

## VI

## The Young Sicilian, Luigi Monti

HE was not a very important person," said the professor. "He owes his significance to the fact that Longfellow included him in the group at the Wayside Inn. There was nothing else about him especially worth remembering."

From the standpoint of the makers of a dictionary or an encyclopedia, this verdict probably is fair, but all of life is not included within the covers of even the greatest and best of encyclopedias. There are all the unsung heroes of the common life, and there are all the people who, in no sense heroes, manage to keep the wheels turning so that life can go on.

Quite apart from the "Tales of a Wayside Inn," the life of Luigi Monti has significance. He was a lover of liberty, a revolutionist who dared and lost, an exile from home, and a penniless refugee in a strange land. He became a citizen of a new country, at home in the English language, a teacher at Harvard, a lecturer and writer, a United States consul, the builder of a home, the close friend of a great poet. Always he contributed gayety, light-heartedness, charm, a love of beauty, a passion for music, to a serious-minded nation. Even in old age he could laugh like a boy. He is worth remembering and thinking about. His enthusiasms lessen the tension of taut nerves.

Luigi Monti was born January 26, 1830, in Palermo, Sicily, and was educated in the schools of his native city. He early developed a taste for literature

and read widely. In 1848-49 he served in the Revolutionary Army which was trying to end the power of the Bourbon kings. He was exiled in 1850 and came to the United States. He himself wrote of this experience: "Having escaped by a miracle from the hands of a tyrant in Sicily and come to the United States with scarcely a rag to cover me, I have worked incessantly." Through the influence of Mr. Longfellow, who was retiring from the faculty, he was in 1854 appointed an instructor in Italian at Harvard at a salary of \$500. After five years' service he and several other tutors lost their positions, due to a reorganization of the department and the necessity of combining several tutors' salaries to make the salary of a professor.

Luigi Monti did not submit tamely. He dared to print and send a memorial, dated January 17, 1859, which began as follows: "To the Honorable and Reverend the Board of Overseers of Harvard College, the Instructor of Italian respectfully submits the following."

Monti stated that only two months before the action of the Overseers he had been offered the position of instructor in Italian and Spanish by the University of Virginia at a salary double what he received in Cambridge, that he had consulted gentlemen connected with the college and had been dissuaded from resigning because Harvard did not lightly dismiss those connected with the faculty. He pointed out that he had prepared two text books—an Italian grammar and an Italian reader—both of which had been accepted by the college, and that during the time that the professorship of Modern Languages had been vacant he had given instruction in Dante, a labor not required of him. He argued that the action taken was a blot upon his reputation and wrote: "As I stated be-

fore, the corporation has the legal right to make any change it chooses, but it has not a moral right to impeach the reputation of a faithful officer who has served conscientiously the university for five years." A month later President Walker sent to Monti the vote of the corporation stating that his dismissal "did not originate in any personal dissatisfaction with him either as a teacher or a man."

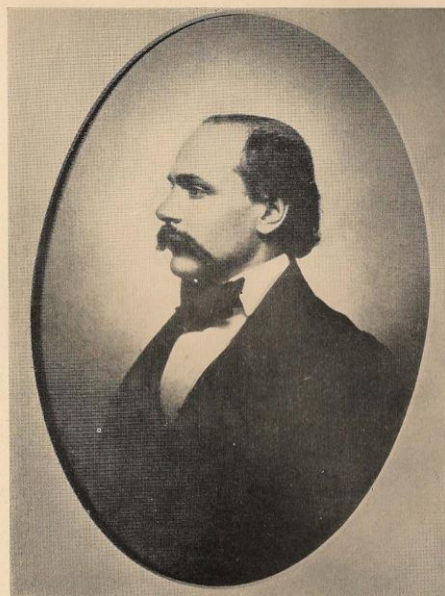
Harvard had given him the honorary degree of Master of Arts in 1857.

In June, 1851, Monti married Frances A. (Fanny) Parsons, daughter of Dr. Thomas W. Parsons, of 16 Winter Street, Boston, in whose home he boarded. She was a sister of Thomas William Parsons, the Poet of the Tales, and both Monti and his wife became members of that summer colony at the Red Horse Tavern to which the poet was so devoted.

