CARDINAL MEZZOFANTI,

The Greatest of Linguists.

The New York Freeman's Journal publishes a most elaborate account of the life and wonderfully linguistic powers of the famous Cardinal Mezzofanti, whose semi-centennial was celebrated on the 16th March last. Most of our readers are familiar with the name of this intellectual phenomenon; but all are not familiar with his life; we reproduce a few extracts from the "Freeman's Journal's" sketch :—

"Fifty years ago, March 16 last, Cardinal Giuseppe Gaspardo Mezzofanti, the greatest linguist the world has ever known, passed away. He was born in Bologna, Italy, on Sept. 17, 1774, of an extremely humble family. His father was a poor carpenter, and the eminence to which, by his own unassisted exertions, Mezzofanti, without once leaving his native city, attained in the exercise of the faculty of language— which is ordinarily cultivated only by the arduous and expensive process of visiting and travelling in the different countries in which each separate language is spoken—is the most remarkable of the many examples of successful pursuit of knowledge under difficulties which literary history supplies.

"Young Mezzofanti was educated in one of the poor schools of his native country, was under the care of the fathers of the celebrated Congregation of the Oratory. The evidence of more than ordinary talent which he exhibited early attracted the notice of one of the members of the Order, to whose kind instruction and patience Mezzofanti was indebted for almost all the advantages which he afterwards enjoyed.

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From a very early age he was destined for the Church, and he received Holy Orders in 1797. During the period of his probationary studies, however, he obtained, through the kindness of his friend, F. Respighi, the place of tutor in the family of the Marescalchi, one of the most distinguished among the nobility at Bologna. The opportunities for his peculiar studies afforded by the curious and valuable library to which he thus enjoyed free access may probably have exercised a decisive influence upon his whole career.

His attainments gradually attracted the notice of his fellow-citizens. In the year 1797, he was appointed Professor of Arabic in the University of Bologna. A few years later he was appointed assistant librarian of the City Library. In 1803 he succeeded to the important chair of Oriental languages in the University of Bologna. This post, which was most congenial to his tastes, he held, with one interruption, for a long series of years. In 1812 he was advanced to a higher place in the staff of the library, and in 1815, on the death of the chief librarian, Pozetti, he was appointed to fill his place.

"Perhaps, indeed, of all who have ever attained to the same eminence in any department which Mezzofanti reached in that of languages there hardly ever was one who had so little of the mere student in his character. In the midst of these varying and distracting occupations he was at all times most assiduous in his attendance upon the sick in the public hospitals, of which he acted as the chaplain. There was another also of his priestly duties, for the zealous discharge of which he was scarcely less distinguished, and which became subsidiary, in a very remarkable way, to his progress in the knowledge of languages. It is impossible to fix with precision the history of his progress in the acquisition of the many languages. But it is well known that at a very early period he was master of all the leading European languages, and of those Oriental tongues which are composed in the Semitic family.

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Very early, therefore, in Mezzofanti's career, he was marked out among the centre of the Bolognese clergy as in an especial manner the "foreigners' confessor" (confessario dei forestieri). In him visitors from every quarter of the globe had a sure and ready a resource; and in several cases it was to the very necessity thus created he was indebted for the acquisition, or at least the rudimentary knowledge, of a new language. More than once it occurred that a foreigner, introduced to the confessario dei forestieri for the purpose of being confessed, found it necessary to go through the preliminary process of instructing his intended confessor. For Mezzofanti's marvelous and almost instinctive power of grasping and systematizing the leading characteristics even of the most original language, the names of a few prominent ideas in the new idiom sufficed to open a first means of communication.

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Among the last languages he mastered was that of the Californian Indians, two of whom had come as pupils to the College of the Propaganada, and up to his very last year the same zeal continued unabated. He died March 16, 1849 in the seventy-fifth year of his age.

The foregoing is a brief outline of the quiet and uneventful career of this extraordinary man. The nature and extent of his prodigious attainments as a linguist are thus attested by a Russian traveller, who published in 1846 a collection of "Letters from Rome." "Twice I have visited this remarkable man, a phenomenon as yet unparalleled in the learned world. He spoke eight languages fluently in my presence. He expressed himself a Russian very truly and correctly. Even now, in advanced life, he continues to study fresh dialects. He learned Chinese not long ago. I asked him to give me a list of all the languages and dialects in which he was able to express himself, and he sent me the name of God written with his own hand in fifty-six languages, of which thirty were European, not including their dialects; seventeen Asiatic, also without counting their dialects; five African and four American !"

