

## THE BELLE OF THE ITALIAN REFORMATION.

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“There be none of Beauty’s daughters  
With a magic like thee.”

“Like a rich jewel in an Ethiop’s ear, the face and personality of Giulia Gonzaga are emblazoned on the sombre page of the Italian Reformation. Few, but church historians, appreciate how widespread was the longing for church reform and for a personal, spiritual religion, in the Italy of the XVI and XVII centuries. The men and women who felt these aspirations were for the most part learned and high-born, though the movement spread in some degree to the common people, and the average student will be surprised to find, that in the kingdom of Naples alone, their numbers ran up into the thousands, and that the opposition to the establishment of the Inquisition in that city was so deep and violent as to prevent it. I have not space for details, but the Italian reformers may be roughly divided into three groups: (1) the conservative and timid, who were forced or cajoled back into the procrustean uniformity of the Roman church like Vittoria Colonna and the cardinals Pole and Contarini; (2) an elect band of martyrs who suffered for their faith at the stake or were drowned in the still depths of the Venetian lagunes. Some of these are unknown to history, but there are others like Aonio Paleario, the tender husband and father, the learned and deeply pious Verolese professor at Lucca; or Carnesecci, the chivalrous monk and friend of Giulia Gonzaga, who has been called ‘the white martyr,’ of whom one cannot think without that thrill of glad surprise which makes our hearts to higher levels rise. A third class, and perhaps the larger number, were driven to flight by the terrors of the Holy Inquisition. Ochino, the eloquent Sienese preacher, became a

wanderer for the rest of his life over the face of Europe. The noble Peter Martyr Vermigli, the friend of Valdès and Ochino, a lecturer on Philosophy and prior of a Neapolitan monastery, was also compelled for the evangelical tone of his preaching to exile himself. He taught Old Testament exegesis at Strasburg, Oxford and Zürich, and summoned to England, by Cranmer, helped in the compilation of the English Book of Common Prayer. By his lectures and his notes on Corinthians and the books of the Old Testament, he was indeed one of the founders of the Reformed churches. Sismondi, the Genevan historian of the "Italian Republics," was descended from an Italian family who were driven out of Lucca for the same reason, and Felix Schelling, our Shakespeare scholar in the University of Pennsylvania, is a son of the Scellino family who had to emigrate from Locarno to Switzerland for the same imperative faith. There were many others whose names, suffering "a sea change" in the lands to which they went, are not easily traced.

Not only friendship and a corresponding faith links Giula Gonzaga's name to the Italian reformers, but also a remark which the terrible Ghislieri, Pope Pius V, is said to have made when her papers and correspondence fell into his hands just after her death:

"Oh, that I had had these sooner that I might have burned her too!"

Her curious story has lured many historians, and biographies of her have been written by Italian, German, French and English scholars, the latest being a voluminous, handsomely illustrated book by Chris. Hare,\* published by Scribner's three years ago, which amplifies contemporary detail and setting, but presents no new facts or throws any fresh light on the elusive, but real question, of the lady's personality. Many years ago the "idea of her life (did) sweetly creep into my study of imagination," and I followed every clue I could find about her in

\*Christopher Hare, pseudonym of Marian Andrews.

the vast Victor Emanuel library in Rome; but when I made a special journey to Mantua to see if anything more intimate and personal could be discovered in the Gonzaga Archives, which are among the most valuable in Europe, the distinguished historian, Luzzio, who is director there, told me that it would be a futile search.

“You may be sure,” he said, “if there were any annals of Donna Giulia’s heretical convictions, and her connection with the Reformation, her kinsman, Cardinal Gonzaga, would have not allowed them to be preserved. Everything has been pretty thoroughly sifted. The only chance at all to find anything about her would be to wade through the gossip, detailed reports with which the Mantuan, like the Venetian, ambassadors in Rome were required to furnish their home government, but it would be a mammoth undertaking affording scant if any results, for the aforesaid reason.”

