude was that she did not notice that Giacomo's incessant devotion to books was making him sallow and sickly, and that unless some strong measures were taken he would become a confirmed invalid. His father cared for nothing so long as the laws he had made for the regulation of his family were not infringed, and Giacomo pored over his books unmolested until his health was entirely undermined. "Before I was twenty," he writes in the dedication to the volume of his poetry published in Florence in 1830, "my

physical infirmities deprived me of half my powers; my life was taken, yet death was not bestowed upon me. Eight years later I became totally incapacitated; this, it seems, will be my future state. Even to read these letters you know that I make use of other eyes than mine. Dear friends, my sufferings are incapable of increase; already my misfortune is too great for tears. I have lost everything, and am but a trunk that feels and suffers."

In view of the statements made by herself, it is difficult to understand how Madame Leopardi can maintain that the Countess never denied her children anything that they really needed, and that it was impossible that Giacomo wanted for money when he was away from home. The testimony of his friend, Ranieri, who shared his purse with him, she dismisses as a mere impertinence, and she brings forward the fact that Giacomo refused an offer made to him in Rome by Bunsen as a proof of his affluence; but whether Ranieri's generosity was misplaced or not, there is no doubt that it existed, and as for Bunsen's offer, its acceptance would have necessitated his taking Orders, a step for which he had no inclination, although he had received the first tonsure when he was twelve years old.

But though the denial of money was naturally galling to the eldest son of a noble house, the denial of liberty was an even harder trial. Fine scholar as Monaldo undoubtedly was, he could not understand that his son's ardent nature needed the contact of other intellects; he himself was entirely content with the four walls of his own library, and he was resolved that his son should be the same. The little town of Recanati, with its sunlit streets, its sloping hillsides rich with corn and vine, its views of mountain and of sea and of the towers of Loreto rising against the distant sky, seems to the traveller of to-day a vision of delight; but to the young poet it was a prison, against the bars of which he beat his wings in vain. Unaided, he could not hope to escape, and therefore he sought the assistance of a friend, and in 1818, Pietro Giordani, the celebrated essayist, with whom he had for some time been in correspondence, yielded to his repeated requests, and came to Recanati that he

might try and persuade Monaldo to allow his son to leave home. Flattered as Monaldo was by the solicitude of such a man, the visit was unfortunate from the first. Impatient to see his friend, Giacomo walked down the road to meet him unaccompanied, and though he was now twenty years old, such a breach of propriety could not be forgiven. Giordani's suggestion, moreover, was one that his host was determined not to entertain, and he was obliged to leave without having accomplished anything. Giacomo's disappointment was so great that for a time he was almost insane, and when he somewhat recovered his calm of mind, he devised a plan of escape. He despatched a secret request for a passport, and in the expectation of receiving it, he wrote a letter to his father to be given after his departure, saying that now that he was of age he could bear his subjection no longer, and that he felt that he should be happier begging his bread than amid the bodily comforts of his home.

The plan was not destined to succeed, however, for Monaldo got wind of it and effectually prevented his son from carrying it out. Yet it was not without results, for in the first place it showed him that Giacomo was possessed of more determination of character than he had supposed, and in the second, the excitement of the incident roused the young man to fresh mental exertion, and he produced two fine odes, one to Italy and the other on the monument to Dante which had just been erected in Florence. The splendour of these odes, which were published through the kind offices of Giordani, woke a response throughout Italy, and, obliged to recognize his son's altered position, Monaldo acceded to his next petition, and allowed him to go to Rome.

Niebuhr, the Prussian Ambassador at the Papal Court, thus describes him in a letter to Bunsen: "I have at last seen a modern Italian worthy of the old Italians and the ancient Romans. Conceive my astonishment when I saw standing before me, pale and shy, a mere youth, in a poor little chamber, of weakly figure and obviously in bad health, he being by far the first—rather, indeed, the only—Greek philosopher in Italy,

the author of critical observations which would have gained honour for the first philosophers of Germany, and only twenty-two years old! He has grown to be thus profoundly learned without school, without teacher, without help, without encouragement, in his father's sequestered home."

