

IN HONOR OF A WOMAN.

How a Young Girl, Scarce Twenty,
Was Crowned With the Silver
Laurel Wreath of Doctor
of Philosophy.

A TRUE DAUGHTER OF THE
CHURCH.

"Genoa la superba! Bologna la grassa!" cry the Italians; and the word grassa is eminently characteristic of a city so filled with associations heathen and Christian, sacred and profane. Voices of old Egypt may be heard in the pillared silence of the Campo Santo where are still found the skeletons of Etruscan warriors bearing in their mouth the coin with which to pay the ferryman, Charon—he is slow to collect his dues—voices of Christian martyrs echo from tombs where centuries have done them reverence.

It was a May morning, over a century and a half ago, in that quaint arcaded city. Writes Mary Josephine O'ahan in Irish Monthly. All the town is astir; gay draperies hang from every window, flags are waving, bells are ringing, students and town folk, old and young, women in white kirtles and kerchiefs, beggars in dark red gabardines, are hurrying through the arcaded streets, past St. Petronia, past the fountain where Neptune poises lightly his trident, across the Piazza, toward the Town Hall. All is life, all is enthusiasm; the patter of the mules with their tiny chaises and their expostulating occupants, the laughter of the women, the repartee of the students medley with the cool splash of the fountains and the silvery staccato of the bells from the Campanile.

Presently a procession winds into sight, the state equipages of the gonfaloniere, the nobility in velvet and gold lace, the municipal authorities in all the insignia of office, college dons in cap and gown, Doctors of Philosophy, Doctors of Medicine, the President of the Institute, the Legate and Vice-Legato, the Archbishop and the Cardinal.

What hero is this whom the city delights to honor? What warrior scarred with battle? What prince flushed with victory? What king coming to his own? Oh, onlooker, fresh from the superciliousness of this Nineteenth Century of ours, pause and wonder! For seated in the place of honor, on either side the great ladies of the court, is a young girl, scarce twenty, clad in an unpretentious gown of black. She it is whom Bologna delights to honor; she it is whom on that May morning Bologna will crown with her most coveted crown, the silver laurel wreath of Doctor of Philosophy.

It is a scene not soon forgotten, that tableau vivant in the Hall of Hercules (for the Town Hall has been found inadequate), that modest girl in black, known to her to us people as Laura Bassi; amid nobles and prelates with no claim to distinction save that won by her own mental powers. The Venerable Archdeacon, after conferring the usual degree, placed a ring upon her finger and made a most elegant discourse in Latin, which Laura bore with proper humility and meekness. Bazzani, President of the Institute, then placed about her shoulders the vara of the University, and upon her head the silver laurel wreath of Doctor of Philosophy. What salvos of applause must have rung through the high arched hall from the enthusiastic Bolognese, as the glistening laurel touched that girlish brow. Bologna's child, Bologna's queen and lineal descendant of a long line of

famous and learned women whom Bologna holds over to her heart.

We hear much in these days of ours of the advancement of learning, of the strides of science, above all, mirabile dictu, of the widened opportunities of women. Every age is a little in love with itself, every age is a little given to the attitude of the late Narcissus, of egotistical memory. In all these things we forget that the world is getting back its own. A few years ago women were not admitted to the universities of either England or America. Sidney Smith's brilliant plea for the education of women met more laughter than commendation. And yet away back in the thirteenth century when the University of Bologna numbered 10,000 students, women were not only admitted to the halls, but women were among its most distinguished professors. What need to name them? Among the many Accorsa Accorsa, Bettisia Gozzadini, Anna Manzolini, the famous anatomist, and that learned and lovely Nevella, whose lectures on law were given behind a curtain that her beauty might not distract her hearers, a wise precaution since it is said that Petrarch was one! What need to speak of the vast array of learned women in convents whose zeal for heavenly virtues was only equalled by their zeal in the acquirement of earthly lore. This was in Catholic Italy ere the great wave of Modern progress had come surging in. This, too, was in old Bologna that watched with such interest the progress of young Laura Bassi, and on the 12th of May, 1792, crowned her its youngest, most honored queen.

The early history of Laura Bassi may be given in a few words. She was born in 1711, her father was a man of cultivated tastes and his home was frequented by many literary and scientific men. Of those, bright little Laura was the pet and plaything, afterwards the pet and disciple. While still a child, she could translate the most difficult Greek and Latin authors at sight, and from these she drew the solid learning and concise vivid style for which she afterwards became celebrated. She studied metaphysics and the natural sciences with the learned physician, Tacconi, her father's friend, studied them so eagerly and persistently that before long her master had sore trouble to defend himself in the discussions held with his pupil. Gassendi, professor of physical science, and the mathematician, Manfredi, were also her tutors; and before she was twenty all Bologna was ringing with her praises.

Nor was it considered singular that this young Italian girl of the eighteenth century should have for tutors the most learned men of her time. Why should it, in that land where learning was ever ranked as next to virtue, and in its pursuit woman was raised to as high honor as man?

Though her timidity was great, Laura had already sustained a most learned discussion in public, in the Latin tongue, with that pluralist in science, Beccasi, and with several other distinguished men; she had been elected a member of the Academy of Sciences; nothing remained but that highest honor in Bologna's gift, to admit her to a chair in the University. Such was her history as she stood that Spring morning in the Hall of Hercules with the sunlight gleaming upon her laurel crown, such the prelude to that triumphal march when all Bologna assembled with vivas and rejoicing to do her honor.

