

my senses should combine in definite shape. Every conscientious actor will concur in my opinion that all moments are not apt for the choice of colors wherewith to reproduce the finished picture of the author's imagination. And how many of us are often *obliged to play a part with a sense of disability to reveal its hidden beauties! As a sunset may supply the painter with a tint undreamed of for his landscape, so a woman's glance may teach us some new way to express affection; a visit to the mad-house, some strange phase of mental alienation; a shipwreck brings us its peculiar forms of anguish, an earthquake its varied aspects of horror and despair; and all must be noted, pondered, anatomized, appropriated with a keen discrimination. To do this, time is needed; with time, experience; and with experience, genius! But I perceive that I have strayed a little from my subject, and I turn back for one moment more into the direct road.

If I persist in my opinion that *Lear* at

first must be vigorous in his old age, I do not therefore admit that at the end he must so retain his vigor as to bear lightly in his arms the dead body of *Cordeia* after the prevailing fashion. May my brother actors forgive me for asking how such Herculean strength is conceivable in a man broken by a host of misfortunes, drawn near to giving up his soul to God? The critics, too, should recognize this inaccuracy, rating, as they do, their protagonist decrepit at his first entrance. To me it seems that, never permitting others to touch his beloved burden, *Lear* should stagger under its weight, without disguising the effort it occasions; this, as I cannot help believing, is not only truer to nature, but also more interesting and more effective.

And now I leave this generous, noble, and unhappy king in peace, bidding farewell to my readers with the wish that *Lear* may rise again to life by the animating breath of some actor of greater power than mine, to make him pathetic and admirable.

Tommaso Salvini.



DANTE.

THE POET ILLUSTRATED OUT OF THE POEM.

It is a grave if not a formidable undertaking to treat of that soldier, statesman, philosopher, above all poet, whom successive generations reverence under the musical name of Dante Alighieri. Fifty-six years sufficed him to live his life and work his work: centuries have not sufficed to exhaust the rich and abstruse intellectual treasure which the world inherits from him. Still, acute thinkers abide at variance as to his ultimate meaning; and still able writers record the impressions of wonder, sympathy, awe, admiration, which—however wide and manifold his recondite meanings may be—he leaves even on simple hearts so long as these can respond to what is lovely or is terrible. “*Quanti dolci pensier, quanto desio*” (“How many sweet thoughts, how much desire”), has he not bequeathed to us!

If formidable for others, it is not least for-

midable for one of my name, for *me*, to enter the Dantesque field and say my little say on the Man and on the Poem; for others of my name have been before me in the same field, and have wrought permanent and worthy work in attestation of their diligence. My father, Gabriele Rossetti, in his “*Comento Analitico sull' Inferno di Dante*” (“Analytical Commentary upon Dante's Hell”), has left to tyros a clew and to fellow-experts a theory. My sister, Maria Francesca Rossetti, has in her “*Shadow of Dante*” eloquently expounded the *Divina Commedia* as a discourse of most elevated Christian faith and morals. My brother Dante has translated with a rare felicity the “*Vita Nuova*” (“New Life”) and other minor (poetical) works of his great namesake. My brother William has, with a strenuous endeavor to achieve close verbal

accuracy, rendered the Inferno into English blank verse. I, who cannot lay claim to their learning, must approach my subject under cover of "*Mi valga . . . il grande amore*" ("May my great love avail me"), leaving to the more confident plea, "*Mi valga il lungo studio*" ("May my long study avail me").

It is not out of disrespect to Mr. Longfellow's blank-verse translation of the Divina Commedia, a translation too secure of public favor to need my commendation, that I propose to make my extracts (of any importance) not from his version, but from Mr. Cayley's. The latter, by adhering to the *terza rima* (ternary rhyme) of the original poem, has gone far toward satisfying an ear rendered fastidious by Dante's own harmony of words; with a master hand he conveys to us the sense amid echoes of the familiar sound. My first quotation (Paradise, canto 1), consisting of an invocation of the Spirit of Poetry, befits both Dante and his translator, while, as it were, striking one dominant note of our study:

"O good Apollo, for this last emprise
Render me such a vessel of thy might
As to the longed-for laurel may suffice.
Till now hath sped me one Parnassian height,
But on my last arena now, beneath
The double safeguard, I must needs alight.
Do thou into my bosom come, and breathe,
As when thou drewest Marsyas of old
Out of his body's perishable sheath."

