

Pascoli, Giovanni

Paulo Ucello;

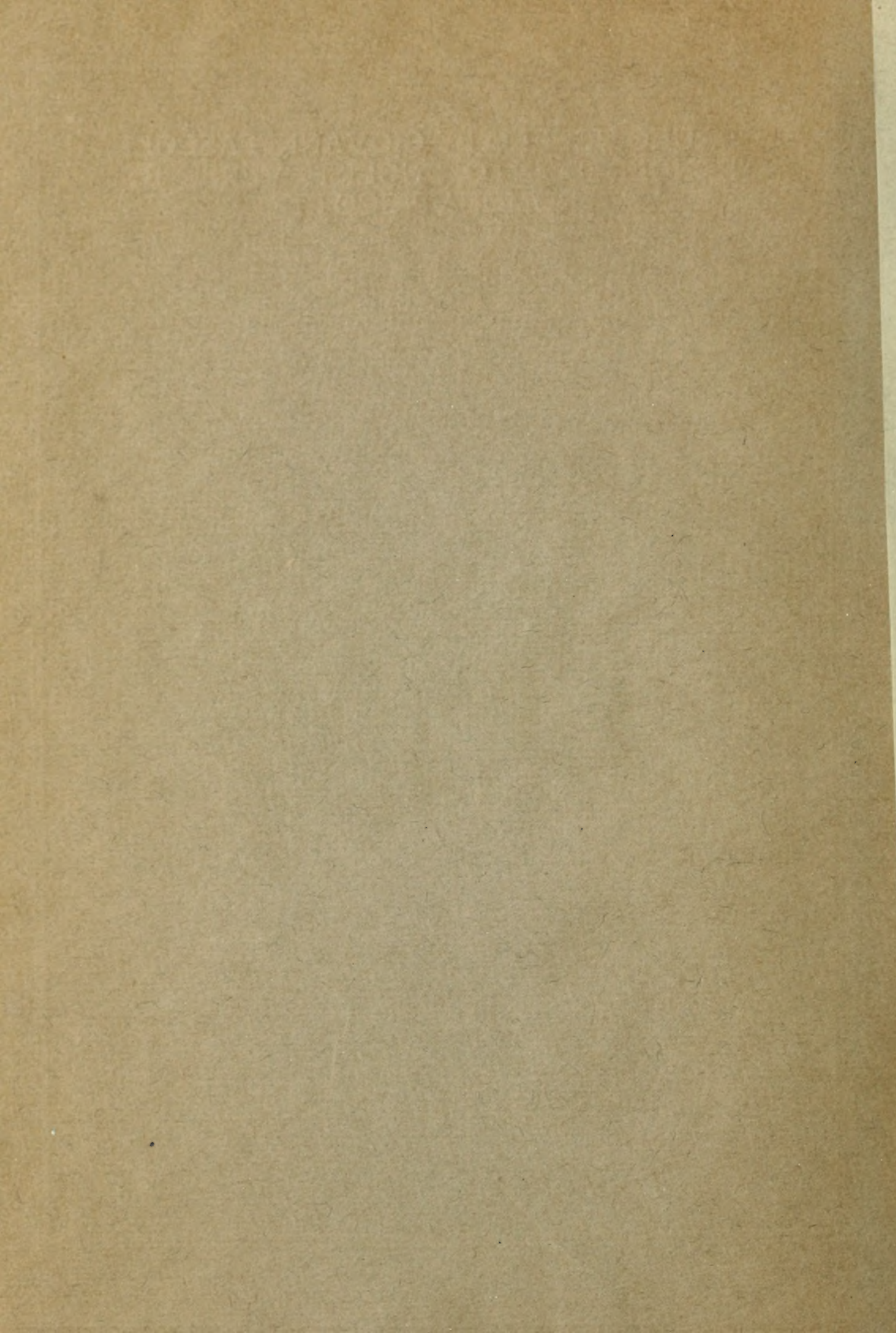
tr. by Romola Piggott.