After the ceremony of coronation Laura was led to the presence of the Archbishop and Cardinal de Polignac, that Cardinal of Anti-Lucretius fame, and those dignitaries, we are told, rose most graciously to receive her. There were more Latin speeches and then more Latin replies from the indomitable girl. To complete the fes-

tivities a magnificent banquet was served in the Palace of the commemoration of the day with Laura's portrait on the one side and Minerva's on the others.

So entered into public life Laura Caterina Bassi, and for twenty-eight years she continued to teach in the great university, holding first one, then another, of its professional chairs. No distinguished personage or crowned head ever passed through Bologna without paying her his respects; and when she became Professor of Experimental Physics, the fame of her teaching brought her scholars from the furthest parts of Europe, many of whom became renowned in after years.

And what, it will be asked, was the heart-history of this woman? Had her heart been starved, as is sometimes charged of learned women, to make her head? One confesses that it is a genuine relief to learn that her entry into public life did not prevent her from entering also into the very honorable state of matrimony. She married the same year that she assumed her duties in the university a man of some distinction in science and letters, Dr. Verati, and in the course of time, with due awe be it spoken, she became the mother of children. Cerebral development in her case did not have the effect predicted by Herbert Spencer, Gregg and other writers of the present day. She is another refutation of that standing horror of the Philistines that knowledge of philosophy in woman necessitates ignorance of cooking, and that, given mathematics, she is liable at any moment to "desert an infant for a quadratic equation."

The duties of her professorship never caused her to neglect her home or her family. She superintended her husband and looked after her children as thoroughly as any good commonplace woman of them all, and she was no more zealous at her books and lectures than at her needle and spindle.

Standing in her university gown, the silver laurel wreath upon her brow, with no side of her womanhood stunted, no phase of it starved, a Christian wife, a loving mother, a learned doctor, true daughter of Italy, true daughter of the Church that honored her, may we not join in the plaudits that on that May morning rang through the arcaded streets of Old Bologna? May we not hail Laura Caterina Bassi as a noble, a fitting type for the womanhood of today.

The Church of England has redeemed itself from a grave scandal. Some time ago a marriage service was interrupted by a High Church minister rising in his pew and asking his officiating Low Church brother to stop the service, as the would-be bridegroom was a divorced man. But the interrupter was ordered to keep quiet and the service was continued to the close. The matter becoming public, the Duke of Newcastle and Lord Halifax took the High Church clergyman's part, and brought the affair to official notice. Now both houses of Convocation, the Archbishop of Canterbury presiding, have approved the conduct of the objector and his two noble backers, and incidentally condemned the Low Church minister before whom the divorced man was married. The thanks of society are due to Convocation and the protestants.

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Torquato Tasso.

It was Goethe who said "Only in Rome have I felt what it really is to be a man. As soon as we enter Rome a transformation takes place in us and we feel ourselves great, like the objects which surround us." And there are few places in the world where greatness and goodness are so readily acknowledged and so profoundly felt as here.

The inspired poet who sang the glories of "Jerusalem Delivered," telling in immortal verses to his contemporaries and to future ages the great deeds of the Crusaders, has never been forgotten in Italy in "the memory of the heart" of its people. There must have been some exaggeration in Byron's lines, when he wrote—

"In Venice Tasso's echoes are no more,
And silent rows the songless gondolier

At Chioggia, a town of fishermen a few miles from Venice, the traveller may see to-day a group of these bare-footed, half clothed "toilers of the sea," gathered in silence around some scholar, who reads to them the tale of "Jerusalem Delivered," as related in sonorous verse by Torquato Tasso, and they contribute, out of their scant and hard-earned savings, a few cents to pay the reader. This is indeed a glory such as Tasso himself would most desire. I have known laborers who work in vineyards, and who can neither read nor write, who can repeat nearly all of this great poem by memory; and who lighten their labor by a sort of chanting these heroic verses. People who have such a store to fall back upon cannot be altogether lonely, even in the absence of reading.

In his day Tasso was regarded as the laureate of the land. The honor of the laurel crown had, two centuries previously, been awarded to his great predecessor in poetry, Francis Petrarch. His solemn incorporation, "on that rock of imperishable glory," the Capitol of Rome, is related in full detail by Guy of Arezzo, an eye-witness. The name of "Laureate," as Father Prout remarks, was then first proclaimed, amid the shouts of applauding thousands, on the seven hills of the Eternal City, and echoed back with enthusiasm from the remotest corners of Christendom.

And when it came the turn of Tasso to receive the same grand distinction, the ceremonies were to be similar to those used two centuries before for Petrarch's coronation. "Death," writes Prout, "interposed his veto, and stretched out his bony hand between the laurel wreath and the poor maniac's brow, who, on the very eve of the day fixed for his ovation, expired on the Janiculum Hill, in the romantic hermitage of St. Onofrio. And the charming Irish writer adds: "Oft have I sat under that same cloister wall, where Tasso loved to bask in the mild ray of the setting sun, and there, with Rome's awful volume spread out before me, pondered on the frivolity of fame."

These honors were only prepared, never bestowed, on the unhappy singer of "Jerusalem Delivered." It was left to posterity to decree other honors to his memory, of a different nature to the myriad hues and symbols of the poet-laureate honor of a long gone past. In Rome the ceremonies of the tercentary celebration of Tasso's death may be said to have opened by the celebration of the solemn Mass of Requiem at eight in the morning in the Church of St. Onofrio, on the Janiculum Hill, in the adjoining convent of which the poet died. The celebrant was his Eminence, Cardinal Vincenzo Vannutelli, who afterwards pronounced the absolution at the tomb of Tasso, in one of the chapels of this church. Representatives of the Academy of the Arcadia were present, and placed a splendid wreath of bronze on the tomb.