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The Abinger Chronicle

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The Abinger Chronicle

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THE EDITOR

CHERRY COTTAGE

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PERILOUS PRELUDE

With some hours on hand in Naples, shortly before the war, I picked my way in search of the alley of San Biagio, patron of booksellers, where the greatest of the Neapolitan philosophers lived a humble and heroic existence two and a half centuries ago; past the cactus-like tumescence of a Jesuit shrine; diagonally across the huge piazza around it; and into the cobbled straight alley running uphill between decaying palaces and chapels formless with age. I could not with certainty distinguish the windows, if they still stand, through which, two and a half centuries ago, Giambattista Vico looked out from his noisier work room—hot with scorn for cloistered and bachelor scholars, as he wove his rede amid nursery din and gossip's chatter—on to the far from noiseless little street below. But those brawny amoretti splashing round the fountain, those onyx-eyed old dames hugging their chins on the steps of the hospital have changed little since the year 1700; and the saintmakers' booths, where old men even to-day squat carving Anthonies and Dominics, and passing them back for their wash of paint in high industrial seriousness—Vico perhaps knew them in these very porchways. I had just read Vico's autobiography, and the great work of research upon its circumstances published a few years ago by Fausto Nicolini. Few tales of intellectual growth and combat compare with it; and its background lies in the few streets of Naples which keep, to-day, a full baroque flavour. May that outlast present horrors!

The saintmakers of this quarter have not, I imagine, in the least degree changed their working methods since that dawn of a century when Leibnitz and Newton disputed

the intellectual stage of Europe; Descartes and Locke still threw back powerful shadows on to the entire world of learning; and the Portuguese Jew of Amsterdam was being too loudly and lengthily refuted by Catholics, Protestants, and Rabbinical teachers alike for anyone to doubt his power of fascination. Meanwhile a fugitive mention in a Leipzig catalogue marked the bounds of Vico's European fame. Some men of learning in Venice were more substantially curious about an eccentric duodecimo volume claiming—under his name—to contain the gist of human knowledge, and there were discussions about a Venetian edition, greatly revised, enlarged, and improved, which were brought to an end, however, by one of those trials with which Providence made sure of Vico's passionate heroism—the manuscript was lost in transit; several hundreds of pages which may to this day be hidden in some antiquarian's lumber-room. Vico replaced them with an entirely new book, designed, like each of his greater works, to recast and reintegrate the logic, law, and science of all Christendom. But this, like all his works, was printed in Naples only. The learned world of Naples, which alone knew of their existence, was tolerant enough to regard these outpourings with respectful pity; and since Vico could compose, in a Latin as smooth as his Italian was uncouth, the prettiest panegyrics that any marriageable Archduchess could ask for, the rotundest encomium on a deceased Viceroy or a Cardinale papabile, they kept him in his post as Professor of Eloquence in the royal Neapolitan university, and even, towards the end, raised the starvation wages on which he had reared a large family and met the cost of his publications.

Ask a grand monarch to savour the genius of William Blake; make known Propertius' merits to a society of the Pilgrim fathers; it would be no harder than to get a hearing for Vico in the modernity of his own age. And yet the man lived and pulsed with his own age's problems; knew its men, its books, its discoveries and ambitions, studied its literary styles, and asked nothing but to be recognised by it.

The age was not, indeed, too parsimonious to spare a "Vir Eruditissime" or an "Ornamentum Civitatis" for one whose Latin grammar and Christian rectitude were beyond

Perilous Prelude

dispute. But there his modest glory had its bounds for a century and more. What wonder? It was the dawn of the triumphant epoch of atomic science, and Vico dismissed the atomic theory of matter as a pitiable aberration of some followers of Lucretius. Here, indeed, is the index of Vico's relation to his age: that amid a mighty chatter about Cartesius, Gassendi, Boyle and Newton he discerned but a rechanffée of talk which had shaken the Stoa and the Academe two thousand years before; and thus would a page of Puffendorf rouse him to a ringing remonstrance—against Epicurus! The new scientific culture of Europe flamed up like a dawn, and Vico recognised its place in a cycle of dawns and dusks. Not only did he calmly diagnose, in his eagerly mathematical contemporaries, a tendency to ways of thought which had accompanied high antiquity to its ruin, but he mysteriously related their speculative fervours to hoary habits of the Chinese, the Red Indians, and the African negroes as related by missionaries. Discoursing of literature, he held that a certain quality in the poems of Homer and Dante, lacking in those of Virgil and Tasso, should be reasoned about from the standpoint of the composition of the human mind as manifested in human society, rather than of the composition of parsable and scannable word-groups. He wished—strange old man—that he knew the barbarous languages of Northern Europe, and would willingly have forgotten what he knew of French geometry. The German language, he thought, might have taught him something more essential about the mind of man.