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PAULO UCELLO BY GIOVANNI PASCOLI
RENDERED INTO ENGLISH VERSE BY
ROMOLA PIGGOTT

Sample



PAULO
UCELLO

¶ Of this edition of PAULO UCELLO
by Giovanni Pascoli rendered into Eng-
lish verse by Romola Piggott have been
privately printed in the Riccardi Press
Fount 120 copies on handmade paper.

PAULO UCELLO BY GIOVANNI PASCOLI
RENDERED INTO ENGLISH VERSE BY
ROMOLA PIGGOTT

428592

18.10.44

TO THE MEMORY OF
ROMOLA PIGGOTT
Born at Rome Sept. 11th 1874
Died at Ripon Oct. 21st 1915.

TO those who knew and loved Romola Piggott this little book is offered as a tribute to her memory. The task of rendering Pascoli's beautiful poem into English occupied some of the weary hours spent at Ventnor during the early part of the year, when she made her last gallant stand for life, or rather, for the health and strength sufficient for her work, without which, for her, life itself was valueless.

The poem was submitted in manuscript to Mr. George M. Trevelyan, than whom few living Englishmen have a wider knowledge of Italy and of Italian literature. His judgment of it is given in a letter written from the Italian front, where he was at the time engaged in organizing the British Ambulance Unit for Italy. He will perhaps forgive the use made of his letter in printing it here.

The British Ambulance Unit for Italy.

Croce Rossa Britannica.

Seconda Armata, Sesto Corpo d' Armata,

Zona di Guerra, Italy.

September 30th 1915.

Dear Sir,

Dr. Brock has given me your sister's poem-translation to read. It was a great privilege to read it, and a very moving contrast to our surroundings and work here just now - except that it breathed of Italy.

I think that it is not only an excellent translation, but what is rare in translations, a beautiful poem in itself. I sincerely trust that so fine a piece of work will find a means of appearing to the world.

Yours very truly,

G. M. TREVELYAN.

December 1915.

PAULO UCELLO

CHAPTER I

Firstly, how Paulo, painter of Florence, saw a bullfinch and desired it exceedingly; and, as he could not buy it, painted it.

PAULO di Dono, early home that day,
Left half-unpeeled a bunch of endive stalk,
That he might paint upon his wall straightway

A little finch seen on his morning's walk,
When, with Donato, on the market street,
And Ser Filippo he had stayed in talk.

His friends bought eggs. He spied, beneath a seat,
A bullfinch caged: its breast a russet red
And black the habit falling to its feet:

Black too the cowl upon its dainty head.
Though passing poor, yet Paulo would have spent
To buy the bird the cost of that day's bread.

But penniless he was. So back he went
To paint the archway at St. Thomas' gate.
'A little monk it is,' he sighed intent,

'Of our St. Mark's.' He did not linger late:
The beat of wings filled all the summer air,
And yet he did not pause to contemplate

Its beauty. On his wall, with loving care,
He painted by the sunset's flaming ray,
And, lo! even the little finch was there,

Poised lightly on a tender apple spray.

CHAPTER II

Of the wall of his small chamber on which Paulo painted, for his own delight, a fair landscape of trees and fields.

FOR thickly clustering over all the wall
Were trees, and flowers, and fruit, and blossom
rare;

Fig, apple, pear, with pine-tree dark and tall.

And wonderful it was to see how there
The almond-blossom still clung gleaming white,
While here already hung the golden pear.

Against the sky tall laurels rose in sight,
While heart-shaped ivy, trailing from the bough,
Covered a welling spring, as dark as night.

Beyond, a hill sloped gently up, its brow
Or with red clusters of the vine aglow,
Or black with new-turned earth beneath the plough.

Willows, beside the stream, were winding slow;
Long cypresses climbed up the rocky steep:
Here idle lay a scythe, and there a hoe.

And here the fresh-turned sods were furrowed deep
And straight, between thick hedges set four-square;
While there a sea of corn stretched in a golden sweep.

And, yet more wonderful! that sturdy pair
Of oxen yoked, who yonder broke the clay,
Were not as big as the swift-footed hare

That from the threatening ploughman fled away.

CHAPTER III

How this same wall was painted by him with all manner of birds that he might take delight in looking upon them, since he could not own them.