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It is told of him that a Smyrniote servant who was with him declared that he might pass for a Greek or a Turk throughout the dominions of the Grand Seignior. While he was residing in Bologna he was visited by the celebrated Hungarian astronomer, Baron Zach, editor of the "Correspondences Astronomiques," on the occasion of the annular eclipse, which was then visible in Italy. "This extraordinary man," writes the Baron, in February, 1820, "speaks thirty-two languages, living and dead—in a manner I am going to describe. He accosted me in Hungarian, with a compliment so well-turned, and in such excellent Magyar, that I was quite taken by surprise. He afterwards spoke to me in German, at first in good Saxon, and then in Austrian and Swabian dialects, with a correctness of accent that amazed me to the last degree and made me burst into a fit of laughter at the thought of the contrast between the language and the appearance of the astonishing professor.

"He spoke English to Captain Smith, Russian and Polish to Prince Volkonski, with the same volubility as if he had been speaking his native tongue." As a last trial the Baron suddenly accosted him in Walachian, when "without hesitation and without appearing to remark what an out-of-the-way dialect had been taken, away went the polygot with equal volubility,"; and Zach adds that he even knew the Zingller or gipsy language, which had long proved a puzzle to himself. Molbech, a Danish traveller, who had an interview with Cardinal Mezzofanti in 1820, said that "he is not merely a linguist, but is well acquainted with literary history and bibliography, and also with the library under his charge. He is a man of the finest and most polished manners, and at the same time of the most engaging good nature and politeness."

"He is familiar," wrote Gorres, "with all the European languages, and by this I understand not only the ancient classical tongues and the modern ones of the first class, such as the Greek or Latin, or the Italian, French, German, Spanish, Portuguese, and English; his knowledge also extends to the languages of the second class, viz.: the Dutch, Danish and the Swedish; to the whole Slavonic family, Russian, Polish, Bohemian, or Czech; to the Servian, the Hungarian, the Turkish; and even to those of the third and fourth class— the Irish, the Welsh, the Wallachian, the Albanian, Bulgarian, and the Illyrian. Even the Romani of the Alps and the Lettish are not unknown to him; nay he has made himself acquainted with the Lappish. He is master of the languages which fall within the Indo-Germanic family, the Sanscrit and the Persian, the Koordish, the Georgian, the Armenian; he is familiar with all the members of the Semitic family, the Hebrew, the Arabic, the Syriac, the Samaritan, the Chaldee, the Sabaic; nay, even with the Chinese, which he not only reads but speaks. Among the Hamitic languages, he knows Coptic, Ethiopic, Abyssinian, Amharic and Angolese."

"The linguistic attainments of Mezzofanti," says another writer, "which are supported by the most unexceptionable testimony from all sides, can only be compared with the achievements of 'calculating boys' who now and then come to light with what seems to be a special and rare faculty for mental arithmetic. Mezzofanti put his ability to a much better use than any of the 'calculating boys,' except Bidder, ever did. No one could have made a better use of the 'excellent memory and 'remarkable flexibility of the organs of speech' to which Mezzofanti himself attributed his linguistic exploits.

TALKS

To Young Men.

"I do not use tobacco; I am temperate in the use of stimulants; I eat good plain food and no late suppers; I keep regular hours, and I work,— that is why I am a young man at eighty-three." So said Russell Sage, in a recent interview, telling how he made his first thousand dollars. It must not be understood that we think it advisable that every young man should follow closely in the steps of the multi-millionaire; but at all events he is able to give advice, which nobody would be any the worse for listening to. He says :— "Any young man who really wants to make money has only to make up his mind to it and he will succeed. And it is while making the first thousands or two that he will learn how to make the rest. In starting out on his money-making career, he must lay down cast-iron rules for regularity and temperance in every detail of his home life, and the routine of his office. He must at any time choose the loss of every cent he has made rather than perform a single act of dishonesty. He must make it a point never to be in debt. It will do him no harm to be a close figurer in regard to small sums, refusing to pay fifty cents for an article worth only twenty-five."

