

The Love-Story of Luigi Tansillo

By Richard Garnett

Now that my wings are spread to my desiré,
The more vast height withdraws the dwindling land,
Wider to wind these pinions I expand,
And earth disdain, and higher mount and higher
Nor of the fate of Icarus inquire,
Or cautious droop, or sway to either hand ;
Dead I shall fall, full well I understand ;
But who lives gloriously as I expire ?
Yet hear I my own heart that pleading cries,
Stay, madman ! Whither art thou bound ? Descend !
Ruin is ready Rashness to chastise.
But I, Fear not, though this indeed the end ;
Cleave we the clouds, and praise our destinies,
If noble fall on noble flight attend.

THE above sonnet, one of the finest in Italian literature, is already known to many English readers in another translation by the late Mr. J. Addington Symonds, which originally appeared in the *Cornhill Magazine*, and is prefixed to his translation of the sonnets of Michael Angelo and Campanella (London, 1878), under the title of "The Philosopher's Flight." In his preface Mr. Symonds says : "The sonnet prefixed as a poem

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to the whole book is generally attributed to Giordano Bruno, in whose Dialogue in the 'Eroici Furori' it occurs. There seems, however, good reason to suppose that it was really written by Tansillo, who recites it in that dialogue. Whoever may have been its author, it expresses in noble and impassioned verse the sense of danger, the audacity, and the exultation of those pioneers of modern thought, for whom philosophy was a voyage of discovery into untravelled regions." Mr. Symonds's knowledge of Italian literature was so extensive that he must have had ground for stating that the sonnet is generally attributed to Giordano Bruno; as it certainly is by De Sanctis, though it is printed as Tansillo's in all editions of his works, imperfect as these were before the appearance of Signor Fiorentino's in 1882. It is, nevertheless, remarkable that he should add: "*There seems good reason to suppose that it was really written by Tansillo,*" as if there could be a shadow of doubt on the matter. "Eroici Furori" is professedly a series of dialogues between Luigi Tansillo the Neapolitan poet, who had died about twenty years before their composition, and Cicero, but is in reality little more than a monologue, for Tansillo does nearly all the talking, and Cicero receives his instructions with singular docility. The reason of Tansillo's selection for so great an honour was undoubtedly that, although born at Venosa, he belonged by descent to Nola, Bruno's own city. In making such free use of Tansillo's poetry as he has done throughout these dialogues, Bruno was far from the least idea of pillaging his distinguished countryman. In introducing the four sonnets he has borrowed (for there are three besides that already quoted) he is always careful to make Tansillo speak of them as his own compositions, which he never does when Bruno's own verses are put into his mouth. If a particle of doubt could remain, it would be dispelled by the fact that this sonnet, with
other

other poems by Tansillo, including the three other sonnets introduced into Bruno's dialogue, is published under his name in the "Rime di diversi illustri Signori Napoletani," edited by Lodovico Dolce at Venice, in 1555, when Bruno was about seven years old !

Mr. Symonds's interpretation of the sonnet also is erroneous—in so far, at least, as that the meaning assigned by him never entered into the head of the author. It is certainly fully susceptible of such an exposition. But Tansillo, no philosopher, but a cavalier, the active part of whose life was mainly spent in naval expeditions against the Turks, no more thought with Mr. Symonds of "the pioneers of modern philosophy," than he thought with Bruno of "arising and freeing himself from the body and sensual cognition." On the contrary, the sonnet is a love-sonnet, and depicts with extraordinary grandeur the elation of spirit, combined with a sense of peril, consequent upon the poem having conceived a passion for a lady greatly his superior in rank. The proof of this is to be found in the fact that the sonnet is one of a series, unequivocally celebrating an earthly passion ; and especially in the sonnet immediately preceding it in Dolce's collection, manifestly written at the same time and referring to the same circumstance, in which the poet ascribes his Icarian flight, not to the influence of Philosophy, but of Love :

Love fits me forth with wings, which so dilate,
Sped skyward at the call of daring thought,
I high and higher soar, with purpose fraught
Soon to lay smiting hand on Heaven's gate.
Yet altitude so vast might well abate
My confidence, if Love not succour brought,
Pledging my fame not jeopardised in aught,
And promising renown as ruin great.

If

If he whom like audacity inspired,
 Falling gave name immortal to the flood,
 As sunny flame his waxen pinion fired ;
 Then of thee too it shall be understood,
 No meaner prize than Heaven thy soul required,
 And firmer than thy life thy courage stood.

The meaning of the two sonnets is fully recognised by Muratori, who prints them together in his treatise, "Della perfetta poesia," and adds : "*volea dire costui che s'era imbarcato in un' amor troppo alto, e s'andava facendo coraggio.*"

This is surely one of the most remarkable instances possible to adduce of the infinite significance of true poetry, and its capacity for inspiring ideas and suggesting interpretations of which the poet never dreamed, but which are nevertheless fairly deducible from his expressions.