Both Niebuhr and Bunsen would gladly have helped him, but all their influence was at the Papal Court, and as a layman he was ineligible for any post; his father refused to allow him more than a pittance, and the next few years of his life were one terrible struggle against poverty and ill-health. If he had been possessed of ordinary vigour, he would no doubt have been able to earn an easy living, for a publisher in Milan had engaged him to edit the Classics, but disease of the nerves had already set in, and his constant changes of residence were made in the hope of an alleviation that never came. His physical state was indeed deplorable; hearing and eyesight were both failing, his bones were softening, and his blood degenerating; heat and cold seemed to be equally injurious to him, any chill caused him the severest suffering, yet if he went near a fire his discomfort was unbearable, and during one sharp season in Bologna he was obliged to plunge himself up to the armpits in a sack of feathers in order to keep any warmth in his frame. The curvature of the spine which had been induced by his constantly bending over books while he was growing became so marked that when he paid a visit to Recanati the people spoke of him as "the Leopardi hunchback."

But the tragedy of Leopardi's life was threefold; it was not only in his circumstances and in his health that he was destined to suffer: love, which brings solace to so many, was to him only another source of pain. With a mind filled with singularly pure and noble dreams, his yearnings after the ideal were not so ready to take human form as are those of many men. The beautiful poem, "First Love," tells of his boyish worship for his cousin, the Contessa Lazzari, a lovely and fascinating woman, some years older than himself; but it was after he had left his home and was working for Stella, the well-known publisher of

Milan, that he met the lady whom he celebrates under the name of Aspasia.

The identity of Aspasia has never been fully established, but by choosing this name under which to address her, Leopardi shows that her mind and disposition were altogether different from those of the butterfly Countess who had charmed his youth. Aspasia of Miletus fascinated the wisest of men by her eloquence, and it is evident that the lady of Leopardi's love charmed him with her intellect no less than by her beauty. Yet the poem is instinct with bitterness; had his love been returned, he might have known that perfect content which rounded the lives of Tennyson and of Browning into harmony and completion; but the rejection of his suit plunged him into a despair that he sought to relieve by declaring that it was not Aspasia whom he had loved, but that ideal which he believed her to embody:

"A revelation of the light divine
Thy beauty was to me; as music's strains,
Or earthly loveliness, may ope the eyes
To heavenly mysteries. The mortal man
Who sighs for the Ideal, still believes
His love will raise him to Olympian heights—
His love, who in her face, her mien, her speech,
Sums up the whole of love and love's desires.
And yet, alas! it is no human form,
'Tis love itself that he would fain embrace,
And when he finds that he has missed the Ideal
He spurns the woman from him.

* * * * *

It is my love is dead, it is not thou,
For now I know it was not thou I loved,
It was Ideal love, who in my heart
Found once a cradle and now finds a grave.
To her I paid my vows, I worshipped long;
But though I knew thine arts, thine eyes to me
Seemed as a shrine wherein Her presence dwelt;
And though I knew my folly, still I bent
A willing slave, beneath thy heavy yoke,
While She remained my goddess."

The same idea dominates the ode "To his Lady," in which he says that all through his life he has been seeking for ideal love, but that though he has sought, he has never found:

"To see Thee face to face
Is but a hope as vain as sweet,
Unless when freed from this my earthly dress
Through worlds unknown I trace
A path by which we twain shall meet!
When first on earth I moved, a dream did bless
My darksome days, that I my love should greet
Upon my onward way; but in this sphere,
Though wide I search, none doth resemble Thee,
Though fair her face may be,
Her looks, her voice, her ways, than Thine are all less fair!"

The strain to which his heart and mind were subjected, accelerated his bodily sufferings, and symptoms of pulmonary disease made their appearance. His trials were increased by his poverty, and it is difficult to understand how his father can have resisted his pleading. "I will submit to such privations that twelve *scudi* a month shall suffice for me," he writes on one occasion; but his parents' idea seems to have been that the family house was always open to him, and that by starving him out they could make him return to it; but it was absolutely necessary for his health that he should live in the south, and as the small allowance that he asked for was denied him, it is scarcely to be wondered at that he accepted the help which was offered him.

