

TALES OF MY NATIVE TOWN

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Tales of My Native Town by Gabriele D'Annunzio & Rafael Mantellini & Joseph Hergesheimer

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By
Gabriele D'Annunzio

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WITH AN INTRODUCTION
BY
JOSEPH HERGESHEIMER



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INTRODUCTION

BY JOSEPH HERGESHEIMER

I

THE attitude of mind necessary to a complete enjoyment of the tales in this book must first spring from the realisation that, as stories, they are as different from our own short imaginative fiction as the town of Pescara, on the Adriatic Sea, is different from Marblehead in Massachusetts. It is true that fundamentally the motives of creative writing, at least in the Western Hemisphere, are practically everywhere alike; they are what might be called the primary emotions, hatred and envy, love and cruelty, lust, purity and courage. There are others, but these are sufficient: and an analysis of *The Downfall of Candia* together with any considerable story native to the United States would disclose a similar genesis.

But men are not so much united by the deeper bonds of a common humanity as they are separated by the superficial aspects and prejudices of society. The New England town and Pescara, at

heart very much the same, are far apart in the overwhelming trivialities of civilisation, and Signor D'Annunzio's tales, read in a local state of being, might as well have remained untranslated. But this difference, of course, lies in the writer, not in his material; and Gabriele D'Annunzio is the special and peculiar product of modern Italy.

No other country, no other history, would have given birth to a genius made up of such contending and utterly opposed qualities: it is exactly as if all the small principalities that were Italy before the Risorgimento, all the amazing contradictions of stark heroics and depraved nepotism, the fanaticism and black blood and superstition, with the introspective and febrile weariness of a very old land, were bound into D'Annunzio's being.

Not only is this true of the country and of the man, the difference noted, it particularly includes the writing itself. And exactly here is the difficulty which, above all others, must be overcome if pleasure is to result from "Tales of My Native Town." These are not stories at all, in the sense of an individual coherent action with the stirring properties of a plot. The interest is not cunningly seized upon and stimulated and baffled up to a satisfactory finale. The formula that constitutes the base of practically every applauded story here—a determination opposed to hopeless odds but invariably triumphant—is not only missing from

Tales of My Native Town, in the majority of cases it is controverted. For the greater part man is the victim of inimical powers, both within him and about; and fate, or rather circumstance, is too heavy for the defiance of any individual.

What, actually, has happened is that D'Annunzio has not disentangled these coherent fragments from the mass of life. He has not lifted his tales into the crystallised isolation of a short story: they merge from the beginning and beyond the end into the general confusion of existence, they are moments, significantly tragic or humorous, selected from the whole incomprehensible sweep of a vastly larger work, and presented as naturally as possible. However, they are not without form, in reality these tales are woven with an infinite delicacy, an art, like all art, essentially artificial. But a definite interest in them, the sense of their beauty, must rise from an intrinsic interest in the greater affair of being. It is useless for anyone not impressed with the beauty of sheer living as a spectacle to read "Tales of My Native Town."

II

The clear understanding of a divergence should result in a common ground of departure, of sympathy, and to make this plainer still it ought to be added that in the question of taste, of the

latitude of allowable material and treatment, the Italians are far more comprehensive than ourselves. This, certainly, is particularly true in their attitude toward the relation of the sexes; and here is, perhaps, the greatest difference between what might be loosely called a Latin literature and an Anglo-Saxon. We are almost exclusively interested in the results, the reactions, of sexual contacts; but the former have their gaze fixed keenly on the process itself. At the most we indicate that consummations of passion have occurred, and then turn, with a feeling of relief, to what we are convinced is the greater importance of its consequences.

But not only is Gabriele D'Annunzio perfectly within his privilege in lingering over any important act of nature, he is equally at liberty to develop all the smaller expressions of lust practically barred from English or American pens. These, undeniably, have as large an influence in one country, one man, as in another; they are—as small things are apt to be—more powerful in the end than the greatest attributes. Yet while we have agreed to ignore them, to discard them as ignoble and obscene, in "Tales of My Native Town" erotic gestures and thoughts, libidinous whispers, play their inevitable devastating part.

Yet this is not a book devoted to such impulses; one tale only, although in many ways that is the

best, has as its motive lust. (It is rather in the amazingly direct treatment of disease, of physical abnormality, that it will be disturbing to the unprepared reader from an entirely different and less admirable, or, at any rate, less honest, convention. Undoubtedly D'Annunzio's unsparing revelation of human deformity and ills will seem morbid to the unaccustomed mind; but, conversely, it can be urged that the dread of these details is in itself morbid. Then, too, we have an exaggerated horror of the unpleasant, a natural, but saccharine, preference for happiness. As a nation we are not conspicuously happier than Italy, but we clamour with a deafening insistence for the semblance of a material good fortune. Meeting pain no better and no worse than other nations, from our written stories we banish it absolutely; but anyone who cares to realise the beauty that, beyond question, pervades the following pages will be obliged to harden himself to meet precisely the deplorable accidents that he must face wherever life has been contaminated by centuries of brutal ignorance, oppression and want.

Again, it is not in the larger aspects, the nobler phases, of suffering with which we are concerned, but in the cold revelation of rasping details, brutal sores and deformity, the dusty spiders of paralysis. If this were all it would be hideous beyond support; but, fortunately, the coldness is only in the