It is now a matter of considerable interest to ascertain the identity of this lady of rank, who could inspire a passion at once so exalted and so perilous. The point has been investigated by Tansillo's editor, Signor F. Fiorentino, who has done so much to rescue his unpublished compositions from oblivion, and his view must be pronounced perfectly satisfactory. She was Maria d'Aragona, Marchioness del Vasto, whose husband, the Marquis del Vasto, a celebrated general of Spanish descent, famous as Charles the Fifth's right hand in his successful expedition against Tunis, and at one time governor of the Milanese, was as remarkable for his jealousy as the lady, grand-daughter of a King of Naples, was for her pride and haughtiness. Fiorentino proves his case by showing how well all personal allusions in Tansillo's poems, so far as they can be traced, agree with the circumstances of the Marchioness, and in particular that the latter is represented as at one time residing on the island of Ischia, where del Vasto

was

was accustomed to deposit his wife for security, when absent on his campaigns. He is apparently not aware that the object of Tansillo's affection had already been identified with a member of the house of Aragon by Faria e Sousa, the Portuguese editor of Camoëns, who, in his commentary on Camoëns's sixty-ninth sonnet, gives an interminable catalogue of ladies celebrated by enamoured poets, and says, "Tansillo sang Donna Isabel de Aragon." This lady, however, the niece of the Marchioness del Vasto, was a little girl in Tansillo's time, and is only mentioned by him as inconsolable for the death of a favourite dwarf.

The sentiment, therefore, of the two sonnets of Tansillo which we have quoted, is sufficiently justified by the exalted station of the lady who had inspired his passion, and the risk he ran from the power and jealousy of her husband. It seems certain, however, that the Marquis had on his part no ground for apprehension. Maria d'Aragona does not seem to have had much heart to bestow upon anyone, and would, in any case, have disdained to bestow what heart she had upon a poor gentleman and retainer of Don Garcia de Toledo, son of the Viceroy of Naples. She would think that she honoured him beyond his deserts by accepting his poetical homage. Tansillo, on his part, says in one of his sonnets that his devotion is purely platonic; it might have been more ardent, he hints, but he is dazzled by the splendour of the light he contemplates, and intimidated by the richness of the band by which he is led. So it may have been at first, but as time wore on the poet naturally craved some proof that his lady was not entirely indifferent to him, and did not tolerate him merely for the sake of his verses. This, in the nature of things, could not be given; and the poet's raptures pass into doubt and suspicion, thence into despairing resignation; thence into resentment and open hostility, terminating in a cold reconciliation, leaving him free to marry
a much

a much humbler but probably a more affectionate person, to whom he addresses no impassioned sonnets, but whom he instructs in a very elegant poem ("La Balia") how to bring up her infant children. These varying affections are depicted with extreme liveliness in a series of sonnets, of which we propose to offer some translated specimens. The order will not be that of the editions of Tansillo, where the pieces are distributed at random, but the probable order of composition, as indicated by the nature of the feeling expressed. It is, of course, impossible to give more than a few examples, though most deserve to be reproduced. Tansillo had the advantage over most Italian poets of his time of being in love with a real woman; hence, though possibly inferior in style and diction to such artists in rhyme as Bembo or Molza, he greatly surpasses them in all the qualities that discriminate poetry from the accomplishment of verse.

The first sonnet which we shall give is still all fire and rapture :—

I

Lady, the heart that entered through your eyes
 Returneth not. Well may he make delay,
 For if the very windows that display
 Your spirit, sparkle in such wondrous wise,
 Of her enthroned within this Paradise
 What shall be deemed? If heart for ever stay,
 Small wonder, dazzled by more radiant day
 Than gazers from without can recognise.
 Glory of sun and moon and silver star
 In firmament above, are these not sign
 Of things within more excellent by far?
 Rejoice then in thy kingdom, heart of mine,
 While Love and Fortune favourable are,
 Nor thou yet exiled for default of thine.

Although

Although, however, Tansillo's heart might well remain with its lady, Tansillo's person was necessitated to join the frequent maritime expeditions of the great nobleman to whom he was attached, Don Garcia de Toledo, against the Turks. The constant freebooting of the Turkish and Barbary rovers kept the Mediterranean in a state of commotion comparable to that of the Spanish Main in the succeeding age, and these expeditions, whose picturesque history remains to be written, were no doubt very interesting; though from a philosophical point of view it is impossible not to sympathise with the humane and generous poet when he inquires :—

Che il Turco nasca turco, e 'l Moro moro,
E giusta causa questa, ond' altri ed io
Dobbiam incrudelir nel sangue loro ?