But who was Vico? The sublime and forbidding Neapolitan has left the answer in a brief and superb intellectual autobiography, to be read alongside of the quasi-contemporary autobiographic sketches of Cartesius (in the *Discourse of Method*) and of Spinoza (in the *De Emendatione*) on which it was no doubt modelled. In intricate, vivid, and solemnly prophetic language Giambattista Vico recounts his struggling boyhood in the deep, teeming Neapolitan alleys; his ten years of reclusion and study in a remote fastness on the Cilento hill range (you can see the range looking inland from the promontory of Ravello); his

return to Naples, the frenzy of the learned Neapolitan world for algebraic and atomic studies; the decay and neglect of humanist studies, and his own half century of fervent and neglected criticism of the new fashions of the mind.

It has been left to the scholars of this century to bring to light the secret which Vico's now famous autobiography veils, or rather tightly conceals under its close texture. The flight from Naples to Cilento was not—it has been discovered—a chance migration in search of work but a panic flight from the attentions of the Holy Inquisition. The scientific rationalism which he discovered rampant on his return to Naples was not, as he himself too loudly insists, new and surprising to him; he had been deeply engaged in its pursuit at a moment when the Inquisition interposed to set bounds and to teach lessons to the innovators with a mass trial of Neapolitan intellectuals from which only the youngest and obscurest, like Vico, escaped unscathed.

His intellectual growth did not arise quietly, naturally, from ten years of solitary meditation. There was a powerful external stimulus—Fear, fear of authority in high places. That is fear not merely of the prison cell, but above all of obliquy.

This is an experience reserved by Providence for youthful genius—the fear that the very honesty of the mind has let one, unperceiving, into perilous passes towards merited condemnation. Some shock of contact with the world of tradition and piety, now for the first time found stonily hostile and disapproving, provokes the awful doubt—"Was all my search for wisdom but a sliding into folly? Were my strivings towards larger life a masked and unconscious rebellion against the limits rightly set by eternal justice? Has not this disaster been sent to me for a warning, to cure me of my futile boldness?"

There was time, in ten years' service as family-tutor in the lonely castle of Vatolla, to face out this question which for Vico had come charged with the threat of a condemnation for heresy—as to Wordsworth it came, a century later, charged with the shame of lawless fatherhood, or to others with the opprobrium of a grosser departure from

Perilous Prelude

contemporary moral conventions. It is a question seldom to be answered otherwise than with some measure of contrition. "Yes, I have foolishly followed a glittering lure." At Vatolla Vico renounced all "Epicuraean" speculation, and the shock of the crisis drove him to explore, in the intricacies of his own mind and of human society, the origin of errors conceived in good faith. When he returned to Naples he was thoroughly purged of them. Only, the purgation proved needless from the mundane standpoint; indeed worse than needless; for fashion in heresy hunting had changed, and the "Epicureans" now dominated polite society. Self correction had rendered his outlook unmodish and antiquated, and quite unfitted him for contemporary glory.

It had—in compensation—rendered him a great writer and inspirer of new science in centuries to come. Vico had found his mission, to be a combattant for deep and traditional wisdom against the brilliant facility of his own age—even against its supreme and triumphant exponent Cartesius. Now it is fascinating to learn (as an erudite footnote informs the dilettante student of these matters) that Cartesius' sketch of his own life, in the *Discours de la Méthode*, conceals, just like Vico's, a crucial episode of Fear. It was not mere inclination, as his autobiography would have it, but the threat of an ecclesiastical condemnation, which—such being the prelatical preference at the moment—turned the youthful Cartesius from "literary" studies to the purer and safer mathematics. His genius, also, passed through the mill of panic.

There is a due place for panic and social disaster at the outset of a life of high intellectual achievement. Cartesius, for France; Vico, for Italy; and Wordsworth for England all alike prove it.

C.J.S.S.

THE OLD PEOPLE

Seventy years we have lived here peacefully in our houses
Disturbing no man's ways

Now, why must we go in the dead of night so suddenly
Children screaming, here and there houses ablaze?

It is hard if after such a harmless life as ours
Death may not meet us, stilling and delivering
Instead of driving us cringing from our houses
Shells bursting about us, our old limbs shivering.

