

## A BOOK THAT SHOOK AN EMPIRE

WHEN a hundred years ago Silvio Pellico published his *Le Mie Prigioni*, the description of his ten years' imprisonment in an Austrian fortress, it was with no political purpose. Partly, one may guess, as the result of those terrible years, and partly because, before the intensity of his religious experience during those same years, all else paled and became insignificant, on his release he turned away from politics, and all his writings henceforth would be on religious and moral themes. And if he published the story of his sufferings, it was at the instance of his parish priest, with the sole aim, as he says,

of helping to comfort the unhappy by showing the evils I suffered and the consolations that attended on the worst misfortunes; to show that through my long torment I did not find humanity so wicked, so unworthy of indulgence, so poor in noble souls as it is often made out to be; to invite noble hearts to love much, to hate no one . . . and to repeat a truth well-known but often forgotten: that Religion and Philosophy create strong wills and calm judgments, and that without these united conditions there can be no justice nor dignity nor sure principle.'

When an eminent Protestant told him that he had been converted to Catholicism by an eloquent passage in praise of confession, Silvio Pellico felt he had not written it in vain. That his book should seize the imaginations of Europe and do more than any other to shake the Austrian domination in Italy, was neither in his expectations nor intentions.

In 1820 he would have felt otherwise. Silvio Pellico was then an ardent young man of thirty-two, highly esteemed in the literary circles of Milan, then the 'Athens of Italy.' The poets Monti and Foscolo were his friends (though the latter had already fled to his exile at Turnham Green), Madame de Staël and Schlegel among his acquaintances, while Byron, to whom he showed the manuscript of his *Francesca de Rimini*, already a triumph in the theatres of Milan, Florence and Naples, immediately set to and trans-

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lated it into English verse. And when the *Conciliatore* was founded, a club grouping some of the most distinguished of the younger Italian writers and publishing a literary and historical review, Silvio Pellico was appointed as its secretary.

The *Conciliatore*, continually mutilated by the censor, was suppressed after about a year. It was indeed the symbol of more perilous activities. Five years had passed since the Congress of Vienna had handed back the 'Kingdom of Lombardy and Venetia' to Austrian rule, the other Italian states to Hapsburg princes, and the whole peninsula was in a ferment with the awakened sense of nationality. Poets like Leopardi and Foscolo sang their despair at the moral abasement induced by alien despotism, or by recall to history and tradition sought to prepare the Italy of the future. A liberal constitution seemed the height of human happiness, and England an Arcadia for its possession. And all over Italy against tyrannous government oppressed peoples strove by means of secret societies.

The Carbonari or 'Good Cousins' originated in Naples, where in 1821 they would create a formidable revolt against a barbarous rule. In Piedmont the same year they would wring a transient constitution from the House of Savoy, which adhered to the absolutist principles required by the Holy Alliance. In the Romagna they found a leader in a gay young poet-musician, Pietro Maroncelli, who, coming to Milan and winning the friendship of Silvio Pellico over a discussion on music, found in the Carbonaria an additional bond. In Milan indeed the movement was never more than a shadow. Its members were the flower of cultured society, whose aim was rather the conversion of Austria to liberal ideals than violent risings. Even so, it sufficed to rouse Vienna to panic severity, with that indignation which, oblivious of any 'rights of nationality,' saw only 'sedition,' a sin to be shuddered at, almost a sacrilege against the Emperor by Divine Right.

The vigilant Austrian police smelt out the conspiracy. Maroncelli was arrested, and among his papers was found

the name of Silvio Pellico, who, after a pitiless interrogation (during which even the inquisitors testified to his nobility of character and the difficulty of entrapping him into admissions damaging to his friends) was with his friends condemned to death, a sentence commuted to fifteen years *carcere duro* in the horrible fortress of the Spielberg.