With such feelings it may well be believed that in his enforced absence he was thinking at least as much of love as of war, and that the following sonnet is as truthful as it is an animated picture of his feelings :—

II

No length of banishment did e'er remove
My heart from you, nor if by Fortune sped
I roam the azure waters, or the Red,
E'er with the body shall the spirit rove :
If by each drop of every wave we clove,
Or by Sun's light or Moon's encompassèd,
Another Venus were engenderèd,
And each were pregnant with another Love:

And

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And thus new shapes of Love where'er we went
 Started to life at every stroke of oar,
 And each were cradled in an amorous thought ;
 Not more than now this spirit should adore ;
 That none the less doth constantly lament
 It cannot worship as it would and ought.

Before long, however, the pangs of separation overcome this
 elation of spirit, while he is not yet afraid of being forgotten :—

III

Like lightning shining forth from east to west,
 Hurl'd are the happy hours from morn to night,
 And leave the spirit steeped in undelight
 In like proportion as themselves were blest.
 Slow move sad hours, by thousand curbs opprest,
 Wherewith the churlish Fates delay their flight ;
 Those, impulses of Mercury incite,
 These lag at the Saturnian star's behest.
 While thou wert near, ere separation's grief
 Smote me, like steeds contending in the race,
 My days and nights with equal speed did run :
 Now broken either wheel, not swift the pace
 Of summer's night though summer's moon be brief ;
 Or wintry days for brevity of sun.

IV

Now that the Sun hath borne with him the day,
 And haled dark Night from prison subterrene,
 Come forth, fair Moon, and, robed in light serene,
 With thy own loveliness the world array.

Heaven's

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Nor this disturbed by any thought of me,
 So scourged with ill's' innumerable train,
 New grief new tear begetteth not, as sea
 Chafes not the more for deluge of the rain.

The "quaint foliage" is in the original "Arab leaves," *arabe frondi*, an interesting proof of the cultivation of exotic plants at the period.

The lady rejoins her husband at Milan, and Tansillo, landing on the Campanian coast, lately devastated by earthquakes and eruptions, finds everywhere the image of his own bosom, and rejoices at the opportunity which yawning rifts and chasms of earth afford for an appeal to the infernal powers :—

VI

Wild precipice and earthquake-riven wall ;
 Bare jagged lava naked to the sky ;
 Whence densely struggles up and slow floats by
 Heaven's murky shroud of smoke funereal ;
 Horror whereby the silent groves enthrall ;
 Black weedy pit and rifted cavity ;
 Bleak loneliness whose drear sterility
 Doth prowling creatures of the wild appal :
 Like one distraught who doth his woe deplore,
 Bereft of sense by thousand miseries,
 As passion prompts, companioned or alone ;
 Your desert so I rove ; if as before
 Heaven deaf continue, through these crevices,
 My cry shall pierce to the Avernian throne.

The poet's melancholy deepens, and he enters upon the stage of dismal and hopeless resignation to the inevitable :

As

VII

As one who on uneasy couch bewails
 Besetting sickness and Time's tardy course,
 Proving if drug, or gem, or charm have force
 To conquer the dire evil that assails :
 But when at last no remedy prevails,
 And bankrupt Art stands empty of resource,
 Beholds Death in the face, and scorns recourse
 To skill whose impotence in nought avails.
 So I, who long have borne in trust unspent
 That distance, indignation, reason, strife
 With Fate would heal my malady, repent,
 Frustrate all hopes wherewith my soul was rife,
 And yield unto my destiny, content
 To languish for the little left of life.

A lower depth still has to be reached ere the period of salutary
 and defiant reaction :—

VIII

So mightily abound the hosts of Pain,
 Whom sentries of my bosom Love hath made,
 No space is left to enter or evade,
 And inwardly expire sighs born in vain,
 If any pleasure mingle with the train,
 By the first glimpse of my poor heart dismayed,
 Instant he dies, or else, in bondage stayed,
 Pines languishing, or flies that drear domain.
 Pale semblances of terror keep the keys,
 Of frowning portals they for none displace
 Save messengers of novel miseries :
 All thoughts they scare that wear a gladsome face ;
 And, were they anything but Miseries,
 Themselves would hasten from the gloomy place.

Slighted

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Slighted love easily passes from rejection into rebellion, and we shall see that such was the case with Tansillo. The following sonnet denotes an intermediate stage, when resignation is almost renunciation, but has not yet become revolt :—

IX

Cease thy accustomed strain, my mournful lute ;
 New music find, fit for my lot forlorn ;
 Henceforth be Wrath and Grief resounded, torn
 The strings that anciently did Love salute,
 Not on my own weak wing irresolute
 But on Love's plumes I trusted to be borne,
 Chanting him far as that remotest bourne
 Whence strength Herculean reft Hesperian fruit.
 To such ambition was my spirit wrought
 By gracious guerdon Love came offering
 When free in air my thought was bold to range :
 But elsewhere now dwells another's thought,
 And Wrath has plucked Love's feather from my wing,
 And hope, style, theme, I all alike must change.