The moon's very bright. The dam has burst, they say.
Do you see water over the fields, old friend?
Your eyes are better than mine. The water's coming?
Cutting the village street at either end?

Is there no way out? Then I shall go back to my house
It's hard if a man mayn't go to his home to die.
Over there the enemy watch, I suppose, for my eyes
Can faintly see a crimson glow in the sky.

JOAN AIKEN

TRUTH

There, where my spirit dwells in solitude
in poverty and hours of quietness,
there I must often be;
though all my days with work and friends were filled
with country hours between the whirl of town
yet drought would be.

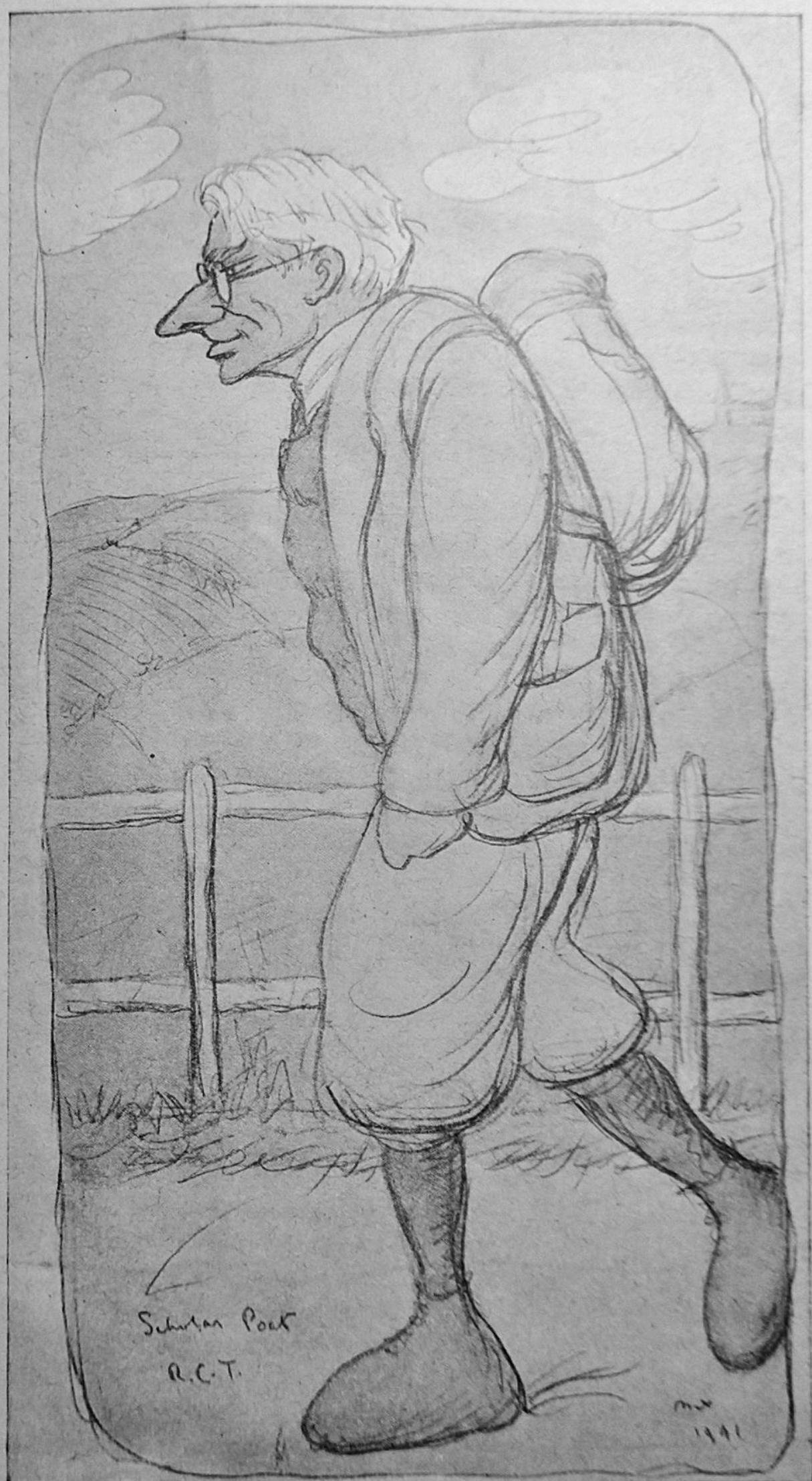
There where my spirit may refreshment find
is place most bare of beauty's sound and colour,
of friendship's gladness.

