



# A R U S O

AN  
ILLUSTRATED  
LIFE



HOWARD  
S. GREENFIELD

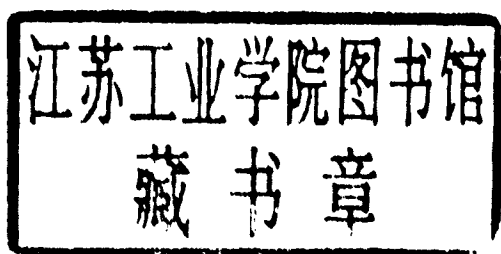


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FOREWORD BY DENNIS O'NEILL

CARUSO  
*An* ILLUSTRATED LIFE





# CARUSO

## *An* ILLUSTRATED LIFE

Howard S. Greenfeld



A JULIET GARDINER BOOK



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# PREFACE

**I**n making the television series, 'A Tenor's Tribute', our intention was to use the singularly effective medium of television to collect and arrange the anecdotes, places, memories and atmosphere associated with the great singer, Enrico Caruso, and carry them in an entertaining way to a larger audience in the hope that they too would enjoy a portrait of a great life and an extraordinary man.

I hoped to bring my own enthusiasm for the man and the tenor to the screen and to help to explain the demands and complexities of his chosen career. Here was a man against whom all odds were heavily stacked, whose courage, perseverance and conviction turned those same odds so completely around as to make the retrospective view look as if he was simply born lucky. It was this aspect, the man himself, that I was convinced had to be the key to understanding his success. Through the many months of planning, researching and filming, this conviction was borne out. My professional admiration grew as my knowledge and understanding of the human being that fuelled his work deepened.

It is my hope that this book which tells of Caruso's life and career, will enrich your enjoyment of the programmes, 'A Tenor's Tribute', and in turn will bring you close to sharing my warmth for this giant, 'the great Caruso'.

Dennis O'Neill

*AT THE AGE OF TWENTY-TWO, Caruso sang the role of Turiddu in Cavalleria Rusticana at the Teatro Cimarosa in Caserta. It was his first appearance in a work that was part of the standard repertory. Singing with him in the role of Santuzza was Elena Bianchini-Cappelli.*





# 1

## NAPLES: *The* EARLY YEARS

**T**he via San Giovannello agli Ottocalli is like countless other congested streets that make up the working-class neighbourhoods of Naples. It was there, at number seven, in a modest second-floor apartment that Enrico (the less formal Errico was the name on the parish register) Caruso was born. The date of his birth was either 25 or 27 February 1873 — it has been celebrated on both dates. (Enrico Caruso, Jr believed that his father was born on the earlier date and that it was not registered until the 27th, but, in his words, ‘No matter. He was born.’)

Though this undistinguished and far from palatial building might seem an inappropriate birthplace for the man who would be known as the King of Tenors, the city of Naples itself, which played such an important role in the history of opera and song — ‘the very fount and birthplace of fine singing,’ Stendhal wrote — was an altogether suitable setting for such an auspicious occasion.

The birth and especially the survival of the infant at the time of a devastating cholera epidemic were as miraculous as the gift of song he would one day offer to the world, for he was the first of a large number of Caruso children — eighteen is the number usually given, though this number is certainly exaggerated — to live beyond infancy. Even under normal conditions, the rate of infant mortality was high in the disease-ridden city, and Caruso later attributed his survival in the midst of an epidemic to the aid of a wet nurse, who cared for him in place of his own mother, who was too weak to do so.

*MARIA CASTALDI, a warm and intelligent woman, who married Marcellino Caruso only a few months after his wife's death, proved to be the ideal stepmother for young Enrico. The two maintained a close and loving relationship until the tenor's death.*



MARCELLINO CARUSO, the tenor's father, enjoyed drinking at local cafés, but he worked hard and never failed to support his family. As far as he was concerned, his son's musical education was a waste of time.

Caruso's parents, who had come to Naples from a small village to the north, were far from wealthy — but they were not poor, as some legends would have it. The tenor's father, Marcellino, was known as a heavy drinker, but he was steadily employed, first as a mechanic and then as a factory superintendent, and he was always able to support his family. His wife, Anna Baldini, was a kind and gentle woman, whose health had deteriorated with the years, but who lavished on her first healthy child her quiet strength and profound affection.

Enrico, a good-natured boy, returned this affection; he was uncommonly devoted to his mother. In the absence of his father, who preferred to spend most of his evenings at local cafés, Enrico undertook, at a very early age, many of the responsibilities of the household, responsibilities far more suited to a boy twice his age. He was a normally playful and noisy child, but he already showed a sense of duty that would characterize him throughout his life.

His playground was the colourful Neapolitan waterfront, where the teeming, overcrowded city came to life. There he learned to swim and dive, and, like so many boys who lived near the harbour, he dreamt of being a sailor.

But his parents had other plans for him. His mother, who had taught him to read, wanted him to have a formal education; his father disagreed, he was determined to apprentice him to a mechanical engineer. A compromise was reached: at the age of ten the boy was sent to work as an apprentice, but he was also allowed to attend classes at the Bronzini Institute, which specialized in training young boys to sing in local church choirs.