AND birds there were: birds, birds on every hand,
That the good man had seen, and loved, and
could

Not buy: on bough and blade, on stream and land:

With tuft, with necklet and with crested hood,
From the wide ocean or from mountain height,
Dwellers in hill and valley, brake and wood;

On wings of snow and fire, of air and light;
Green, golden, crimson, blue their feathers gay;
Homing with grub or fly captured in flight.

Armies of cranes from mists fled fast away;
On the still waters of the azure stream
Fleets of white swans oared their majestic way.

Each swallow sped to its familiar beam;
And the brown eagle, soaring high above,
Swooped down on them in vain, too far to seem

A danger, even to the quail, nor move
To fear with the loud rumble of its wings
The pigeon or the fearful turtle-dove.

Safe on the bushes of the moorland nesting,
Secure upon the rushes of the fen,
Perched undisturbed the nightingale and lapwing,

Tom-tit and sea-gull, cuckoo, finch and wren.

CHAPTER IV

How, gazing on these creatures of his brush, he forgot to repeat the
'angelus' and fell into temptation.

WHEN in his room the little finch beside
Was captive, without use of net or lime,
Paulo gazed upon his wall with pride.

So rapt he was, he heeded neither time
Nor his wife's call, nor did he hear at all
From Giotto's tower the Ave Mary chime.

On these his tender creatures, loved so well,
The old lay-brother gazed with thoughtful care,
While round him, soft and still the twilight fell.

And he forgot his wonted evening prayer,
The angel's greeting. From the street in cadence
Soft strains of viol and lute rose through the air:

From balconies was born the lingering fragrance
Of marjoram and thyme, while all along
The golden broom lined the street with radiance.


Round Brunelleschi's spire a chattering throng
Of sparrows through each buttressed archway whirred;
Below young lads and maidens raised a song.

Around thee, Santa Maria del Fiore, stirr'd
Such living freshness, such a fragrant spell,
Paulo forgot St. Francis and his word,

And, tempted, in his heart to murmuring fell.

CHAPTER V

How Paulo, who longed for a little living bird, fell to murmuring in his heart.

‘ H, holy Mother Poverty,’ he said,
‘One of thy silly sheep am I, alack!
Water I drink, and eat coarse barley-bread:

And every superfluity I lack,
Most like the snail that daubs the wall and goes
Bearing its worthless all upon its back.

I want no farm such as Donato owes
At Cafaggiolo, but a strip of ground,
Where crab-apple, or pear, or fig-tree grows.

For even a head of garlic, I’ll be bound,
Is joy to him who toiled to make it grow.
Yet, what of that? My lands lie all around

Me here in pictured perspective: and though
I’m not Donato, yet I’ve won some fame
At painting trees and fields, which is, I trow,
As good as selling eggs. So in God’s name,
Paulo di Dono, be content to see
Beautiful lands on which thou hast no claim.

But oh! the pure delight ’twould be to me
To own one of these blackbirds on the wing,
Or nightingale, or wood-pecker, maybe.

No make-believe, a real living thing
To call my own and cherish day by day
In fact not fancy: one to fly and sing,
And comfort me now I am old and grey.’

CHAPTER VI

How St. Francis came down to Paulo by the paths of the fair landscape he had painted and did reprove him.

SUCH was the humble plaint that mutely stirr'd
Within his heart, and yet from heaven on high
The son of Pietro Bernardone heard.

And, lo! St. Francis down the hill draw nigh,
Gliding among the vines and orchard trees;
No blade was bent as he trod lightly by.

Barefoot he was, and clad in homely frieze.
'Oh, naughty Paulo, brother mine,' he cried,
While yet afar: 'doth it no longer please

Thee, foolish one, to eat the crust of bread
By mountain springs, in Poverty's own fold,
Who dwells on high, by God companionèd?

Crumbs from the angels' table dost thou hold
In scorn, my brother, coveting to bear
Pallet and staff and shoes, silver and gold?