The setting of Giulia Gonzaga’s life is saturated with that picturesque and many sided quality which is peculiar to the brilliant and complex period of which she was so conspicuous a figure. I have called her the belle of the Reformation, but she was really the most noted beauty of the Renaissance age. The tradition that Charles V. was one of her lovers, while it has, I think, no historical basis, yet shows the esteem in which her attractions were held, and we have the witness of every great poet and painter of her time to her supreme loveliness of person and spirit. It was a century of hyperbole, but the testimony of Titian and Ariosto is convincing. Bernardo Tasso, father of the poet of *The Jerusalem Delivered*, describes her in verses which dwell upon inner, rather than mere external, beauty:

“Her holy eyes and thoughts, like arrows to the mark, turn to God; living to Him, she is dead to herself, and on none other feeds and takes comfort,” but other men tell of a high, serene brow shaded by golden, curly hair and those clear, shining windows of her soul which opened

under tranquil, black lashes. As will be seen, the men who fell under the spell of those eyes or were ennobled by the subtler influences of her mind and character were a large and varied company.

The princely Gonzaga family was one of the most powerful of North Italy. The fanciful frescoes of their palaces in Mantua though obliterated and besmirched by barbaric, northern soldiers, yet attest the taste and culture of nobles who furnished models for the pleasure houses of Europe. Italians could find no lovelier thing to reproduce for their national exposition than the dainty blue and gold "Little Paradise," in which Isabella d'Este, a Gonzaga bride, received the most brilliant of her contemporaries, or read those Elzevir and Aldine editions of the classics which she so dearly prized. One cannot but smile over the claims and pretensions of some of our modern American women, when one considers how the women of the Renaissance already knew how to conciliate higher learning with womanly charm and beauty.

A hundred years before Isabella d'Este and Giulia Gonzaga, Vittorino da Feltre, one of the greatest educators of history, held in the Casa Zoiosa a wonderful school for the young Gonzaga princes, in which he emphasized the *mens sana in corpore sano* and vied with Arnold of Rugby in the nobility and simplicity of his scholastic ideals, with an almost Anglo-Saxon insistence upon truth telling and clean, active living; offering scholarships to poor boys and inciting the young Gonzagas to emulation of them.

But my Giulia could not boast of being a fellow-citizen of Virgil for she was born in 1513 at another fief of the Gonzaga family not very far from Mantua and her father was of a younger branch of the descendants of Lothiar. Her mother was a Fieschi of Genoa, but she was early left an orphan and reared by a wise old grandmother. Even as a child she learned to ride, and to fly the falcon on the misty banks of the Oglio River which

flows through a flat country. Indoors, she was taught Greek and Latin and music, embroidery and sewing. From infancy she seems to have been surpassingly beautiful, disproving the old Italian proverb that she who is pretty in swaddling bands will be ugly in the piazza. An old contemporary so describes her:

“Giulia surpasses all her sisters. Her modesty cannot conceal her gifts and attractions. Ever ready with piquant, witty sayings, she is yet ever gently courteous. She sings the sweetest melodies. Devoted to knowledge as Minerva, she has the artist’s gift to reproduce the many beauties of nature.” It was the good old custom to read much aloud, and the tales of Godefroi de Bouillon and King Arthur, the Divine Comedy and the Epistles of Saint Jerome fell upon a ready ear and an alert intelligence. At nine years old, we find her twice sending motetts with pretty little notes to her kinsman, the Marquis Federico Gonzaga of Mantua.

At the early age of twelve, she was invited by her kinswoman, Isabella d’Este, to be one of a party of ladies on a trip to Rome, where Isabella was going to obtain a cardinal’s hat for her son. By horse and barge and litter, they made a wonderful progress from one powerful kinsman’s castle to another in Ferrara, Ravenna, Pesaro and Urbino, and were brilliantly entertained, for while the courtiers of Queen Elizabeth still ate without forks, Italy had all the amenities of a luxurious civilization. It was probably on this journey, in the beautiful red castle of the Este family at Ferrara, that Ariosto was charmed by the glance of those “serene eyes” and set her portrait in his gallery.\*

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\*“Giulia Conzaga che dovunque il piede

Volge e dovunque I sereni occhi gira

Non pur ogn’ altra di bettítá la cede

Ma come scesa dal ciel dea l’ammira.”