His job bored him, as did his regular studies at school, but his singing classes delighted him. 'It was as natural for me to sing as it was to play,' he wrote many years later. And he was appreciated by his teachers, who discovered that the new student had an extraordinarily fine contralto voice, so fine a voice that he soon became the principal soloist of the school's choir, known throughout Naples for its excellence and much sought after by churches for use in their services and religious processions.

In spite of his successes as a singer, however, it was obvious that the boy would never become a good student, and his father, vindicated, demanded that he give up his studies and work regular hours at his job. He would be allowed to sing all he wanted, but only after a full day's work which might prepare him for a serious future.



Enrico had no choice but to give in to his father's wishes, but he had no intention of giving up singing. He was frequently called upon to offer serenades to young ladies, on behalf of their unmusical fiancés, and occasionally he offered his services at social functions. In addition, he continued to sing at church services whenever he had the opportunity.

One such religious service, on 1 June 1888, marked the saddest day in the young boy's life. On that morning, he had been asked to sing at the Church of San Severino as part of the celebration of Corpus Christi. He especially loved singing at these services, but this time the fifteen-year-old boy hesitated: his mother was very ill, and he was torn between his obligation to sing at the church and his desire to stay by her side and give her comfort.

At his mother's insistence, he set off for the church. In the middle of the service, there was an interruption. Neighbours, who had seen Marcellino Caruso emerge weeping from his home, had come to the church to tell young Enrico that his mother had died. It was a terrible moment — Enrico had been very close to his mother, and it was her faith that encouraged him to go on singing. But it was also, in a way, a liberating moment, since he had worked at the factory largely to help to support his mother and would now be free to do just what he wanted — to please himself and only himself. To fail at music, which was of course a possibility, seemed to him far more honourable than to succeed at his tedious work at the factory.



*ANNA BALDINI CARUSO, the tenor's beloved mother, who encouraged her son to continue his studies. This photograph is taken from a pastel which Caruso kept at his bedside.*

He had to be patient, however. His strong contralto voice was changing, and during that period he feared that his singing voice might never return; this was the fate of many promising boy sopranos. In addition, his responsibilities at home towards his younger brother and sister — Giovanni, born in 1876, and Assunta, born in 1882 — were, for a while, greater than ever. He had to replace his mother in as many ways as he could.

Fortunately, this responsibility was of short duration, for, only five and a half months after the death of Anna, Marcellino remarried, and his second wife, Maria Castaldi, took charge of the home and the children with intelligence and kindness. But the problem of his singing voice remained, and while, for two years, Enrico marked time at his job, he continued to worry that he would lose his ability to sing. He never gave up, however, and, though

## CARUSO

his musical activities were necessarily curtailed as his voice changed and developed, he managed to sing whenever the opportunity was presented to him. His perseverance was rewarded, as it became increasingly obvious that the boy with the sweet contralto voice was becoming a man with an equally pleasing voice somewhere between tenor and baritone. Even his father had reluctantly come to realize that his eldest son's future lay beyond the confines of the factory and that he was determined to pursue his dream of becoming a singer.



*NAPLES IN 1900, with its magnificent bay and Mount Vesuvius looming in the background. It was here that Caruso was born and here that he died.*

The first concrete steps in this direction were taken in the summer of 1890, when Enrico was seventeen years old. Naples, his home, was at the time one of the liveliest and most enchanting cities of Europe. Rising above and enclosing a magnificent bay, dominated by the imposing sight of the ever-threatening Mount Vesuvius, and animated by its vigorous and passionate people — both ingratiating and infuriating — it drew visitors from every part of the world. The rebirth in the 1880s of the Neapolitan song — haunting, melodious expressions of the population's joys and sorrows — added enormously to the city's charms and gave rise to an immensely popular form of entertainment known as the *café-chantant* — the singing café. Neapolitan songs, accompanied by guitar, mandolin, or piano, were sung throughout the city, but nowhere more effectively than in these cafés which lined the city's colourful harbour.



It was these caf  s that Caruso visited during the summer of 1890 — to learn from the expert singers of Neapolitan melodies and, whenever possible, to become part of the entertainment himself. He earned very little money that first summer, but his sweet voice was noticed, even attracting the attention of one client who offered to send him to his brother for singing lessons. (Caruso accepted the generous offer, but after eleven lessons he came to the conclusion that the lessons were doing him more harm than good.)

The following summer, a more promising opportunity presented itself when the owner of a well-known caf  , the Risorgimento at the rotunda of the via Caracciolo, which ran along the crescent of the bay, suggested that the young man join the regular entertainers at his caf  . He would not only have a chance to sing before an audience; he would also be allowed to keep whatever money the customers cared to give him.