This, however, is not a point at which continuance is possible, the mind must go either backward or forward. The lover for a time persuades himself that he has broken his mistress's yoke, and that his infatuation is entirely a thing of the past. But the poet, like the lady, protests too much :—

X

If Love was miser of my liberty,
 Lo, Scorn is bounteous and benevolent,
 Such scope permitting, that, my fetter rent,
 Not lengthened by my hand, I wander free.

The

The eyes that yielded tears continually
 Have now with Lethe's drops my fire besprent,
 And more behold, Illusion's glamour spent,
 Than fabled Argus with his century.
 The tyrant of my spirit, left forlorn
 As vassal thoughts forsake him, doth remove,
 And back unto her throne is Reason borne,
 And I my metamorphosis approve,
 And, old strains tuning to new keys, of Scorn
 Will sing as anciently I sang of Love.

Several solutions of this situation are conceivable. Tansillo's is that which was perhaps that most likely in the case of an emotional nature, where the feelings are more powerful than the will. He simply surrenders at discretion, retracts everything disparaging that he has said of the lady (taking care, however, not to burn the peccant verses, which are much too good to be lightly parted with), and professes himself her humble slave upon her own terms:—

XI

All bitter words I spoke of you while yet
 My heart was sore, and every virgin scroll
 Blackened with ire, now past from my control,
 These would I now recall ; for 'tis most fit
 My style should change, now Reason doth reknit,
 Ties Passion sundered, and again make whole ;
 Be then Oblivion's prey whate'er my soul
 Hath wrongly of thee thought, spoke, sung, or writ.
 Not, Lady, that impeachment of thy fame
 With tongue or pen I ever did design ;

But

But that, if unto these shall reach my name,
 Ages to come may study in my line
 How year by year more streamed and towered my flame,
 And how I living was and dying thine.

There is no reason to doubt the perfect sincerity of these lines at the period of their composition ; but Tansillo's mistress had apparently resolved that his attachment should not henceforth have the diet even of a chameleon ; and it is small wonder to find him shortly afterwards a tender husband and father, lamenting the death of an infant son in strains of extreme pathos, and instructing his wife on certain details of domestic economy in which she might have been supposed to be better versed than himself. His marriage took place in 1550, and in one of his sonnets he says that his unhappy attachment had endured sixteen years, which, allowing for a decent interval between the Romeo and the Benedict, would date its commencement at 1532 or 1533.

Maria d'Aragona died on November 9, 1568, and Tansillo, whose services had been rewarded by a judicial appointment in the kingdom of Naples, followed her to the tomb on December 1. If her death is really the subject of the two poems in terza rima which appear to deplore it, he certainly lost no time in bewailing her, but the interval is so brief, and the poems are so weak, that they may have been composed on some other occasion. With respect to the latter consideration, however, it must be remembered that he was himself, in all probability, suffering from disabling sickness, having made his will on November 29. It is also worthy of note that the first sonnets composed by Petrarch upon the death of Laura are in general much inferior in depth of tenderness to those written years after the event. "In Memoriam" is another proof that the adequate poetical expression of grief, unlike that of life, requires time and study. Tansillo, then, may not have been so completely
 disillusioned

disillusioned as his editor thinks. If the poems do not relate to Maria d'Aragona, we have no clue to the ultimate nature of his feelings towards her.

A generally fair estimate of Tansillo's rank as a poet is given in Ginguéné's "History of Italian Literature," vol. ix., pp. 340-343. It can scarcely be admitted that his boldness and fertility of imagination transported him beyond the limits of lyric poetry—for this is hardly possible—but it is true that they sometimes transcended the limits of good taste, and that the germs may be found in him of the extravagance which so disfigured Italian poetry in the seventeenth century. On the other hand, he has the inestimable advantage over most Italian poets of his day of writing of genuine passion from genuine experience. Hence a truth and vigour preferable even to the exquisite elegance of his countryman, Angelo di Costanzo, and much more so to the mere amatory exercises of other contemporaries. After Michael Angelo he stands farther aloof than any contemporary from Petrarch, a merit in an age when the study of Petrarch had degenerated into slavish imitation. His faults as a lyrist are absent from his didactic poems, which are models of taste and elegance. His one unpardonable sin is want of patriotism; he is the dependant and panegyrist of the foreign conqueror, and seems equally unconscious of the past glories, the actual degradation, or the prospective regeneration of Italy. Born a Spanish subject, his ideal of loyalty was entirely misplaced, and he must not be severely censured for what he could hardly avoid. But Italy lost a Tyrtæus in him.