Through Garibaldi the revolution in which the young Sicilian had risked his life at last succeeded. His beloved Sicily was annexed to the Italy of King Victor Emmanuel. Then through the influence of the friends that he had made in Boston and Cambridge, Monti was appointed United States Consul at Palermo—a post that he held from 1861 to 1873. The youth of twenty who barely escaped with his life came back in just a little more than a decade with the commission of the great republic where he had taken refuge.

His younger daughter was born in Palermo and died there in 1869, aged six. Her death moved her uncle, T. W. Parsons, to write a tender and beautiful verse:

Six years of Sicily and then a grave!  
Such was the little life our Father gave  
To thee, sweet child; how few that count four-score  
May number six whole years of sunshine o'er!  
She never knew a cloudier clime than this,  
And so shall feel the more at home in bliss.



Luigi Monti, the Young Sicilian



When the politicians of Grant's time got the office of consul away from him, Monti returned to Boston, where he gave lessons in Italian, delivered lectures and published two or more books. His novel, "Leone," is not a work of great merit but the plot might easily prove a gold mine to a clever scenario writer of today. His "Adventures of a Consul Abroad" was published in 1878. It could not have been taken very seriously by the Boston of that golden age of literature. He translated several works from Italian into English and apparently turned his hand to many literary jobs to earn an honest penny. He delivered the Lowell Lectures in the fall of 1876 on "Modern Italian Literature," and had that same high honor for a second time in 1880, when his subject was "Dante and His Times and Works." There is a record of his lecturing at Vassar, Wellesley, Peabody Institute and other institutions.

He moved to New York City before returning to Europe. As A. H. B. in the *Boston Traveler* of April 15, 1922, puts it, "he lived in New York City in the late eighties and the early nineties."

On March 12, 1890, Monti sent from 107 East 45th Street, New York, to the librarian of Harvard College, an entry for the Harvard file about himself: "King Humbert has lately conferred the Cross of the Crown of Italy upon him for his services in 1848-49 as a patriot and exile and his works as a man of letters in this country."

Professor J. D. M. Ford of Harvard, who wrote a sketch of Monti which has not been published as yet, says that he left the United States in 1893. His wife died in Viareggio in 1906 and is buried in Rome. Thereafter he made his home with his daughter Elena, who had married an officer in the Italian army named di Majo. They lived in various places where this

officer was stationed—Cagliari in Sardinia, Catania in Sicily, and finally Milan, where General di Majo was in command of the Army of Northern Italy.

He died March 3, 1914, at the age of eighty-four, the last survivor of the characters in the Tales. The circle had been broken when the Student died in 1856. The Landlord followed in 1861. The Theologian died in 1872, the Musician in 1880, the Spanish Jew in 1889, the Poet in 1892, and then finally the Young Sicilian, fifty-eight years after the first break in the group.

Letters in existence throw light upon some of the chapters of his life given here in such bare outline.

In the Parsons letters recently edited and published by Zoltan Haraszti of the Boston Public Library, there are several which show how the literary group in Boston and Cambridge helped Monti get his appointment as consul and keep it for twelve years in spite of a hungry rush of office-seekers. Both Parsons and Longfellow doubtless used their influence with their friend Charles Sumner to secure the appointment in the first place. Parsons keeps Sumner in touch with the life of the Montis in Palermo. In 1861 "all is right" with their friend in Palermo. In 1863 "we hear constantly from Mr. Monti. He is well and hard at work. My sister is well and has two children—and, what is strange, seems to be less homesick than her husband."

In 1866 "Mr. Monti of Palermo frequently desires to be warmly remembered to you. I hear good accounts of his devotedness to his office on every hand, and I believe that you will never have occasion to regret the eminent services you rendered to him toward his appointment."

Then came 1869. Andrew Johnson went out of office and Ulysses S. Grant came in. The Grant followers had their eyes upon every post big and small

that they could seize. Promptly Monti was replaced.