That Mr. Sage began early may be gathered from his own words: 'At twelve years of age, I perceived that poverty meant getting the minimum out of life and that the fulness of life lay in a plump purse. I therefore made up my mind that money could and should be had. So after helpimg my father all day on the farm, I chopped wood evenings for a rich neighbor, a gentleman farmer. At the end of the first week he gave me a dollar. I wish I had that bit of silver now, for it was the first dollar all my own. But I gave it to mother."

There is a touch of the humanities just here that is not known to the general public, or if it is known is not usually put down to Wm. Sage's credit by the present generation. After working for his brother in a grocery store at the princely salary of one dollar a week, the future Napoleon of finance had accumulated five twenty-dollar bills, which he deposited in a local bank. How he got so much money is naively told by himself—"It is necessary to explain how I came to have five twenty-dollar bills when I should have had but three. To be brief I made extra quarters then, as I have made extra dollars since. I was always ready for a swap. As I was unusually lucky, my quarters in time amounted to dollars. Indeed, that extra forty dollars over and above the saving from my earnings was accumulated by nickels, dimes and quarters at a time. They said I had a talent for 'dicker,' that I was slick at a 'hoss-trade,' and I guess they were right."

This latter bit of open confession seems more in consonance with the general impression people on Wall Street have of the octogenarian millionaire. In his twentieth year, Sage had accumulated his magic thousand dollars. Two years later he bought out his brother's grocery store. At twenty-five he was worth $75,000; at twenty-eight he had $300,000. Twenty years later he lost eight millions by the Grant and Ward failure and never turned a hair. Now he is worth over a hundred millions. It would scarcely be a healthy thing for the world, if every body was modelled on the same lines or was actuated by the same ideas as Mr. Sage, even if he is over eighty and has more money than he can conveniently count. Fingering dollar bills at the rate of sixty to a minute and working ten hours every working day, it would take nearly nine years before he could get through the pile of greenbacks, and still it is questionable if many of us would care to change places for an ambition that turns dimes into dollars and dollars into millions. 'A last quotation from his interview is characteristic of the man:—

"I say to the starters in life— Grasp every favorable opportunity while it is hot and hang on to it with the tightness of a vise, even if it burns you for a while. It is said that opportunities do not come to all. That is not true. The trouble with some young men is that they fail to recognize and to halt Opportunity as it sweeps by. The grasping of even the majority of his opportunities will, in the end, land any man on his feet upon the pinnacle of success.

Somewhat over a quarter of a century ago, there was a line in our copy books which read:—"Man's time a moment, and a point his space." It was difficult for the very young mind to grasp the subtlety of that sentence. In the first place its construction did not seem to agree with the elementary lessons in syntax that were being ground into the young brain about the same time, and worse still the young mind could not comprehend its meaning. It was very much like "the simple child who lightly draws its breath and feels its life in every limb," what should we know of measuring time by a moment or the vastness of space by something which we were told had neither length, breadth nor thickness? But thirty years change all these things and the dogmatism of youth,— when we were quite sure that our teachers were harmless idiots—has lapsed gradually into the rough graded road of bitter or sweet experience. Now we can recognize that man's time is but a moment—the present one; the future is not his; the past has been but is not, and what a gloomy retrospect it is to most of us ! Few men dare answer themselves conscientiously, look backward and say, "It is well." Most men in their innermost heart will bow the head and say, "It is ill." Visions of lost opportunities for good rise up, and in their very intangibleness wave before us a feeling something ghostly, with the echo of a voice that wails "too late." And the atmosphere grows cold and there is some sort of the indefinable feeling that seems like an inward chill or as if there was a strange unseen presence hovering near. And then thoughts change, and with them the mental visions. Lost opportunities for evil seem to be but few. They have been used and put away long ago; but the ghost of them is there and it is not pleasant to look upon. "Phantoms of fame, like exhalations, rise and vanish." Where are our chateaux in Spain ? How have the gauzy filaments of aerial castles dissolved ? How is our faith shaken in the sublimity of youth ? We are even tempted to lose faith in the good grey poet, who, looking back after seventy years, sang:—

"How beautiful is youth ! how bright it gleams
With its illusions, aspirations, dreams !
Book of beginning, story without end,
Each maid a heroine, and each man a friend.
Aladdin's lamp, and Fortunatus' purse,
That holds the treasure of the universe !
All possibilities are in its hands,
No danger daunts it and no foe withstands;
In its sublime audacity of faith,
"Be thou removed," it to the mountain saith,
And with ambitious feet, secure and proud,
Ascends the ladder leaning on the cloud !"