Why this should be, my God alone can tell,
who made me thus, and gave capacity
for so much sadness,

For so much sadness in pursuit of truth,
the finding which is cold bright paradise—
cost what it may.

Yet some I know who walk their quiet way
in happy company, in joy and play,
O happy they!

S.S.



R. C. Trevelyan

by Max Beerbohm

THE LUCKY ONES

Three wild gypsies on an autumn morning
 Came to my house and stood at the door;
 They asked for shoes—"Any old shoes, lady!"—
 I gave them money, and they whined for more.
 They said I had a lucky face, would never lack for anything.
 One was a witch woman, crooked like a thorn;
 One was a lad, trowsle-haired and barefoot,
 And the last a girl as lovely as the morn.

They went on their ways with nobody to stop them,
 They went their ways down the leafy lane,
 And I turned back to my bottling and my jamming
 And tried to be a housewife, a housewife again.
 But oh, I smelt the hedges with the ripe nuts falling!
 And longed for the meadows where the brown hare lies,
 And I thought of the girl with her lips red as bryony
 And all the darkness of Egypt in her eyes.

EILUNED LEWIS

THE ARTIFICIAL DEAD

"Now that we are both dead," I said, staring at the pale face of my enemy, "we might shake hands."

He stared back at me.

I propped myself on my elbow and felt as comfortable as lying on Margate beach.

"Do you understand? We are dead," I repeated, and smiled, for he looked as though he needed encouraging. It was not so much his paleness that made me sorry for him nor yet the fact that I had killed him but his dazed air of helplessness, of being lost, of being taken by surprise.

I sat up.

"You can move, you know, even though we are as dead as mutton."

The Artificial Dead

His silence increased in me a desire for explanations.

"I should like to shake hands to show there is no ill-feeling between us. I killed you but without malice against you individually. I killed you, not for being you, as I might have had you attempted to strangle my wife, but because of what you stood for. You were the legitimate enemy. And we are quits, for although you did not kill me yourself, your comrades did."

Here I stopped to feel for the hole in my side where I knew death had entered.

"Over there," I said, pointing out the details which might help realisation, "is the bayonet that killed you. It is still red. . . 'Having seen all things red, Their eyes are rid, of the hurt of the colour of blood for ever,' " I quoted.

His eyes did not leave my face.

"But I suppose Wilfred Owen was too English for you?"

He nodded.

"Damn it!" I exclaimed, "you must accept the situation. You can't blame me for the way the world is made."

I thrust out my hand.

He acquiesced mutely. He allowed his hand to slip into my grasp. I supplied the power that operated the action.

I stretched and yawned luxuriously.

"You might say," I remarked, "that this feeling of tranquility and repose are really heavenly," and I laughed, wondering if the adjective were appropriate.

My enemy-friend sat up.

"Are you sure we are dead?"

It was a relief to hear his voice at last.

"Positive," I reassured him. "I never felt more dead in my life."

"So" and he contemplated his heels digging moodily into the sand. "So we are dead finished. . . ."

His progress was slow.

I recited softly to myself: "'Alive he is not vital overmuch; Dying, he is not mortal overmuch; Nor sad, nor proud, Nor curious at all.' "

The Artificial Dead

He rocked himself backwards and forwards.

"You see how pleasant it is to be dead. You can move. You are as free as air. Your wound does not pain you."

This spurred him to an outburst.

"But why should I be dead? What have I done, what have I ever done that I should be dead now?"

"As I know nothing about you it would be hard for me to solve such a riddle. Looks are little to go by. Most of us think we mean well at heart but at our best are no more than ineffectual angels. Tell me about yourself."

He took a deep sighing breath that was like a yearning wind from another land.

"I have a wife, Ninetta. I *had*."

He corrected himself with a fussy anger.

"I have a son, Battista. *Had*, I mean. And three daughters, Maddalena, Beatrice and Giuliana . . . my little Giulia."

"She is your favourite?" I suggested.

"*Was*."

How swiftly names conjure up pictures! Ninetta, Battista, Maddalena, Beatrice and Giuliana . . . I could see them all. Together they formed a majestic group, laughing and flashing their almond-white teeth and their honey-dark skins radiating an indolent smell of warmth and their limbs as strong as tree roots contrasted against a background of olive groves.

"Ninetta was to have come home from the sanatorium this month."

Ninetta stole quietly, unobtrusively out of the olive garden, coughing slightly.

"They sent Beatrice back from the factory four months ago. She had been spitting blood."

Beatrice followed her mother out of the picture with that deprecating, insignificant cough.

"Battista is still at school. But he has to live with a peevish aunt who ill-treats him. He is not happy away from home."