In Rome they were lodged in the stately Palazzo Colonna, having a daily allowance from the pope for meats, wines and dainties. They met all that was brilliant and worthy in Roman society. It was a time when artists and scholars were being thrilled and fertilized to activity, not only by the men and the manuscripts which the Fall of Constantinople had sent to Italy, but in Rome itself they were rediscovering buried treasures of classic beauty to serve as models for a new epoch in art, and the arabesques of the freshly excavated Baths of Titus guided the hand of Raphael in the decoration of the Vatican loggie. Can we doubt that the sensitive mind of the lovely young Giulia was stimulated by the intellectual pollen which was in the very air. Why, in the garden of the palace where she walked daily were the remains of the ancient Temple of the Sun, and men were waking to the treasures of the Forums which are hardly more than a stone's throw from Palazzo Colonna.

With a start of surprise, we are reminded that "she who is born beautiful, is born marriageable," by finding that in June of 1526, our Giulia, to our modern eyes, hardly more than a child, is betrothed and married, in the chapel of that same house, to Prince Vespasiano Colonna, a widower with a daughter as old as the bride. Of course we do not know how she felt, but it was considered a brilliant match as the Colonna were among the first lords in Europe. Vespasiano seems to have really loved his girl bride and to have truly esteemed her, for he not only left her, in his will, the uncontrolled possession of the larger share of his vast estates, but also made her guardian of his daughter Isabella, who was to prove a thorny charge. It is said that Vespasiano Colonna took a deep interest in the principles of the Reformation and was really attached to them, imbuing his young wife with the same love and interest. But of this we cannot be certain. Immediately after the wedding, he took the two young women to Palliano, one of his estates in the Sabine

mountains, tarrying for a night at Marino, another Colonna castle set in the cyclamen and violet-scented woods which fringe Lake Albano.

But Giulia Gonzaga was not destined to lead a peaceful, secluded marriage life for long. Italy was racked by the contentions of Spain and France, in which all the Gonzaga and Colonna kin were involved. The year after the marriage saw the sack of Rome by the Constable of Bourbon when Europe stood aghast at what northern soldiery were capable of. Giulia's brother, Luigi Rhodonte, a gigantic palladin of the Orlando Furioso type helped the pope to escape, and then flew up to remote Palliano to protect his beautiful sister and her step-daughter, for Vespasiano had died very suddenly leaving a widow not yet sixteen years old.

Giulia's biographers have differed over the significance of her choice at this time of her emblem, an amaranth flower with the motto "Non Moritura." Monkish writers have affirmed that it referred to the preservation of chastity. Protestants have given it a religious meaning as declaring her faith in the immortality of the soul and a future life. She never married again, but every man, woman and child whom she met seems to have succumbed not only to her rare beauty, but to the more permanent spell of charm and goodness, combined with unusual intellectual culture and a deeply religious nature. We cease to think of the swanlike grace of her white neck, the delicately penciled brows and almond-shaped eyes, the lovely mouth, wavy golden hair, long slender fingers of exquisitely shaped hands, and the tall, beautifully moulded figure, to be seen in her painted portraits in Vienna, Rome and England, and are enchanted rather by the thought of a being breathing thoughtful breath, in whose breast dwelt holy valor, supreme unselfishness and a warm, throbbing human heart. We are told that when she passed over the grass, little flowers seemed to spring beneath her feet and that she appeared to be the daughter, or

the sister, of spring herself; but more compelling, across the cold gap of the centuries, are little phases of feminine tenderness like this for little cousins and kin:

“Kiss the babies for me, but most of all kiss my most beautiful, my *most delicious* Douna Ippolita.” Douna Ippolita was six then. The familiar word of *nini* which she uses always for children conveys rather the idea of “the darlings.”