Longfellow, when he wrote those lines at the fiftieth anniversary of the class of 1825 of Bowdoin College, had half a century to look back upon and again he saw the airy castles of his youth, and he was a man that had accomplished much and it all made for good. These thoughts were brought about by reading a most excellent article in the Saturday "Evening Post," which treats in a practically philosophic way with "People who live in air castles." From it are taken the following extracts :—

"Living in the future is living in an air-castle. The man who says he will lead a better and a newer life to-morrow, who promises great things for the future and does nothing in the present to make that future possible, is living in an air-castle. In his arrogance he is attempting to perform a miracle; he is seeking to turn water into wine, to have harvest without seed-time, to have an end without a beginning.

If we would make our lives grand and noble, solid and impregnable, we must foresake air-castles of dreaming for strongholds of doing. Let us think little of the future except to determine our course, and to prepare for that future by making each separate day the best and truest that we can. Let us live up to the fullness of our possibility each day. Man has only one day of life,—to-day. He did live yesterday, he may live to-morrow, but he has,—only to-day.

The secret of true living,— mental, physical and moral, material and spiritual,—may be expressed in five words: Live up to your proportion. This is the magic formula that transforms air-castles into fortresses.

Men sometimes grow mellow and generous in the thought of what they would do if great wealth came to them. "If I were a millionaire," they say,—and they let the phrase melt in their mouths as if it were a caramel, —"I would found a college; I would build a great hospital; I would show what real charity is."Oh, it is all so easy, so easy, this spending of other people's fortunes! Few of us have a million, but we all have a portion of it. Are we living up to our proportion ?

The man who is not generous with one thousand dollars will never be generous with a million. If the generous spirit be a reality with the individual, instead of an empty boast, he will find opportunity every hour of his life to manifest it. The benevolence need not even be expressed in money at all. It may be shown in a sympathy, an instinctive outstretching of a helping hand to one in need.

The air-castle typifies any delusion or folly that makes man forsake real living for an idle, vague existence. Living in an air castle means that a man has taken second or third choice in life and does not realize his mistake.

The man who wraps himself in the Napoleonic cloak of his egotism, hypnotizing himself into believing that he is superior to all other men, is living in an air-castle.

The man who believes that his life is the hardest in all the world, and who lets trifling cares and worries eclipse the glorious sun of his happiness, darkening his eyes to his privileges and his blessings, is living in an air-castle.

The woman who thinks the most beautiful creature in the world is seen in her mirror, and who exchanges all that is best in her for the shams, jealousies, follies and pretenses of society, is living in an air-castle.

Some men live in air-castles of indolence; others in air-castles of dissipation, of pride, of avarice, of deception, of bigotry, of worry, of envy, of intemperance, of injustice, of intolerance, of procrastination, of lying, of selfishness, or of some other mental or moral characteristic that withdraws them from the real duties and privileges of living.

Let us find out what is the air-castle in which we, individually, spend most of our time and we can then begin a recreation of ourselves. The bondage of the air-castle must be fought nobly and untiringly.

As man spends his hours and his days and his weeks in any air-castle, he finds that the delicate gossamer-like strands and lines of the phantom structure gradually becomes less and less airy; they begin to grow firmer, strengthening with the years until, at last, solid walls hem him in. Then he is startled by the awful realization that habit and habitancy have transformed his air-castle into a prison from which escape is difficult.

And then he learns that the most deceptive and dangerous of all things is,—the air-castle.

"Oh Promise Me!" At some time in her life Cupid pleads in every woman's ear, and when that time comes it is a woman's duty to think twice before she answers. She should think once for herself, and once for the man who has chosen her for his life companion.

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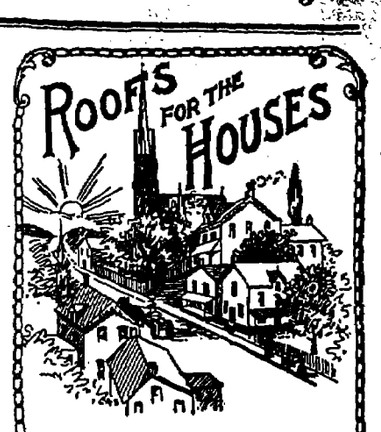

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Montreal, 1st April, 1899. 38—5

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