Antonio Ranieri, himself deeply interested in literature, had been introduced to the poet in Florence, and filled with admiration for him, he offered to devote time and purse to his service. The story of this friendship inevitably recalls the story of Severn's friendship for Keats, but whereas Severn's love made his services seem as nothing to him, Ranieri's book, "Seven Years of Fellowship," is filled with a sense of his own devotion. In the very first sentence he states that he and his sister Paolina had made "the greatest sacrifice for Leopardi that any human beings could make for another." These words are the keynote of the book, and great as their devotion undoubtedly was, a little more reticence on the subject is very desirable. The constantly recurring phrase, "My angelic Paolina," is another

jarring note; angelic as Ranieri's sister may have been, it is hardly for him to insist upon it, and though the sharing of his purse with the impecunious poet was a generous deed, it is impossible not to feel that he is lacking in delicacy when he enlarges upon the details of his liberality.

A move to Naples was decided upon, and Ranieri describes his anxiety that nothing should be spared for Leopardi's comfort and the exertions made by the angelic Paolina to provide the necessary furniture—chests of drawers, chairs, tables, and beds with mattresses; but what is even more unattractive is the way that he dilates on the ingratitude with which Leopardi received the sacrifices made for him. Healthy air and comfortable surroundings were, he says, of no avail, when "our dear invalid" insisted upon going his own way with regard to diet and treatment. Leopardi was no doubt a difficult patient, and his habit of turning night into day must have been irritating in the extreme; but Ranieri had chosen of his own free will to nurse a dying genius, and it was scarcely good taste to rush into print to tell the world that his friend had left "an unamiable memory behind him."

But it was not for long that Leopardi was to inflict his woes upon friends who found them a burden grievous to be borne; with each month his sufferings increased, and on June 14, 1837, he passed away, and was buried in the Church of San Vitale, at Fuorigrotta, just outside Naples.

Pathos surrounds Leopardi's career from the cradle to the grave, but in nothing is it more pathetic than in the fact that the only friends who watched over him in his sufferings should have demanded admiration for so doing. One of the greatest men that Italy has ever produced, his bread was doled out to him by a grudging charity, and his presence was only endured on sufferance. It is strange to contrast this mendicant position with the praises bestowed upon his writings. "They speak of you as a god," wrote Giordani, after the publication of his "Patriotic Odes"; and Gladstone, in our own day, paid him

a similar tribute in the *Quarterly Review.* "We cannot hesitate to say," he writes, "that in almost every branch of mental exertion, this extraordinary man seems to have had the capacity for attaining, generally at a single bound, the highest excellence. Whatever he does, he does in a manner which makes it his own; not with a forced or affected, but with a true originality; stamping upon his work, like other masters, a type that defies all counterfeit."

And yet this man, of soaring genius and consummate achievement, has made one doctrine the theme of all his writings—the hopelessness of Hope! His prose writings are to the full as pessimistic as his poetry; perhaps in all the range of literature there is nothing more despairing than his dialogue between Plotinus and Porphyrius, in which Porphyrius attacks Plato's doctrine of the Immortality of the Soul on the ground that it destroys the only real consolation that sufferers possess—the certainty of future annihilation! Physical pain and privation may be endured when the soul is sustained by Faith or by Love, but when these two sources of strength fail, it is little wonder that the burden should prove too heavy to be borne. Faith he had none, and the Love for which he so ardently longed was denied him. Signorina Boghen-Corrighani, in her interesting book, "Woman in the Life and Works of Giacomo Leopardi," says that when the poet discovered he had made a mistake in believing that he had found the ideal in human form, he became angry, and laid the blame not upon himself but upon the woman; but though the remark is doubtless well justified, it is difficult not to sympathize with those who, as Prosper Mérimée says, are not simply lovers, but "lovers of love." Erminia Fria-Fusinato in her "Lines to Giacomo Leopardi," written in 1874, speaks of his unquenched thirst for love, and says that his verses now take the bitter revenge of awakening in the hearts of the women who read them the love which while he lived he could never kindle in any woman's breast; but it is impossible not to wish that instead of this tardy

revenge his verses had awakened in some heart a love responsive to his own, a love which would have soothed his troubled spirit and nerved his mental powers to fresh efforts:

"Amid so much of grief
As Fate on mankind doth bestow,
If I could find Thee here below
Such as I picture Thee, with what relief
New hope, new joy, should in my bosom spring!
As in my early days I loved Thee, so
Again should love its wakening virtues bring!
But not for me
Hath Heaven decreed such comfort, life with Thee
Would taste no more of earth, but rather be
That life immortal which the angels know."[1]

[1] "To his Lady."