Battista's merry smile faded.

"Maddalena has a good job in a laundry."

The Artificial Dead

"Ah . . ." I grunted, seeing the sturdy figure lifting baskets of frothing clothes on to her buxom hip. Here at least would be life abundant.

"Maddalena is lame, from an injury at birth; a little slow at her work but thorough. I wish she did not have to stand so much, but she does not complain. It has to be it seems."

The roots were twisted, deformed.

"She would have liked to be a singer but there was no money for her training. She had to earn."

"And Giuliana . . . little Giulia?" The olive garden was almost deserted.

"My little Giulia is at a school of dancing. She won a scholarship. For her all things must be possible. She is like thistledown. She is only thirteen, but she has been many times on the stage."

Giulia stood alone amongst the olives.

"And you . . . what did you do?"

"I made coffins."

The olives shrivelled and fell like sonorous stones to the ground.

"High-class coffins."

"I see."

"You see! You see!" he mocked. "So what have I ever done that I should be dead now? I, a hard-working family man, a maker of high-class coffins and only forty-one! And all of them needing me. . . You quote so much poetry, make poetry out of that! Better still, make reason out of it! Why should I be dead? I ask you and you say nothing!"

He stared at me with eyes that were fuming and sulky now.

"You might say that we are not the real dead . . ."

"What!" he cried, "after all you have been impressing upon me about our being dead?"

"Wait. You are not being done out of a coffin," I replied. "We are dead but we are not the dead who belong here. You might say that we are the artificial dead. We served no purpose in our individual destinies by dying. To us it was no glory, no crown, no fulfillment. We belong

The Artificial Dead

to those who die without expectation or preparation, carelessly, blindly, by accident, by mistake, without climax, drama or triumph. To us death was no more than an artificial flower in the hair; with Keats, Shelley or Rupert Brooke or John Cornford, death was a part of life. It was an episode of magnitude, comparable to a love affair, the begetting of a child or an instant of inspiration.

"You do not belong here because they need you . . . Ninetta coming home from the sanatorium, Giuliana dancing, Battista unhappy. . . they make your death an artificial one. Your place is with them, making coffins to feed them."

I smelled the fetid cave-like ground-floor room, woodshavings curling ankle-deep, the coffin taking shape on its trestles ready to house the dead with more dignity than many living know, Ninetta coughing, Battista home from school. Here was a design for living simplified to the mere struggle to remain healthy enough to earn a livelihood without the drastic simplification of war.

"So . . ." he said, "and then what?"

"Nothing," I said, standing up. "When one is dead it is too late to be wise."

I stretched out a hand to pull him to his feet.

"Come along," I said, "at least we can learn our way about here."

"You believe in finding your way," he observed, "I leave it to others. I follow."

"Well, look! There is an angel, follow her!" I said, giving him a push. "Don't let her go. She'll know the way!" But he seemed feeble and the angel appeared to be floating off, so I jostled him aside and grabbed handfuls of skirt.

"I've no intention of going," she replied, putting a cool hand on my head.

"Do you understand Italian?" she asked.

"I used to."

"Then you must know all his family history by now," she said, nodding in the direction of a bed on my right side, whereon a man lay talking to the ceiling. His face was familiar. I knew his dark, sultry eyes. I was torn with a fear lest he should not get well.

The Artificial Dead

"Will he recover?"

"Oh, yes. He's tough."

I nestled into the cotton comfort of my bandages feeling in my side a central swirl of hot pain.

"He didn't belong to the dead. He blundered into death's way. He was one of those who follow. But he was not real there. He was out of place. Death was an artificial flower in the hair . . ."

My mouth was firmly stopped with a thermometer.

IDA PROCTER

CHILDHOOD AND YOUTH

Childhood and Youth were met together
In one sweet form and face,
As the moon in the twilight sky yet lingers,
But dawn from the East creeps on apace.

A child she seemed when first I saw her
Bathing with her friends in the stream below.
A child's were her limbs, her breasts, her laughter.—
How could I then foreknow?

She smiled on me fearlessly with eyes
That had stolen the dancing of her feet,
As along the river she raced more swiftly
Than light and shadow o'er wind-swept wheat.

Summer has passed, Autumn and Winter,
And again Spring is here.
Changed now is her laughter, in her smile lurks coyness,
In her eyes proud fear.

I too am changed : whene'er I meet her
My bold words fail me, I know not why.
Childhood and Youth contend in her no longer :
Proud Day now fills the sky.

R. C. TREVELYAN

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