Five years of this sentence were ultimately remitted; ten he served, and it is of these ten he tells in *Le Mie Prigioni*. But the book is not a chronicle of horrors but rather the history of a soul, anticipating, though on how higher a level, Oscar Wilde's *De Profundis*. For in the early days of his imprisonment, in his anguish at the grief of his beloved parents, Silvio Pellico had re-discovered the Christian faith, which he had never formally forsaken, but which had for some years lost its efficacy for him (as was the case with many of the young intellectuals, in reaction, perhaps, to the often servile conformism created by the alliance of Throne and Altar). From that moment religion becomes all in all to him. His book tells of days of unbroken prayer, with the continuous joy of the sense of a Presence; of reactions of despair and aridity, when suicide becomes a fierce temptation; of the sudden descents of supernatural peace; of the consolation in the Bible and in the Sacraments—more especially, the Sacrament of Penance, more frequently vouchsafed. They were noble souls, those early Carbonari. (The Church had not yet condemned the movement.) Maroncelli, who, when the lives of the prisoners had become one of continual and grave illness, was allowed to share a cell with his friend, bound himself with him in a compact: 'to suffer with dignity, to learn the lessons of misfortune, and thirdly, to forgive.' And Oroboni, a third comrade in misfortune, in whispered conversations from window to window, emphasised that duty of forgiveness, doing much to allay Silvio's bitterness, and to bring to him the realisation that *ubi caritas est, Deus est*.

It is this all-embracing charity that gives a special charm to *Le Mie Prigioni*. Silvio's was an expansive nature, 'all

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heart,' as the Italians say, and a glimpse, an unseen voice, was enough to determine his affection. And thus in his pages the grim background is enlivened by an array of figures lovingly portrayed—the deaf and dumb child who played beneath his window, and wept when Silvio was transferred to another cell; the woman prisoner, whom he never saw, but whose voice he could hear repeating endlessly a melancholy little song of the flight of happiness; the gaoler's daughter in Venice who poured out to him her love-sorrows, 'as to a father'—a compliment the young man did not wholly appreciate, and when one day, she threw herself weeping into his arms, he felt bound to tell her, 'Zanze, you mustn't kiss me. It doesn't do!'

The gaolers themselves appear in the same idyllic light. Even the gaolers, for what is strangest in the story is the extraordinary contrast between the inhumanity of the system and the compassion of its servants. The prisoners, desperately ill, had yet to bear the weight of heavy chains; for several years they were refused the consolation of the Mass; all letters were denied them, and, on their release, their joy was tempered with anguish to know whether their parents were alive or dead—and at least one went back to find an empty hearth. Maroncelli, after suffering agonies with an ulcerated leg, could not have it removed till permission was obtained from Vienna. And yet, 'All who came in contact with us were good.' The police commissioners who handed them over embraced them weeping; the gaolers pressed food on them, taken from their own portions (which, aware of this, the prisoners steeled themselves to refuse) and lamented that they were forbidden to 'help the unfortunate,' and even the head-warder, old Schiller, the martinet who warned them from the first that he would keep his oath to allow no concessions, spoke of the Italian prisoners as his sons ('Da sind meine Söhne!') and sought to console them by paternal tenderness.

When he was being taken to Austria, Silvio, who had dreaded the moment when the compassionate Italian villagers would give place to Austrians, who would see in

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the prisoners only enemies, to his amazement found in Austria the same compassion as among his own people, a pity for misfortune that knew nothing of frontiers. 'Die Arme Herren!' All through the years they would hear no harsher epithet. It would seem indeed that if with the march of civilisation the horrors of the ancient prison systems have been superseded, the humanity of individuals has lessened also. Now that in Italy history is so strangely repeating itself, and liberal opinions are again a penal offence (to be met with the same inhuman sentences and the same derisive mitigations) there is a vindictive resentment between men of the same nation that was absent between those who differed in language and culture a hundred years ago. Probably because in those days the Faith had a more effectual hold on the peoples, and also because the Divine Nation, like all parvenus, demands a more officious service than the old-established Monarchy by Divine Right.

In 1830, when ten years had passed, Silvio Pellico and Maroncelli were set free. The former at least was a broken man. In the struggles of the Risorgimento he would take no part; revolution seemed forbidden by his Christian principles. The movement towards United Italy would go on without him, but by his book, which had gained the sympathy of Europe, he had done as much as any man to smooth its way.

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