

NOTES

The Centenary of a Masterpiece

Fifty years ago Manzoni died. And a hundred years ago he finished the first draft of his great novel, *I Promessi Sposi*. Some critics say it is the only really big Italian work of fiction in prose, and certainly it is the only one that has won world-wide fame. Decadents like Carducci may rail at it, but the sound good sense of cultured readers rests with satisfaction on the magic pages which in rich Italian words tell the delightful story of Renzo and Lucia. It is an intensely national book. It holds the heart of Italy in it as *Knocknagow* holds the heart of Tipperary. And, like all great works, it grows on one with each re-reading. In this its greatness is evident; for it is only the great things, such as the ocean, the mountains, and the stars that never stale or lose their wonder. So, during this year of a double jubilee for Manzoni, there will be numerous pilgrimages to the Lecco arm of sunny Como, where the huge crags stand sentinel above the tremulous expanse of waters of the loveliest of Italian lakes.

At Lecco

If you have the opportunity of going to Lecco you will find many changes there since the days of Don Abbondio. Cypresses are still mirrored in the waters where the lake sleeps unmoved in sheltered corners; the mountains are as grand and as inspiring as they have been from the beginning; the waters of the Adda rush under the bridge as rapidly as when Manzoni played there as a child. But the town is busier now, with its ironworks; the quiet of other days has vanished and the monastery of Fra Cristoforo is there no longer. The church at Acquate, too, has disappeared, and with it the house of Don Abbondio. Don Rodrigo's castle is replaced by the sumptuous villa of a more commonplace robber-baron of to-day. Lucia's home remains, and has been converted into an inn, from the cool pergola of which you may look out over Lecco and the mountains as you rest after your journey. There, for an hour, one might forget that the old times are gone for ever; and a lover of Manzoni might summon before his inward eye the chief characters of that wonderful novel which had its setting in this beautiful corner of Italy.

An Appreciation

Writing of a visit to Lecco, and beginning with Lucia's home, L. Collison-Morley, says, in the *Nation and Athenaeum*:

It is fitting that this house should survive. There was nothing romantic in Manzoni's temperament. His romanticism was confined to his art, to his rejection of the rules, and the like. Once we are among his peasants—for Manzoni was a good democrat, who never used his title of Count, and chose peasants, Renzo and Lucia, for his chief characters—we realise that it is no paradox to say that the realists are the true descendants of the chief of the Italian romantics, not the so-called romantics who professed to call him master. Such a scene as Renzo's visit to Tonio might serve as a model to Verga himself.

There was still the castle of L'Innominato, that super-robber-baron, whose conversion follows so closely the lines of Manzoni's own, and who was set over against Cardinal Federigo Borromeo, the saintly Archbishop of Milan, in the struggle to prevent the marriage of the humble pair. Should we risk it? Time is not often so kind in leaving and destroying only what we ourselves would wish to have left or destroyed. With a last look at the cottage we decided on taking the plunge, and we were well rewarded. This kind of thing has a way of knowing how to look after itself in Italy, and we are not disappointed in the result of our walk up the steep winding path to the ruined castle.

Yet as we sit sampling the "mezzo" of wine at

the inn, we have a little sigh of regret, ungrateful though it may sound. When one thinks of *I Promessi Sposi*, it is the comic characters that rise to one's mind—Perpetua the shrewd Agnese, and the rest. Even Renzo is, at his best when Manzoni's kindly irony is playing over him. Humor was of the very essence of the man, as his delightful letters show, and it was here for the first time that he could give it full play in his work—that we can see what he really is, as Goethe put it. Yes, we should like to have had some tangible relic of Don Abbondio, who ranks with the great comic creations of Italy, if not of the world—the kindly, cowardly old village priest, whom everybody likes, though his refusal to marry the young couple after he has been threatened by Don Rodrigo's bravi is the cause of all the trouble. Don Abbondio contains the very essence of Manzoni's humor, which takes its rise in the contrast between the real and the ideal, between Don Abbondio's weaknesses and what was for Manzoni the highest of all callings, worthily filled by the Cardinal or by Padre Cristoforo. Hence (though Manzoni is always happy the moment he finds himself in Don Abbondio's company) it is in the interview between the priest and the Cardinal that this humor touches its highest point. Thus his humor really has the same source as his tragedy, which springs from the contrast, or rather the struggle, between the real world of brutality and force which he invariably chose for the setting of his tragedies as well as for his novel, and Manzoni's ideal Christian world, between Don Rodrigo and Lucia. And it is because Lucia belongs too completely to this ideal world that she has been more severely criticised than any other character in the book. She is colorless. There is no passion in her relations with Renzo; they lack reality. She is most truly alive in her terror at being carried off by the bravi. It is by her negative qualities, by the pity her abject fear awakens, and by her simple religious faith that she works upon her captor. Manzoni knew what he was doing. "There is about six hundred times more love in the world than is necessary for the preservation of our precious species.

We ought not to write of love in such a way as to incline the reader's mind towards that passion." In the first draft the amazing career of the nun Gertrude was sketched in considerable detail, but Manzoni ultimately left only enough to explain her betrayal of Lucia. An early critic complained that we often find ourselves not under the broad vault of heaven that covers all sorts and conditions of men, but under the roof of the temple, containing only the faithful. Faith in God is, Manzoni assures us, the *sugo di tutta la storia*.

Yet his playful irony does not spare even Lucia. When Renzo brought his bride home to Bergamo he informs us that there was general disappointment after all that had been heard of her beauty. Was he anxious to forestall any inclination to ridicule his idealisation of her? Was this in a measure the penalty he had to pay for the perfect balance of the whole man which made it impossible for him not to see every side of a question, and explains his unwillingness to commit himself, even in a letter, until he had weighed every syllable beyond any possibility of mistake?

DIOCESE OF DUNEDIN

The Children of Mary desire to notify their friends that the garden fete previously announced for November 17 will be held in the Dominican Priory grounds on Saturday, December 1. The fete is being organised to assist the Dominican Nuns, and their friends are asked to help by donations of any description. Gifts may be left at the Priory.

The children's mission, conducted by the Redemptorist Fathers during the past week at St. Joseph's Cathedral, was concluded on last Sunday afternoon. The mission for adults, which is to continue for a fortnight, was opened at the eleven o'clock Mass on Sunday by Rev. Father Campbell, C.S.S.R., and at the evening devotions a mission sermon was preached by Rev. Father McManus, C.S.S.R., to a crowded congregation. The week-day Masses, which are celebrated at 6, 7, and 9 o'clock (the first and last Mass