Dante or Durante Alighieri, Alighieri, or Aldighieri—for in all these forms the names are recorded—was born a noble citizen of Florence on the 8th of May, 1265, the sun being then in the sign of Gemini, an auspicious sign according to popular opinion of that day. And a meaning has been found for "Alighieri" apposite to him who so eminently bore the name: it has been turned (by a process I attempt not to analyze) into Aligero (winged), when at once we recognize how suitable it is to the master spirit that fathomed Hell and ascended through Purgatory to the heights of Heaven. Nor need "Dante, Durante," remain without an appropriate gloss. Dante (giving) befits one who has enriched the after ages; Durante (enduring) suits no less that much-enduring man who (writing after the event) puts an apparent prophecy of his own banishment into the mouth of one of the personages of his poem (Paradise, 17):

"Thou shalt leave all things, which thou long ago
Hast loved most dearly, and I've herein said
What dart is soonest shot from exile's bow.
Thou shalt experience how another's bread
Is salt upon our palate, and what bale
'Tis up and down another's stairs to tread."

Boccaccio in his "Life of Dante" traces back his hero's family to a certain Eliseo of the noble Roman house of Frangipani, who,

toward the date of the rebuilding of Florence by the Emperor Charlemagne, settled in that city. In course of time the descendants of Eliseo, dropping their original cognomen, re-named themselves as Elisei. Prominent among them in the days of the Emperor Conrad III. arose Cacciaguida, knight and crusader, who married a lady of the Aldighieri of Ferrara, or perhaps of Parma; her birthplace seems uncertain. This lady bestowed her patronymic on one of her sons, Dante's ancestor in the direct line; and he becoming a man of note, his descendants adopted his name as their own surname; thus permanently distinguishing as Alighieri their branch of the house of the Elisei.

On his pilgrimage through Paradise, Dante encounters in the fifth heaven, that of the planet Mars, the spirit of his venerable forefather Cacciaguida, who discourses with him at considerable length, and after describing the happy thrift and simplicity of Florence in his own day—in Dante's day become a hot-bed of luxury and extravagance—briefly narrates some circumstances of his birth and after life (Paradise, 15):

"To a civic life thou seest how goodly, how
Reposeful, fellow-citizens how leal,
How sweet a homestead Mary, with loud vow
Solicited, gave me, and of Christ the seal
I took within your ancient Baptistere,
As Cacciaguida for His Commonweal.

The camp of Emperor Conrad then I sought,
And by him was I girded for his knight,
So well I pleased him, for I bravely wrought.
I followed him, yon wicked faith to fight,
Whose votaries by your Shepherd's fault despoil
Your jurisdiction of its native right.
By this unholy people from the coil
Of the false world obtained I my release
(Ah, World, whose love doth many a spirit soil),
And entered out of Martyrdom this Peace."

If, as we have seen, mutation of name and residence characterizes that dignified stock from which Dante sprang, no less conspicuously did mutability of faction and fortune, and a bandying of names, now one in the ascendant and now another, characterize that beautiful Florence which called him son. Her citizens were divided into Guelphs and Ghibellines: these names, in their primitive form, having been the battle-cries on a far-off field where, more than a century before Dante's birth, a crown was lost and won between two contending princes. The crown in dispute was the imperial crown of the Holy Roman Empire: the aristocratic party of Imperialists attached to the victorious Conrad of Hohenstaufen became known as Ghibellines, the overthrown opposition as Guelphs. And as the standing opponent of the Empire was the Popedom, the Papalist party in Italy, equally

definable as National or as Democratic, was styled Guelph.

Here already were sufficient grounds for strife. Yet, as if insufficient, private rancor heaped fuel and explosives on the public flame. First, a feud between the Florentine families of Buondelmonte and Amideo widened and confirmed the political breach; secondly, a brawl among the children of one Florentine citizen by two successive wives split the Guelph party into subdivisions distinguished respectively as Black and White.

Nor were words and names, orations and counter orations, the chief political weapons of those days. Sword and fire, confiscation and banishment, made and left their mark on either side, in accordance with the ever-shifting preponderance of this or that faction. The elder Alighieri, a lawyer by profession, a Guelph by party, was along with his party living in exile at the time of his son Dante's birth; but in the year 1267 the Guelphs returned to Florence, and the banished man rejoined his family.