Caruso enthusiastically agreed to the arrangement, and each evening, after a day's work as a mechanic, he would go to the Risorgimento, often receiving nothing for his troubles, but occasionally earning a few lire. By the end of the summer, he had earned more than money; he had earned the enduring friendship of Eduardo Missiano, a young baritone whose interest in his talent radically changed young Caruso's life. Missiano, the son of a wealthy Neapolitan family, had never sung in public — he had apparently more taste than talent — but he was studying with one of the city's most distinguished teachers, Guglielmo Vergine, and he offered to take Caruso to Vergine to arrange for lessons. It was, obviously, an offer the young man could not refuse, a chance to study voice professionally for the very first time.

At their first meeting Vergine was unimpressed, complaining that Caruso's voice sounded like 'the wind whistling through a window', but at a second audition he reluctantly — with Missiano's urging — agreed to teach the inexperienced tenor.

It was an opportunity Caruso had eagerly sought, but he knew it would be difficult. In addition to studying with Vergine, he had to continue his work at the factory and he had to continue, whenever possible, singing at the waterfront caf  s. But the young man persevered; he was as energetic and tireless as he was ambitious to become a singer. He had had no formal musical education, and he



*ASSUNTA CARUSO, born in 1882, was Enrico's only sister. The two were not close and saw little of each other after the tenor left Naples. She died in 1915.*



did not receive one — in the traditional sense — from Vergine, but he had an innate musical sense, had been gifted with perfect pitch, and was able to absorb quickly and intelligently the lessons of his unsmiling, demanding teacher. Vergine was the first to train him in the art of singing, and succeeded in turning him into a true tenor by teaching him how to use his voice. Caruso, though not encouraged by his teacher at the beginning of his career, never failed to give him credit for his later success.

*CARUSO, on the right, and two men who played important roles during his first years as a singer. Enrico Pignataro, a baritone, who sang with him in Caserta in 1895 and found him work at the Teatro Bellini in Naples a few months later, is on the left; and Guglielmo Vergine, his first professional singing teacher, is in the centre.*



In February 1894, Caruso celebrated his twenty-first birthday. His years of study had served him well; even Vergine agreed that he was ready to make his operatic début in one of the lesser Neapolitan theatres or in a nearby provincial opera house. (At the time, even small, provincial towns could boast opera seasons.) However, a



twenty-first birthday meant more than a coming of age for an Italian male: it meant that the time had come for him to serve his three years of military service.

Caruso, who had hoped that he might be rejected because of his none too sturdy physique, was no exception, and, shortly after his birthday, he was called up and ordered to join the Thirteenth Artillery at Rieti. During the trip to the army camp, some fifty miles from Rome, he was disconsolate. He knew that three years without singing at this crucial stage could well mean the end of his career, that all of his years of dedication might have been wasted. And they might well have been had it not been for his meeting at Rieti with an army major who, almost miraculously, appreciated his talents.

As a soldier, Caruso was predictably inept. He performed his duties perfunctorily, and in his free time he sang. He sang in an effort to improve his voice and for the sheer joy of singing, as well as for the pleasure his singing seemed to give his fellow soldiers. Only the commanding officer, Major Nagliati, was not entertained. Complaining that the young man's voice was disturbing his own work as well as the camp's routine, he angrily summoned Caruso to his office where he questioned him sharply, and, most surprisingly, revealed himself to be a knowledgeable music-lover. Caruso, he realized, was a serious musician, and to confirm his own feelings that the young Neapolitan might be of more use to his country as a singer than as a soldier, he arranged an introduction to one of Rieti's noblemen, the Baron Costa, himself an accomplished musician. The baron agreed that the young man was indeed gifted — extraordinarily so, in his opinion. He took Caruso in hand, offered him his home as a practice studio, accompanied him on the piano, and coached him. In only five days — an astoundingly short time — he managed to teach him the demanding role of Turiddu in Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana* — the first complete role Caruso had ever learned.

There were no longer any doubts on the part of the major or the baron. Deeply impressed by the young soldier's talent, they agreed that it would be a waste to keep him in the service, and they found a solution. After less than two months, Enrico Caruso was discharged from the army. He was, it was claimed, needed at home to support his family, and his younger brother Giovanni was called up to replace him.



## 2

# *The* BEGINNING *of a* CAREER

C aruso, again a civilian, arrived in Naples on Easter Sunday, more determined than ever to make a place for himself in the world of opera — no matter how great the sacrifice. As a first step, he decided not to return to his job at the factory; the money he could make there could not compensate for the time lost in the pursuit of his career. Instead he would have to manage to live on the meagre earnings from his occasional appearances at church festivities and at the city's waterfront cafés.

He resumed his studies with Vergine, with increased energy, able to devote far more time to them than he had in the past. Vergine's attitude towards his pupil had changed. No longer belittling him, he showered the young tenor with praise and took an active and enthusiastic part in trying to further his professional career, arranging auditions for him whenever possible.

The most promising of these was held in the autumn of 1894 before Nicola Daspuro, a well-known newspaperman, who had been asked by the great Milanese publishing firm of Sonzogno to organize a season of opera at the Mercadante, one of Naples' most illustrious theatres. Among his many talents, Daspuro was a competent musician and sometime librettist, who acted as Sonzogno's representative for southern Italy. His first season as impresario at the newly remodelled Mercadante had been enormously successful, and as a result he was besieged by singing teachers from far and wide, eager