What followed illustrates the power of Sumner and the loyalty of Lowell both to his absent friend Longfellow and to Parsons. The following sentences from the letter of Parsons to Lowell tell the story. It is dated April 14, 1869:

"Mr. Monti has been eight years at his present post and I have heard from every possible source of information that he has given eminent satisfaction in his office to all classes. . . . He has always proved himself a firm friend of the Administration and is in fact in heart and feeling as much of an American as I am, and I fear I might truly say, a better patriot. His salary is only \$1500 a year and he had two little girls—the elder about nine years old; the other, about six, he has just lost. While this grief is upon him, Mrs. Parsons writes me tonight—and I also see by the papers—that a new nomination has been made for Palermo; and the news knocks me down. What shall I do, my dear Lowell? You are au fait with politics and parties. You are not only a poet but a man of the world which I by no means am. Were Mr. Longfellow here (he was abroad) I do believe his noble friendship for Luigi would spur him to go on at once to Washington and use his influence to stay this overthrow. . . . I can not but think you would be doing him (Mr. Longfellow) a great favor, as well as a generous kindness to Mr. Monti and to me, to write a good word to Mr. Sumner in my brother's behalf. To beg I am not ashamed in this cause. My plea would be nothing in Washington. A word from yourself in the right quarter might be a charm to stay the falling axe."

Those who know Washington and politics will realize what Lowell and Sumner together accomplished. President Grant sent a special message to the Senate



withdrawing the appointment of Monti's successor, and he was undisturbed for four years more.

In 1873, things were different. Grant came in for a second term. Sumner had lost his power. Parsons pursued the Secretary of State, Hamilton Fish, from one city to another and finally had an interview with him at his country place, Garrisons Landing on the Hudson, and found that "Luigi had no chance of re-appointment."

Monti came back to the United States, established himself at 1 Beacon Street, Boston, but kept his residence in Palermo, still hoping to go back.

The bulletin of the Boston Public Library puts us under a debt of gratitude by publishing a frank letter of Parsons to his sister, Mrs. Monti, which the editor says was never sent. It was written August 27, 1882: "It rejoices my heart to feel, what I gather from the tone of your letter, that in your own heart you still cherish some longings for your country, for America you know *is* our country—and is Nellie Parsons Monti's birthplace, and as for Luigi he is downright, double-distilled, Cape Cod Yankee." The next paragraph half-heartedly approves of his sister's desire to keep her residence in Palermo, but says that since his confidential talk with Hamilton Fish, Secretary of State, a few years before, he had given up all hope of seeing Luigi back in a consulate. Then he writes these interesting and illuminating paragraphs:

"Besides, Mr. Monti in making himself a literary man has in some degree unmade himself for an official position. Uncle Sam does not want literati to contend with mutinous crews and ignorant sea-captains. A scholar like Hawthorne might indeed be sent to Liverpool in remuneration for electioneering services to a Democratic President; a lofty compliment from a genius like Hawthorne to a boon-companion and so

forth. But Hawthorne was not a good consul like Luigi Monti; in fact, appeared on most occasions of business the booby that he really was, out of his own department, which was purely of imaginative literature, for which he was gifted and cultivated to an extraordinary degree."

Turning again to the subject of Monti he wrote: "Nevertheless your husband is—to be candid with you, my dear Fanny—not much of a literary man and very little of a scholar in the high sense of scholarship. Because he gives in Boston, under a certain influence, and with a *not* uncertain prestige, a course or two of Lowell lectures which my friend James Lowell must have been remotely instrumental in obtaining, you must not fancy that he is to be reckoned among the sacred band whom the vulgar designate as 'literary fellows.' From your long residence abroad, my dear Fanny, and I am writing very freely, with apologetic advances—you might easily, from Luigi's talk, overrate his position. Mr. Monti is industriously using his talents to secure a permanent position as tutor—not Professor, for which he is by no means qualified. I dwell on this distinction because you so frequently have spoken of a Professorship at Cambridge, and ignorant people often talk to me of Professor Monti. If you come back to Boston, you must at once and forever disabuse your mind of this rubbish. It is more than Luigi Monti can do to understand fully a single Canto of the *Paradiso*. Is he then qualified to succeed Mr. Longfellow, who was himself in many passages wholly astray? A higher tone of scholarship is now exacted in our part of New England than that which might content Palermo. I will not speak of Chicago or any of those newly sprung or pretentious places. But I wish you to know that in the state of Massachusetts there

are plenty of people dwelling in obscurity—farmers' daughters and mothers of hard-working children—who can easily distinguish between mental qualities and know the genuine from the . . ."