Let us with that absence and that reunion connect such thoughts of home-longing and (in a figure) of home contentment as breathe in the following lines (Purgatory, 8; Paradise, 23):

"It was that hour which thaws the heart and sends
The voyagers' affection home, when they
Since morn have said Adieu to darling friends;
And smites the new-made pilgrim on his way
With love, if he a distant bell should hear,
That seems a-mourning for the dying day."

"As when the bird among the boughs beloved,
Keeping beside her darlings' nest her seat,
By night, when things are from the view removed,
That sooner she the dear ones' looks may meet,
And that by which she feeds them to purvey,
Counting for them her anxious labor sweet,
Forestalls the hours upon the unsheltered spray,
And waits the sun with burning eagerness,
Poring with fixed eye for the peep of day."

Not long did the elder Alighieri survive this renewal of happiness. Yet our hopes follow him out of sight into the veiled and better land, there to behold him awaiting the restitution of all things, even as Dante, in his Divine Comedy, represents a congregation of elect souls as yearning after the resurrection of the body (Paradise, 14).

Despite so irreparable a loss, the young Dante received, under his widowed mother's protection, a refined and liberal education. His taste was for study rather than for amusement, and to such a taste, allied to perseverance and wedded to a preëminent intellect, the treasures of knowledge lay open and accessible. His mother's circumstances, though not opulent, were easy. Thus she was able

to intrust her son's education to Brunetto Latini, a notary by profession, by occasional office an ambassador of the Florentine Republic, an attractive man of the world; moreover, a scholar and a poet. Between him and his pupil a tender affection grew up, as Dante himself assures us (Hell, 15) when he encounters his master's shade.

Dante also studied at the universities of Padua and Bologna, and in mature life augmented his stores of knowledge in learned and polite Paris. According to an uncertain tradition, he visited England, and in particular Oxford.

In a period of broils, heart-burnings, rivalries, Dante was not the man to observe a tepid neutrality. He bore arms on the field of Campaldino and at the siege of Caprona, and on one or both occasions with credit to himself and to his cause. The battle of Campaldino was followed by a storm—the stirring up of which storm is attributed to diabolical agency by the shade of Buonconte, a noble Ghibelline who fell on the losing side, and who accosts Dante in the Ante-Purgatory (Purgatory, 5).

Yet, though a soldier, Dante was not primarily a soldier; rather, it may be, a statesman, a ruler, a legislator.

From the highest civil dignity, however, that of the Priorato, or chief magistracy of Florence, Dante found himself excluded by a circumstance which at once dignified his social position and threatened to impede his public career. Giano della Bella, Prior of Florence in 1292, had ordained that such families as counted a cavaliere (knight) among their ancestry should be reckoned noble, while for that very reason they should lose certain civic privileges. Thus Cacciaguida the Crusader, by ennobling his descendants, cut them off from sundry more substantial honors. To rehabilitate him, as we may suppose, for public office, Dante's name is found inscribed among the *Medici e Speciali* (Leeches and Druggists), their "art" standing sixth in the list of principal arts; and documents still extant in the archives of Florence show that he did actually take part in the councils of several years, commencing with the year 1295.

On June 15th, 1300, Dante, supported by five less noted colleagues, was created Prior. The Black and White broils were at this time raging with such virulence that the Papal Legate, Cardinal Matteo d'Acquasparta, sent to Florence for purposes of pacification, failed in his mission, finally (though at a period considerably later) laying the rebellious city under an interdict. In such troublous times Dante assumed the command; nor was he one to rule with a tremulous hand. By

him and his colleagues was enacted a law which banished chiefs and adherents of both parties into separate exile; to Corso Donati, Dante's brother-in-law, with his "Blacks," a spot in the Tuscan mountains was assigned for residence; the Whites, among whom was Dante's dearest friend, Guido Cavalcanti, were dispatched into the baneful Maremma.

They went, but they returned; and divided as they went, so they returned, the Blacks keen for vengeance. This faction now denounced the Whites as Ghibellines, anti-papalists, foes of France; and, invoking foreign aid, induced Charles of Valois, then on his road to Rome, to countenance their machinations. Dante, his tenure of office as Prior being expired, was hereupon sent by his successors, as one of four ambassadors, on a counter embassy to the Roman court. Like the turbulent factions he had helped to banish, he also went; but, unlike them, he returned no more.