I have not space to tell of the secret marriage of her beloved brother Luigi to her step-daughter Isabella, nor of his death shortly after from wounds in battle, of the birth of their child Vespasian who, when his mother married again, became the supreme object of his Aunt Giulia's devotion. During the summer before the birth of this boy in 1531, Giulia transferred her residence to Fondi, a Colonna fief in the kingdom of Naples from which she derived her title of Countess of Fondi, by which she is best known. This curious old walled village, where St. Paul is said to have rested and St. Thomas Aquinas to have taught theology near an orange tree, planted by himself, is on the Appian Way and the old coach road between Rome and Naples. The landscape in which it is set, is of that enchanting quality to be found only in Italy. It is as if Sicily were holding up her cornucopia of loveliness towards the North to verify Mignon's song. Orange groves and silvery olives lap the little town in softness, and stretch to a sparkling sea, while on the Southern horizon the magic, opaline profile of the Mount of Circe, rises like an exquisite, vaporous ghost of the myths and poetry of Greece—“A dancing shape, an image gay, to haunt, to startle and waylay.” No more fitting background could have been found for the loveliest woman in Italy and she spent some years here. It is said that the Via Appia, from a street of tombs, was changed into a frequented thoroughfare for the literary, artistic visitors who thronged to visit the young widow. Her secretary



Porrino, was a well known writer of the day. Only the student of Italian literature would be interested in the majority of these guests, but among them were two of European fame whose lives and thoughts were to be deeply intertwined with those of Giulia Gonzaga: Vittoria Colonna and Juan Valdès. Letters from both ladies show the friendship and admiration which existed between Giulia and her husband's distinguished cousin, the poetess and friend of Michael Angelo. In one letter Vittoria recalled the cordial hospitality she had enjoyed from Giulia at Fondi, and thanked her for an "Exposition concerning St. Paul," by Valdès, which she greatly needed and desired. She so spoke of a journey Giulia was planning to Lombardy: "It is fitting that my Donna Giulia should revisit her earthly *patria*, being so conversant with the heavenly one." They belonged to the same set socially and intellectually, and in a sense religiously, but as the times waxed to sharper cleavage, Vittoria seems to have condemned reformers like Ochino and repudiated doctrines opposed to the Roman church, while Giulia became more intimately associated with them, devoting love, care, time and money to their cause. Vittoria's attitude is as ambiguous as the famous frescoed figure of Solomon in the Pisa Campo Santo.

Juan Valdès visited Fondi with a letter of introduction from Cardinal Gonzaga and so wrote to him: "I stopped a day at Fondi with that Lady of whom I can only say that it seems to me a pity she is not the queen of the whole world, but I think God so arranged it that we poor creatures might enjoy her divine conversation and courtesy which are not inferior to her beauty."

It was no mere parlor knight who wrote this, for Juan de Valdès was a Spanish gentleman of manners so courtly, a life so pure, and a piety so deep and active that he made the most profound impression on the saints and worldlings of his generation, and was the inspiration and center of the movement for a more spiritual religion.

His brother was the Latin secretary of the Emperor Charles V, but his own book, "Dialogo de Mercurio y Caron," brought him into collision with the Inquisition so that he left Spain and spent the rest of his life in Italy. He is described as a true knight of the holy grail without fear and without reproach, one in whom the keen sword of soul and intellect had well-nigh pierced the frail sheath of the body. Some of his writings were translated into English by Nicholas Ferrar and won for him the love of our own quaint George Herbert. Another visitor to Fondi was the painter Sebastian del Piombo, to whom the pope lent swift horses that he might more quickly paint the portrait of Lady Giulia. And here it may not be irrelevant to quote what the Countess of Fondi wrote to an old friend about her picture by Titian which has disappeared: "As for my portrait, I do not know whether I should rejoice, for if it is as beautiful as you say, it cannot resemble me, for it would seem that Messer Tiziano sought to show the greatness of his genius by painting an absolutely beautiful woman, as I should be, but am not really. But I rejoice that this portrait is in the hands of your Excellency, so I may hope that through this picture, you will be reminded of the real person and be more generous with your letters."

But the most notorious event of Giulia's life at Fondi was a violent one in which she narrowly escaped with life and honor. The Sultan of Turkey having heard of her great beauty, desired to obtain her for his harem. The corsair Barbarossa undertook to capture her for this purpose. Landing with his men on the coast near by, he raided the country, burning and murdering all that came in their way. Disappointed at not finding Donna Giulia in the Fondi convent, he set fire to it, after violating and killing the terrified nuns, and the countess would have been caught in the darkness but for the fidelity of a servant who helped her to escape, half-clad, through a window of her palace and hide for twenty-four hours in the thick

woods of Monte Passignano. Some slimy slander and mossy legend have gathered about this strange adventure. It has been said that, to protect herself, the Lady Giulia mutilated her beauty with a dagger; and a monkish historian insinuates that the servant man who saved her, but saw her unclothed, was afterwards killed for it, by her orders. There is a ring of the old tilt yard in the exclamation of the historian Ireneo Affó ápropos of this story:

“This friar lies foully in his throat!” There is a well known Italian poem called, “The Fugitive Nymph,” dedicated to a dear friend of Giulia’s, the brilliant young cardinal, Ippolito dei Medici, in which her terrible nocturnal flight is described; and the whole episode, incredible as it seems, is vouched for by serious historians and contemporaries. This raid was the occasion of a successful expedition against the Turks by pope and emperor. Cardinal Ippolito dei Medici was one of the most active in rushing to Donna Giulia’s defense and driving the corsairs from the coast. Early in life he had been chosen by Vespasiano Colonna as the future husband of his daughter Isabella, but the engagement appealed to neither of the main parties. After Vespasiano’s death Isabella married Luigi Rhodomonte, and Ippolito is said to have been deeply enamoured of her lovely step-mother, Luigi’s sister. However that may be, shortly after the corsair raid, a fresh shock came to Donna Giulia. She was at church when the news came that Cardinal Ippolito was dying of poison administered in a cup of chicken broth. On horseback she rode at once to Itri, the mountain town where he was staying, the birthplace of Fra Diavolo, a veritable eagle’s nest on the crest of the purple Apennine, staying with him until his death, which the historian Giovio, who was present, tells us was less bitter for Donna Giulia’s virtuous and tender ministrations.

These two dark events made life at Fondi impossible for her, and she, shortly after, removed her establishment to Naples, which was to witness the most characteristic

phase of her story and development. It is difficult to realize that even then she was only twenty-three years old. She had occupied for some time a position of great responsibility, she had suffered the loss of many loved ones so that she was singularly isolated for a young and beautiful woman, and she had been vexed by lawsuits and complications connected with the restless Isabella, at once her step-daughter and the widow of her beloved brother. The Emperor Charles V commanded her presence at court, where she was welcomed by many friends and kinspeople, but she was formed for loftier things than the gaiety of Neapolitan society. She withdrew from it and devoted herself not only to the education and establishment of her beloved nephew Vespasian, but to the poor and sick of the hospitals and especially to the neglected children of that seething city. Even this did not satisfy her hungry soul and we find her gathered into the elect group of noble minds which Juan de Valdès had attracted to the study and practice of Christ's Gospel. Fra Bernardo Ochino, the eloquent Sieneſe preacher, was drawing the whole city to hear him and stirring the people so profoundly that not long after, he was set upon for his heretical opinions and compelled to fly the country.

One day while he was preaching, Donna Giulia's heart was so troubled by his message that she left the church in tears, sorely needing to find rest for her soul, and very wretched. And she found that rest and peace, under the wise and spiritual ministrations of the gentle Spanish knight, Valdès. In private, personal conversation, he pointed out to her the way of salvation through justification by faith, showing her that pious deeds could only be the fruits of that faith, and pointing out to her the repose which the soul, emancipated by Christ, might find in God. That conversation seems to have made daylight in her spirit and she was, ever after, his best beloved disciple. He wrote for her his "Christian Alphabet" which seems to be, in dialogue form, a reproduction of that momentous

talk in which, by God's grace, he was the instrument of her conversion. For her he seems to have written his translations of the Psalms and his notes on St. Paul's epistles and other works. Here is one of his letters to her :

To the Most Illustrious Lady Giulia Gongaza—"Being persuaded, Illustrious Lady, that the continual reading of the Psalms of David, which I sent you last year, translated from Hebrew into Spanish, has formed your mind to so pious and confident a trust in God that you can leave everything in His hands as David did; desiring that you may go forward, and that there should be formed in you a mind as firm, perfect and constant as that of St. Paul in the things belonging to the Gospel, I now send you these Epistles of St. Paul translated from Greek into Spanish, the continual reading of which will, I feel sure, contribute greatly to your progress in spiritual edification, provided, however, you do not read from curiosity or vanity, as men do who are without piety, thinking thereby to serve God: setting themselves to read St. Paul as a Spaniard would do to speak Greek with the object of pleasing a Greek Emperor—. You should imitate St. Paul inasmuch as you see that he imitates Christ. Strive to be more like Christ and like God, and thus recover the image and likeness of God in which the first man was created. . . I only wish to hold up David and St. Paul as patterns, so long as your mind is not able to take as your patterns Christ and God."

