

The Power of the Man and the Power of the Moment.

On September 12th, 1919, when the interest of the world was centered expectantly on Wilson's fourteen points, and the disturbance they were causing in the League of Nations, Gabriel D'Annunzio dramatically claimed the attention of everybody by leading a filibustering expedition to Fiume and occupying it in the name of Italy. The very audacity of the enterprise, the almost ridiculous ease with which it was accomplished, and perhaps above all, the seeming inconsistency of its leader with its nature, won from the world a laugh of genuine enjoyment and gained for D'Annunzio a prominent place in the popular memory.

With the relative importance and strategic position of Fiume everyone is acquainted. Likewise all know what a bone of contention Fiume proved to be at the Peace Conference. And that a *Poet*, at the head of a mere handful of men, should seize and hold it for fifteen months, in defiance both of his own government and of the governments involved in the controversy over its possession, is the more remarkable because of its apparent absurdity. This, however, the poet did—and thereby made history.

The world thus far has seen three phases of D'Annunzio's eventful life; she has seen him first as a poet, then a soldier, and lately a dictator. It is given to so few men to enjoy such a remarkable career that it is well worth one's while to give D'Annunzio rather more than a cursory glance, to regard him successively in each of the roles he played, and to decide for one's self whether to consider him the genius he is thought to be by some, or the lunatic he is thought to be by others.

First of all, however, a few words about the man himself. To the best of our knowledge no authentic detailed description of the hero of Fiume has hitherto appeared in print on this side of the Atlantic. The only facts therefore that we can glean,

are deduced from photographic close-ups. Gabriel D'Annunzio appears, by contrast with fellow officers, to be a slim, wiry man, a little above the average height. He has a thin, oval-shaped, clean-shaven face and is very bald. His nose is perhaps the most striking feature of his face—a sharp, aquiline, aggressive, nose, suggestive of great nervous energy and decisiveness. He has a thin-lipped mouth, and his somewhat protruding chin expresses rather a complacent self-sufficiency than the indomitable will-power that one would look for to conform to the aggressiveness of his nose. During the war he suffered the loss of his right eye, but this is made the less noticeable by reason of the large, horn-rimmed spectacles he wears. He pays, according to report, great attention to his dress. This report gains credence from the fact that a short while before the war a Neopolitan newspaper published an amusing inventory of all his clothes, the completeness of which inventory hinted at the more or less vain collaboration of the poet. *This* was the man who seized Fiume.

D'Annunzio, the poet, the dramatist, is well known outside his native Italy. He was born at Francavilla Al Mare, Chieti Italy, in 1864. He is the author of the *Laudi*, *The Triumph of Death*, *The Child of Voluptuousness*, *The Virgins on the Cliffs*, and *The Fire*. Henry Furst, writing in the Nineteenth Century says:

“At that time (the outbreak of the war) Gabriel D'Annunzio stood at the height of his fame, the epitome of Latin culture, wedded, at its best, to an intense power of enterprise in action. By the long series of his novels and tragedies, and more particularly by the consummate art of his poetical masterpiece—the three books of the *Laudi*—he had raised the Italian literature of his day far above the clerical sentimentalities of Fogazzaro and the limited themes of Wordsworthian imitators like Pascoli; he had set it free from its insularity and its ignorance of the main streams of modern thought, and had given it a universality and a European consciousness.”

D'Annunzio has for many years shown abundant evidence

of the eccentricities of his artistic temperament. Most of his novels and plays he wrote at "La Capponcina," a remarkable, pseudo-monastic abode covered with Latin inscriptions, in which every article of furniture is alleged to be at least four hundred years old. D'Annunzio has had pictures of himself spread broadcast, wherein he appears writing on an ancient church-altar, lighted up by sixty candles. Evidently he believed with Balzac, that inspiration comes only with candle-light. This also recalls the legend of Alfred de Musset, "writing feverishly all night in his apartments in Paris by the light of candles." In his fastidiousness regarding his clothes, he resembles Mascagni, the famous composer of *Cavellieria Rusticana*. These oddities illustrate the innate vanity and love of pomp peculiar to the Italian race but a little more marked in the case of the poet.