Charles of Valois occupied the oltr' Arno (beyond the river Arno). Corso Donati raised the Black standard, and, by the help of the French prince, gained a crushing victory. Fire and sword devastated Florence; one Podestà (magistrate or mayor) was expelled, another appointed; a multitude of Whites were exiled and doomed to beggary. Well might Dante choose Fortune for his theme (Hell, 7):

"This Fortune whom thou namest: What is she?

He, whose high wisdom all beside transcends,
Has made the spheres, appointing one that might
Rule over them, whence every part extends
To each, in tenor uniform, its light;
So to the glories of the world He did
One common regent and conductress plight,*
Who might from time to time, from seed to seed,
And place to place, their empty riches shake,
Beyond forestalling by your wit and heed.
She doth one people raise, and one doth make
To languish, by the allotment of her hand,
Which is concealed, as by the sward the snake.
Your wisdom can against her make no stand;
She judges and foresees, and aye pursues
Her sway, like every god in his command.
Her revolutions have no pause nor truce;
Her swiftness from necessity is wrung;
So many be they who for change have use.
And she it is who should on cross be hung,
As many tell, who blame her much amiss,
Where they should praise, with foul and wicked
tongue.
But she is happy, hearing naught of this,
Among the glad first-born of God attending
To turn her sphere about, and bide in bliss."

Dante was fined, was banished for two years from Tuscany, was permanently excluded from office. This in January, 1302. In the following March he was condemned to

* I have ventured to replace a rhyme.

fagot and stake should he ever again set foot in Florence. Yet in 1316 this sentence was conditionally reversed. The state of Florence published an amnesty, whereby, on payment of a fine and performance of public penance, Dante, among others, would be free to return. Such an alternative, however, only served to double-bar the gates of his city forever against him. Hearken to the thunder of his indignation at the humiliating overture:*

"Is this, then, the glorious fashion of Dante Alighieri's recall to his country, after suffering exile for well-nigh three lusters? Is this the due recompense of his innocence manifest to all? This the fruit of his abundant sweat and toil endured in study? Far from the man of philosophy's household this baseness proper to a heart of mire, that he . . . should endure, as a prisoner, to be put to ransom! Far from the proclaimer of justice that he, offended and insulted, to his offenders, as to those who have deserved well of him, should pay tribute! This, father, is not the way to return to my country; but if, by you or by another, there can be found another way that shall not derogate from Dante's fame and honor, readily will I thereto betake myself. But, if by no honorable way can entrance be found into Florence, there will I never enter. What? Can I not from any corner of the earth behold the sun and the stars? Can I not, under every climate of heaven, meditate the all-sweet truths, except I first make myself a man of no glory, but rather of ignominy, in the face of the people and city of Florence?"

That Florence which could neither break nor bend the spirit of her mighty son had, meanwhile, wrought in him a far different transformation. Under sentence of banishment, confiscation of goods, contingent death, Dante the Guelph had changed into Dante the Ghibelline: the Papal temporal power became the object of his outspoken abhorrence, the Imperial sway, of his devoted advocacy. A passage (abridged) from Dante's prose treatise, "De Monarchiâ," sets before us his theory of world-government:

"Only Man among beings holds mid place between things corruptible and things incorruptible. Therefore that unspeakable Providence proposed to man two ends: the one the beatitude of this life, which consists in the operations of his own virtue; the other the beatitude of eternal life, which consists in the fruition of the Divine Countenance. To these two beatitudes by divers means must we come. Wherefore by man was needed a double directive according to the double end; that is, of the Supreme Pontiff, who, according to Revelation, should lead mankind to eternal life; and of the Emperor, who, according to philosophic teachings, should direct mankind to temporal felicity. And whereas to this port none or few, and those with overmuch difficulty, could attain, unless mankind, the waves of enticing cupidity being quieted, should repose free in the tranquillity of peace; this is the aim to be mainly kept in view by the Guardian of the Globe,

* I need not even wish to excel my sister's translation of this passage, which I extract, word for word, from "A Shadow of Dante." The original occurs in a private letter from Dante to a religious.

who is named Roman Prince, to wit, that in the garden-plot of mortals freely with peace men may live."*

The Whites, exiled while Guelphs, sought to regain their citizenship under Ghibelline auspices. In 1304 they attempted to re-enter Florence by force of arms, and failed. Years later their hopes revived under the Emperor Henry of Luxemburg, but received in his sudden death their own death-blow.

