

WRITERS OF LITHUANIA

DR. VINCAS KUDIRKA

1858 - 1899

1883, the first edition of a periodical, "The Dawn," came out, and happened to fall into the hands of Vincas Kudirka. His reaction was immediate. Like a surging tide, the idea of nationalism swept him off his feet. Kudirka became one of the most dynamic supporters of the resistance movement.

We can safely say, that, with the first edition of the periodical "The Dawn," Vincas Kudirka began his career as a writer — a career which eventually assumed precedence over his medical profession. In 1889 he began editing a periodical, "The Bell," the pages of which he filled with moving, patriotic appeals to the Lithuanian people; here and there he included his translations of selections from world literature. Unfortunately, as a consequence of abnormal living conditions while he was at the university, V. Kudirka developed tuberculosis early in his life. Yet that did not break his spirit. To the last minute of his life, he never ceased writing, advocating the cause of the oppressed. By his bedside he always kept a candle burning, so that he could destroy what he was writing, in case the police "dropped in."

As for his character, Vincas Kudirka was not a political orator. He was an artist who loved music, painting, and literature. He never liked to talk too much — he rather wrote, wrote, and wrote, unceasingly.

The writings of Vincas Kudirka may be classified into four general categories: journalistic writing, satire, poetry, and miscellaneous. All of his writings exhibit a quick response to environment, dynamic reaction to situations, and the continuous tone of light satire constantly interchanging with unmistakable seriousness of thought and idea. Practically all of his articles deal with the plea of unified action against oppression and injustice, at the expense of personal ambition and at the price of self-sacrifice. He dealt very boldly with practical problems confronting the Lithuanian people, never settling for a compromise. He had one goal — to keep the spirit of patriotism strong in the hearts of his people.

When we come to his satires, we find practically the same subject matter. Only the form is different, becoming literature in the true sense of the word. The favorite topic of his satires was the corruption and incompetence of the Russian government officials. One of his longest and best-known satires "The Officials" (Viršininkai), deals with a specific incident that had taken place in Lithuania. Both the place and the action, and also the personages, could be traced down easily to actual persons. The story deals with a Russian governor, who, upon arriving at the place of assignment, decides to call himself the God of the county. Yet in attempting to act like a God — almighty despot — he makes himself extremely ridiculous. In the meanwhile, however, the people are being duped and severely mistreated. It is a delightful, and at the same time a completely realistic satire, the meaning of which cannot possibly be misunderstood. It is very direct — intended for the people to show how they are being duped by officials with less brains than themselves, yet with unlimited, despotic power over them. Some of the other satires, dealing with similar problems are "The Remembrances of Lithuanian Bridge," which is allegorical, although not less clear than the first one.

As for his poetry, it was rather meager. He did not have time for poetry. Matters of greater importance had to be written about for which poetry was not suited as a medium. Yet what we have of his poetry is strong and definitely of a superior quality. The general tone of his poetry is strongly ideological. He is also the author of the National Anthem of Lithuania, in which he combines romantic idealism and positiv-istic realism — urging us to seek our strength in the glorious past and work for the future welfare of our country and humanity as a whole. Work and action toward a better world to live in is our only objective. Untiring energy runs through all his poems. Achievement of spiritual nobility and human dignity is the aim of all, not material smugness, which must be sacrificed for the achievement of the former, if necessary.

Among his miscellaneous writings we find a number of translations from the general body of world literature, among which there are E. Bellamy's short story "With the Eyes Shut," Schiller's "Die Jungfrau von Orleans" and "William Tell," Byron's "Cain," and others. He also made many translations from Polish literature. Kudirka hoped through these translations to call the attention of the world to Lithuanian literature, by showing that the language is capable of expressing such sentiments and ideas as Schiller's and Byron's.

Not of least importance is V. Kudirka's work in literary criticism. He may safely be called the first Lithuanian literary critic. Apart from several reviews in which he stresses the importance of aesthetics and the richness of ideas in poetry and literature in general, V. Kudirka also wrote an "Art of Poetry" in which he discusses very thoroughly the basic principles of dramatic writing and criticism, different types of poetry, etc. He advocates the metrical system of versification, putting rhyme in secondary place of importance. The availability of this treatise in a more universally known language would be of considerable interest to the literary theorists.

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