It is not as a poet, however, that D'Annunzio arouses and interests us, but as a soldier and dictator. A special correspondent of the *London Times* says:

"It is a great mistake to underrate D'Annunzio. This man is a real force. . . . He is an untiring worker and has that divine gift of personal magnetism which attracts the loyalty and devotion of other men. There can be no question of his power to sway the masses. The almost religious admiration in which he is held by the regular Italian forces—officers and men of the army and navy alike—is surpassed only by the fanatical fervor of his own followers."

Surely such confidence between a leader and his men could not have sprung up over night, nor could it have begot itself. Such, indeed, is not the case with either of these possibilities.

D'Annunzio did more than anybody else to bring Italy into the war. Some of his speeches then, as his Fiume orations now, will endure as long as the Italian language. It was his speech at Quarto, May 4th. 1915, that finally ranged Italy with the Allies against Austria, her age-long enemy. His oratorical powers—the means through which he played on the responsive chords of his countymen's emotional nature—no less than his own personal magnetism, first won for him the esteem and

veneration that his subsequent successes have perpetuated. And the culmination of his persuasive effort was a consummate bit of genius, namely his choice of mottoes for his standards, *Italia o Mor'te? Italy or Death!* What could be better calculated to awaken the slumbering passions, the dramatic instincts, the intense patriotism of the Italian people? *Quis Contra Nos? Who can oppose us?* What maxim could be better worded to cheer and revivify at every glance, a race as easily discouraged as it is aroused. The secret both of D'Annunzio's enlisting the sympathy of the whole of Italy, and of the success of his Fiume adventure, ought, in view of these very potent reasons, no longer be a source of wonder to anyone. The poet was thoroughly acquainted with the disposition of the people he was swaying.

The confidence that the men reposed in him was not the poet's only asset, 'tis true. Throughout the four years of the struggle he had served under the Italian colors by land, by sea, and in the air, sharing their dangers with his men and endearing himself to the hearts of every one of them by his impetuous ardour. He won promotion after promotion, decoration upon decoration, lost his right eye, and finally received the Medal for the Mutilated, and the Gold Award of Valor—the equivalent of the Victoria Cross. Armed with the esteem and confidence of the masses, he encountered no difficulty in enlisting the services of a mere handful of soldiers, making a dramatic entry into Fiume and defying Nitti and the Italian government.

His armament grew rapidly. Troops that had been sent against him, deserted to him, captivated by the novelty of his position and their natural love of glory. Volunteers singly or in small contingents, continued to arrive all day long till his handful of troops became a veritable army. On September 20th., a fleet of aeroplanes flew from one of the Italian aviation camps, and, landing near Fiume, placed itself at the disposition of D'Annunzio. When on October 30th. 1919, he, as "the interpreter of the will of all sane Italians," proclaimed the annexation of Fiume to Italy, he already had at Fiume, four battle-

ships of the Italian government—the *Dante Alighieri*, the *Nullo*, the *Mirabello*, and the *Abba*, besides a flotilla of smaller craft—and was hourly winning fresh adherents, contrary to Niti's supposition that the poet's expedition would prove "a mere flash in the pan." Within so short a time Fiume had, under his leadership, begun to assume the proportions of a Buffer-State.