In fact, though not at once in appearance, Dante's efficient public life was well-nigh ended when Florence cast him out. Yet not so, if we look beyond his active services and the brief span of his mortal day. For, taught by bitter experience in what scales to weigh this world and the things of this world, he bequeathed to future generations the undying voice of his wisdom,—a wisdom distilled in eloquence, modulated to music, sublimed by imagination, or rather subliming that imagination which is its congruous vehicle and companion.

Disowned by his mother city, Dante thenceforward found a precarious refuge here or there, chiefly in the petty courts of Ghibelline potentates. Thus he sojourned with Count Guido Salvatico in the Casentino, with Ugucione della Faggiuola in the mountains of Urbino; afterward under the protection of Moroello della Spina in the Lunigiana, to whom the Purgatory is said to have been dedicated, and to whose hereditary and personal hospitality the following lines, addressed to the shade of his father Conrad, refer (Purgatory, 8):

"The fame, which nobly of your house doth tell,
Proclaimeth hamlet, and proclaimeth peer,
That those who have not been there note her well.
And as I would arrive aloft, I swear,
Your honorable house the adorning prize
Of arms or largess doth not cease to bear.
A privilege in their kind or custom lies."

As foremost among Dante's friendly hosts may perhaps be reckoned Can Grande della Scala, Lord of Verona. Yet from Can Grande's court he was driven (as the story goes) by an insult from a privileged buffoon. Nevertheless, we find the praises of this eminent noble, preceded by those of an elder head of the same house, put into the mouth of Cacciaguida, and thereby perpetuated (Paradise, 17).

Ravenna became the exiled poet's final refuge, Guido da Polenta his last and generous earthly protector. For him Dante undertook a mission to Venice; and this failing, he seems to have lost heart. His homeward journey lay through the malarious lagoons: no marvel is it that he contracted a fever, and at length found a sure resting-place in

Ravenna, where he died on the 14th of September, 1321, and where he was buried.

Looking back for a moment to that crisis in Dante's life as a patriot, when from a Guelph he became a Ghibelline,—that is (as at the first glance might appear), when, from having been champion of an Italian Italy, free and sole mother and mistress of her own free children, he became, whether from personal disgust or sheer despair or from whatever other motive, as ardent a champion of that Imperial power which aspired to rule over her,—we may feel disposed to wonder at the transformation, perhaps to condemn the citizen. Not so, I would plead, until we have studied in his writings and have pondered over his own lofty view and exposition of a world-wide political theory; until we have striven to realize how the Italy before his eyes had in part become a field of mutual destruction, and therefore of self-destruction; until by virtue of reverent, compassionate sympathy we have hungered with him on the bitter bread of exile, and have trodden the wearisome, dusty roads of his wandering banishment. At its best our judgment may be erroneous; only let us not suffer it to settle down into stagnant and contented shallowness. By the mouth of St. Thomas Aquinas, Dante himself cautions us against rash judgment, and elsewhere, by one multitudinous, harmonious utterance of unnumbered glorified souls combined into the semblance of an eagle, sets forth the impartiality of God's final, irreversible sentence (Paradise, 13-19):

"And let not folk in judging trust their wit
Too fast, as one who counteth up the corn
In 's field before the sun has ripened it;
For I have all through winter seen a thorn
Appearing poisonless and obdurate,
Which then the rose upon the sprig hath borne:
And I have seen a ship, that swift and straight
Has run upon the mid-sea all her race,
And perished, entering at the harbor gate.

. . . . As the stork in circles flies
Above that nest wherein she feeds her young,
And as those fed attend her with their eyes,
So moved (and so mine eyes upon him clung)
That figure blest, whose movement of each plume
Was on such numbers of free counsels hung.
Circling he chanted, 'As to thee, by whom
They are not understood, my notes be, so
To mortals is God's everlasting doom.'
Then went on one and every flaming glow
Of God's own spirit, in that sign enmailed,
Which made to Roman arms the World bend low.
'This kingdom,' he began, 'was never scaled
By mortal that had not believed in Christ,
Before, or after, He on Cross was nailed.
But look, there's many calleth Christ, O Christ,
That shall, for meeting Him in judgment, want
Much more than such a one as knew not Christ.
The Æthiop shall judge, and cry, Avaunt
Such Christians, when those congregations two
Part, one for Wealth eterne, and one for Want.'"