Then the editor of *More Books* writes: "Twice Parsons remarks, 'They are calling me to dinner,' but although determined 'not to descend to the table d'hôte' he seems to have succumbed to the summons. This may be the reason that the letter was abruptly broken off—and apparently never was sent."

Luigi Monti may not have been a scholar in the Boston sense, but he was an intelligent, charming man, devoted to the Italian poets, Meli, Dante, Petrarch, Ariosto and Tasso, and next to them Boccaccio. It is written, "he took delight in the Sicilian verses of Meli." He was able to appreciate a man like Mr. Longfellow and was in turn beloved by the poet and all the members of the household. The Longfellow story must have a chapter to itself.

That his youth stayed with him in old age we can see by the following delightful letter from Gertrude Merrell Lowe (Mrs. William Baird Lowe) written March 22, 1939:

"Your articles in *The Christian Leader* on the Wayside Inn are most interesting, but especially so to me, for I once met one of that charming coterie of men. This was Signor Monti at the Hotel Victoria on Lake Como, Italy, in the summer of 1913.

"Signor Monti's daughter, Donna Elena di Majo, was also there with her tall handsome husband, who was a general commanding Lake Como and the surrounding district. General di Majo was aide-de-camp to His Majesty, the King of Italy, from 1906 to 1910. In 1910, he was promoted and made 'Commandante di Corpo d'Armata' with headquarters at Milan. In 1914, he was called by His Majesty and served as

his aide-de-camp during the World War. He was then retired with high honor.

"Donna di Majo made friends with my little daughter. She afterward told me, 'I have always wanted to meet a dear little American girl because my mother was one.' (Miss Parsons.) This led to a friendship that has lasted through the years.

"Signor Monti and the general have both passed away, but Elena di Majo still lives in Rome, Italy.

"Signor Monti wrote in my book, 'A young Sicilian he, fresh from Salerno's blue.' He was very jolly and most entertaining. He told funny tales about his friend Garibaldi and of his lecturing at Vassar and other colleges. He loved the Longfellow family. Mrs. Longfellow's death caused such grief to him and to his wife! We had just been honored with a private audience at the Vatican with Pope Pius X and were most enthusiastic about the kindness of the Pope. We dwelt upon his beautiful complexion—so like a baby's. 'Oh, yes,' he said, and pointing to his forehead, 'but Leo had the brains.'

"Upon his return to his native land he hastened to see his old friend Garibaldi. They had been friends together in the army.

"Upon being admitted, he informed the servant that the American Consul wished to see him (Garibaldi), and sent in his card. The servant returned with the news that Garibaldi was taking his bath, and would receive the visitor as soon as possible. He was unaware that his old friend had become an American citizen.

"Signor Monti then sent word back that official business of the greatest importance required an audience at once. Without delay Monti was ushered into the presence of the patriot in his bath. When he



saw his old friend he hurled a cake of soap at him and shouted, 'You old fraud!'

"Signor Monti told me this, and how he laughed and his eyes twinkled at the recollection."

In the prelude to the first series of the "Tales of a Wayside Inn," Longfellow writes of Monti the lines that will make his personality known to readers of English verse for generations yet to come:

A young Sicilian, too, was there;  
In sight of Etna born and bred,  
Some breath of its volcanic air  
Was glowing in his heart and brain,  
And, being rebellious to his liege,  
After Palermo's fatal siege,  
Across the western seas he fled,  
In good King Bomba's happy reign.  
His face was like a summer night,  
All flooded with a dusky light;  
His hands were small; his teeth shone white  
As sea-shells, when he smiled or spoke;  
His sinews supple and strong as oak.

. . . . .  
Much too of music was his thought;  
The melodies and measures fraught  
With sunshine and the open air,  
Of vineyards and the singing sea  
Of his beloved Sicily;  
And much it pleased him to peruse  
The songs of the Sicilian muse,—  
Bucolic songs by Meli sung  
In the familiar peasant tongue,  
That made men say, "Behold! once more  
The pitying gods to earth restore  
Theocritus of Syracuse!"