The Italian government, however, did not remain idle. The city was immediately blockaded, but as a matter of fact the blockaded was very lax, and food and supplies reached D'Annunzio throughout October and November; but thereafter it grew more severe. As Commandant and Dictator, D'Annunzio quieted the anxiety of the Fiumans by a series of proclamations which were countless variations of the theme, *Italy or Death!* Had the poet been as wise as he was picturesque, he might have carried the Italian people with him and made inevitable a rupture between Italy and her Allies. But his proclamations were wild and raving, and he drifted into a bitter hostility to the cause for which he had worked so hard during war. We quote a passage from one of his proclamations which is bitterly hostile to England:

"The voracious Empire which has possessed itself of Persia, Mesopotamia, of the New Arabia, and a great part of Africa, and which was never glutted, can send down upon us those same arial slaughterers who, in Egypt, were not ashamed to massacre insurgents bearing no other arms than the branches of trees. The greedy Empire which is lying in wait for Constantinople, which disguises the possession of at least one-third of China's vastness. can adopt against us the same means of execution adopted against the worn-out people of the Punjab. Yet shall we always be victorious. All the insurgents of all the races will gather together under our standard." Here speaks, not the practical, level-headed Dictator but the Poet, dominated and carried away by his ardent imagination.

For thirteen months thereafter, there was no work done in Fiume. When his own resources were exhausted D'Annunzio paid his nine thousand troops with money "presented" to him

by the wealthiest citizens of the city. In the meantime he strengthened his position, while the Allies pondered over the situation. The poet was fully resolved to sacrifice himself and his soldiers for Italy, and was therefore a difficult proposition. Ultimatum after ultimatum was accepted by one of the Allied Nations to be rejected by another; popular expectation grew tense and was keyed up to a high pitch as the time progressed. D'Annunzio's position grew precarious, but whether he realized it or not, he gave no sign.

In November, 1920, the Italian government began to force his hand. The poet prepared for a resistance that would immortalize his name in the annals of Italy. The crisis drew on apace. The poet's men were afire with enthusiasm and were prepared to follow him to the end. All efforts at mediation, made by the Peace Conference, seemed to have failed; when, on St. Stephen's Day, the problem of Fiume was settled by the Treaty of Rapallo. The poet marched out of the city at the head of his forces—and next month we hear that he has been quietly married in Switzerland to Luisa Baccara, his latest love, and has begun to write again.

It is believed that the Vatican had no inconsiderable share in influencing D'Annunzio's ultimate decision to capitulate. Don Celso Constantini, Apostolic Administrator of Fiume, and Cardinal Gasparri both communicated with the Commandant and Mayor Gignante, the Cardinal urging that "public opinion is painfully alarmed at the prospect of a resistance that can only cause new sorrows and new tears, great injury to the people, and a further postponement of the peace for which every heart is longing. Even more painful would it be to see fraternal blood spilled without result. Prompted, therefore, by regard for that common sense, generosity and deference by which you have shown yourself to be animated, I make bold to call attention to those considerations, and urge that, for the paramount reasons of peace, fraternity and true patriotism, you work to avert the dreaded misfortunes." Although the mayor replied in substance that he would never recommend a settlement

which did not insure the annexation of Fiume to Italy, it is important to note that the reasons which Cardinal Gasparri urged against further resistance were those which were subsequently assigned for surrendering the city to the Italian forces.

The story of Fiume, reduced to its simplest terms, is the product of the magnetic action of one man upon a population rendered peculiarly responsive to his influence by the charged atmosphere of their environment and the events immediately preceding. D'Annunzio wished to make Fiume a "Citta Italianissima." That he failed is due only to his own lack of foresight, for which he is hardly to be blamed. Some have dubbed his adventure "Garibaldian," and have glorified it as such. Judged by superficial appearances, it bears some resemblance to the famous expedition of 1860. But the likeness goes no further than mere appearances. The expedition of 1860 was prepared and accomplished by a handful of private citizens free from military duty, and "with the approval of the government." The Fiume expedition was conceived and carried out by fragments of the regular army, that refused obedience to the law, and it was against the wish of the government. No! D'Annunzio was not another Garibaldi. He was more. His case may be defined by what Matthew Arnold terms the result of: "The power of the man, and the power of the moment."

W. J O'LEARY, '23