* Maria F. Rossetti.

Hitherto we have contemplated Dante mounted, as it were, on a public pedestal. We have recalled his career mainly according to that aspect under which it forms a portion of the history of his age and nation. The man among men, the leader or the victim of his fellow-countrymen, has engrossed our attention.

But thus we have beheld only half a Dante. We have not looked, or even attempted to look, into that heart of fire which burned first and last for one beloved object. For, whatever view we take of Beatrice, unless indeed we are prepared wholly to set aside the poet's own evidence concerning himself, either she literally, or else that occult something which her name was employed at once to express and to veil, must apparently have gone far to mold her lover; to make him what he was, to withhold him from becoming such as he became not.

On Dante's own showing (in his "Vita Nuova" and elsewhere), this object, fruitlessly beloved on earth, but to be attained to and enjoyed in the heavenly communion of saints, was Beatrice, daughter of Folco Portinari, beautiful, gracious, replete with virtue, courteous, and humble. Not, it may be, that when first they met she shone, even in farthest-seeing poetic eyes, with her full luster; for at that first meeting they were both but children of nine years old, he somewhat the elder. She at her father's house, he brought thither by his own father on a holiday occasion—thus they met whom love was to unite by an indissoluble, because by a spiritual, bond. For no courtship, as it would seem, ensued. Not a hint remains that Beatrice even guessed her boy-friend's secret. He sought her company, and felt the ennobling influence of her presence—so noble an influence that love (he avers) ruled him not contrary to the dictates of reason. With equal emphasis Boccaccio dwells on the intact purity of both lover and beloved in this absorbing passion; for absorbing it was on Dante's side, whether or not it was returned.

And we may well hope that it was neither returned nor so much as surmised by its object; for, at the age of twenty, Beatrice Portinari became the wife of Simon de' Bardi. Of Dante's consequent grief we find no distinct mention, although one passage in the "Vita Nuova" may refer to it. Of his bitter grief when, in the year 1290, at the still youthful age of twenty-four, she died, he has left us an ample record.

It is narrated, but I know not whether on trustworthy authority, that, in this period of bereavement, Dante donned the Franciscan habit as a novice in the monastery of San

Benedetto in Alpe among the Apennines, and some writers of the same order have laid claim to him as wearing their affiliating cord and dying in their habit. However this may have been, tonsure and cowl were not for him, as an early day declared.

Boccaccio thus describes Dante in his desolation:

"He was, indeed, through tear-shed, and through the affliction felt within his heart, and through his neglect of all outward personal care, become well-nigh a savage creature to behold: lean, bearded, and almost wholly transformed from his previous self, insomuch that his aspect, not in his friends only, but no less in such others as beheld him, by its own virtue wrought compassion; he withal, this tearful life subsisting, seldom suffering himself to be seen by any but friends. This compassion, and apprehension of worse to come, set his kindred on the alert for his solace. They, marking the tears abated and the consuming sighs according some truce to the wearied bosom, with long-lost consolations set themselves to reconsole the unconsoled one, who, although up to that hour he had obstinately stopped his ears against every one, began not merely somewhat to open them, but willingly to entertain comforting suggestions. Which thing his kindred beholding, to the end that they might not only altogether withdraw him from anguish, but might lead him into joy, they proposed among themselves to bestow upon him a wife; that, even as the lost lady had caused his grief, so the newly acquired one might become to him source of gladness. And, having found a maiden of creditable condition, with such reasons as appeared to them most influential, they declared to him their intention. Whereupon, after long conflict, without further waste of time, to words succeeded effects, and he was married."

This marriage, contracted about a year after the death of Beatrice, proved more or less unhappy; so we deem on indirect evidence. Gemma Donati, sister of that Corso Donati who subsequently, at the head of the Black faction, overran Florence with fire and sword,—Gemma Donati was the chosen bride, the accepted wife. Seven children she bore to her husband, surely a dear and binding link between them; yet, from the moment of his exile, he and she met no more. When, he being already and, as the event proved, finally absent, his Florentine house was burnt, she saved his manuscripts, which were afterward restored to his own keeping. This suggests, though it does not prove, affection on her side. But while some, if not all, of his children rejoined him after a time, his wife never. Perhaps no living woman of mere flesh and blood could have sufficed to supersede that Beatrice whom Dante terms "this youngest angel" long before death had (as we trust) exalted her to the society of all her blessed fellows, whether elect angels or beatified spirits. If so, Gemma is truly to be pitied in her comparatively thankless and loveless lot; nevertheless, such hope remained to her as, of old, Leah may have cherished when altogether

eclipsed by Rachel,—such hope as removes from earth to heaven. Nor could Dante himself have denied her that hope, for thus he writes (Purgatory, 27):

“Sleep over me
Came, even sleep, which oftentimes doth know
The tidings of events before they be.