Be poor and sinless, Paulo Ucello, fare
Even as these, thy brethren of the wood,
Nor ask for gold, nor yet two coats to wear:

Thine own, brown as the fallen leaf, is good
Enough; such as thy sainted sister wise,
The lark, wears; she who pecks two grains of food
On earth, then, singing, soars into the skies.'

CHAPTER VII

How the Saint understood that Paulo deemed his to be but a small desire, yet shewed him how great a one it was in deed.

HIS nearing form grew slowly, till he staid
His steps by Paulo's side; then, grave and
tender,
Upon his heart a gentle hand he laid.

Nought could he feel there save the quivering stir
Of beating wings. Again St. Francis spake:
'Oh, brother Paulo, God's own pensioner,

Little it is to thee that thou shouldst take
From these their freedom; yet how great the wrong
To the winged bird who of his tears must make

Thy pastime. For his haunts he still will long
On green Mugnone, where, a beggar free,
He lived and paid for every grub a song.

To him, believe me, sweeter far will be
The worm, caught in the woods at break of day,
Than head of groundsel in captivity.

Leave them to go upon their airy way,
Redolent with the dew, with sunshine blest,
Singing God's praise, this lovely month of May.

Leave to my minor brothers my bequest,
The life of solitude, the hills to roam,
The tiny cell among the leaves for rest,
The spacious cloister with its airy dome.'

CHAPTER VIII

How the Saint, parting from Paulo, whose desires were so small,
spake to him words that were great.

NOW that again Paulo, in chastened mood,
With Poverty's stern peace was well content,
Saint Francis turned to go and raised his hood,

Called by a far-off bell. But, as he went,
He looked, and still in Paulo's eyes could see
That quivering beat of wings, as yet unspent.

He wept for pity, knowing no harm could be
In that vain, humble wish, the last that still
Clung to his brother's frail mortality.

The faint and far-off chime stole down the hill
From a low convent on the wooded steep,
The work of Paulo's hand. Wafted at will,

From the blue hills, over the valleys deep,
The peal came fitfully upon the air,
And lulled the drowsy landscape into sleep.

'Ave Maria,' murmured the Saint in prayer.
Then, on the unbent grass of the incline,
He passed, with these last words of tender care:

'Like to a bird thou art, sweet brother mine,
Blinded by cruel men. With sightless gaze
Thou seek'st a grain, and the full ear is thine,
Thou seek'st the sun, and all the sky's ablaze.'

CHAPTER IX

How the Saint made Paulo aware that the birds he had painted were themselves real and living, and that they alone might be his.

AND as he went, on either hand he strewed
Crumbs fallen, holy angels! from your board.
As sower his seed, he cast them. Paulo stood

And watched in silent awe. The crumbs were stored
Within his cowl, where he would dip anew
And cast them on the hillside far abroad.

Straightway, amid the leaves, a rustling grew,
A murmuring, as when strong libeccio blows;
The pigeon stretched a languid neck; and through

The leafy trees a subdued twittering rose;
Until the sad, sweet notes were heard that ease
The stock-dove's heart in Greccio's still repose.

Then down from wood and field and orchard trees
The birds came flocking: to his side they clung,
About his head, his arms, his feet, his knees.

The quails came to him with their downy young,
And to him upon white and stately wing
The swans, in fleets, on the blue waters swung.

His image waned, till there remained nothing
Of him save five gold stars upon the hills,
And on the ear, like rustling of the spring,

Fell the crisp pecking of a thousand bills.

CHAPTER X

Lastly how the nightingale sang and how Paulo fell asleep.

AND he was gone. Then from her green retreat
The nightingale in song made question where
Had gone her lover, -sweet-so sweet-so
sweet.

She whistled it along the stubble bare,
Gurgled it with the water's rippling flow,
Whispered it with the birch leaves through the air.

Then paused awhile. And then; subdued and slow,
She questioned all the light clouds one by one,
Then, trilling high, she told the winds her love.

Then she bewailed him to the moon, that shone
Gleaming on stones, shimmering on grasses deep,
And, in the dusky room, lit soft upon

The white-haired painter, fallen into sleep.

PAULO UCCELLO BY GIOVANNI PASCOLI
RENDERED INTO ENGLISH VERSE BY ROMO-
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