So Juan de Valdès "taught to others in the name of his Divine Master, in the dwelling-house, or walking by the way, and often for those, who had an ear to hear, by parable" . . . and Giulia Gonzaga did have the ear to hear, and yielded him inspiring response and sympathy, and showed in her life the fruits of righteousness. We are told that Michael Angelo loved to hear Valdès' translation, from the Greek, of the Epistle to the Romans, in the company of Vittoria Colonna as they sat together in the monastery to which she retired in Rome. In Naples,

Valdès and his friends met in his house on Chiaja and in the Colonna villa on the Island of Ischia, and we hear of wonderful Sundays which they spent studying the Holy Scriptures under the direction of Valdès. But at the age of forty-one, Juan de Valdès passed to his reward and his friends, while they mourned and missed him, yet felt perhaps that it was better, for the shadows of the Inquisition were closing in on Italy, and life was growing precarious for those who would follow the narrow Way.

Donna Giulia had obtained permission, about five years before, to take up her residence in the Convent of San Francesco delle Monache, in which uncloistered nuns daily distributed the king's alms to the poor. She lived there as a lay person keeping up a sort of establishment of her own, receiving her visitors freely. Indeed, Annibal Caro (the Lady Mary Wortley Montague of Italian letters) wrote when Giulia had passed the zenith of her girlish beauty, that he had rather see Donna Giulia Gonzaga than anything, or anyone, in Naples or its environs.

In what remains of her voluminous and varied correspondence, and in revelations made by the trial of her friend, Carnesecchi, we catch broken gleams of her life and thoughts. Many of her letters are in cypher, probably to keep inviolate the plans and safety of her friends and protégés among the reformers, and here and there her secretary's script is interrupted by swift, cryptic sentences in her own handwriting. I am very fond of a letter which she wrote to a certain Madonna Livia who had been beguiled by one of those alchemists so in vogue at the time, and here is one paragraph:

“Would you like me, Madonna Livia, to teach you a true and beautiful alchemy? Lay up for yourself treasure in heaven, where thieves do not break through and steal, where the rust doth not consume nor the moth gnaw and destroy. That which is acquired by evil means is no gain, but a great and dangerous loss. The promises of the alchemist are like those of the astrologers who boast

that they can foretell future things and do not even know the present or the past, and yet they dare to profess that they can reveal heavenly matters as if they were ever present at the council of God. I do not really know whether their fraud is more shameful or our folly in believing, as we do, that which is worthy of all contempt. Look within yourself, Madonna Livia, and if your power does not correspond to your desires, at least place a rein upon them, and then you will not devote yourself to alchemy.”

Her heart rings true as she writes of that same “most delicious darling” grown up to maidenhood . . . . “having perhaps been too importunate about the establishment of Donna Ippolita, I will only say that this young girl gives me supreme delight in all things, and more so every day. If the matter is not settled, may our Lord God order all for the best . . . .” With a mother-heart, she watched and tended Ippolita on her dying bed, a young wife of 28—as she had done in the troubles and complication of her brief lifetime.

She took a lively and benevolent interest in all her wide connection and lavished pensions, and constant aid, on the exiled reformers, and her old servants, and though conscious of her danger from the aroused Inquisition, she refused to fly from Naples, where she died on April 19, 1566, commending her soul to her Redeemer, Jesus Christ, and leaving the most careful directions for the support of her poor friends, her dependents and servants, providing freedom and support of several slaves, and dowries for the daughters of a friend. She could have no better epitaph than the words of Carnesecchi who was beheaded and burned very soon afterwards. He said, she was to him “a fixed star, by whose light he had guided his course in the darkness of a blind world, whose example had kept him from many illicit and impure things, and then had freed him from a superstitious and false religion and kept him within due bounds where otherwise he would have fallen into grave danger.”