My dreams did, young and beautiful, present
A lady to me, that by lawnly lands
Was gathering flowers, and singing as she went:
‘Now know ye, whosoe’er my name demands,
That I am Leah, that about me ply,
To make myself a chaplet, my fair hands;
That I may in the mirror please mine eye
I deck me; but my sister Rachel, she
Is ne’er uncharmed, and sits all day thereby.
She hath as lief her goodly eyes to see,
As I have with my hands to deck me here;
So study pleaseth her, and labor me.’”

Yet it seems hard to accept as full and final such an explanation, because Dante, on his own showing, lapsed from pure, unbroken faith to his first love into unworthy pleasure. Hear how, even amid the peace and bliss of the Terrestrial Paradise, Beatrice, with veiled countenance and stinging words, addresses him, “*Guardami ben; ben son, ben son Beatrice*” (“Look on me well; yes, I am Beatrice”), and, despite his overwhelming shame, resumes the thread of her discourse by speaking no longer *to*, but *at* him (Purgatory, 30):

“Some while at heart my presence kept him sound;
My girlish eyes to his observance lending,
I led him with me on the right way bound.
When, of my second age the steps ascending,
I bore my life into another sphere,
Then stole he from me, after others bending.
When I arose from flesh to spirit clear,
When beauty, worthiness upon me grew,
I was to him less pleasing and less dear.
He set his feet upon a path untrue,
Chasing fallacious images of weal,
Whose promise never doth result pursue.
It helpt me nought, to make him my appeal
In sleep, through inspirations that I won,
Or otherwise; so little did he feel.
So far he fell adown, that now not one
Device for his redemption could bestead,
Except by showing him the souls undone.”

It is of course possible that the one woman whom Dante could not—or, rather, would not—love was that only woman who had an indefeasible claim upon his heart. Whatever the explanation may be, it remains for the present hidden. Time has not shown; eternity, if not time, will show it. Meanwhile let us, by good wishes, commend him, after the prolonged disappointment of life, to that satisfying peace whereunto he consigns Boethius—a philosopher whose writings had aforetime cheered him under depression, and whose spirit he places in the sun among the

lovers of true wisdom, where his fellow-sage, St. Thomas Aquinas, thus sums up his history (Paradise, 10):

“Now, if the eye-beam of thy mind proceed
From light to light, the follower of my praise,
To know the eighth already thou wilt need.
There, blessed from beholding all good, stays
That soul untarnished who the treacherous lease,
If well perused, of worldly joys displays.
That body, whence her violent decease
She made, Cieldauro covers, and she ran
From pangs and exile into th’ endless peace.”

If the master Boethius was wise, wise also must we account Dante the disciple. Some students speak of hidden lore underlying the letter of our poet’s writings: in Beatrice they think to discern an impersonation rather than a woman, in the Divine Comedy a meaning political rather than dogmatic,—or, if in any sense dogmatic, yet not such as appears on the surface. So obscure a field of investigation is not for me or for my readers; at least, not for them through any help of mine: to me it is and it must remain dim and unexplored, even as that “*selva oscura*” (dark wood) with which the Cantica of the Hell opens.

What then, according to the obvious signification, is in few words the subject or plot of the Divine Comedy?

Dante, astray in a gloomy wood and beset by wild beasts, is rescued by the shade of Virgil, who, at the request of Beatrice, already an inhabitant of heaven, has left his proper abode in a painless region of hell, for the purpose of guiding Dante first of all through the nether-world of lost souls, that, by their irremediable ruin, he may learn to flee from evil as from the face of a serpent, retrieving his errors and amending his ways. Over Hell gate an awful inscription is placed (Hell, 3):

“Through me you pass into the city of woe;
Through me you pass eternal woes to prove;
Through me among the blasted race you go.
’Twas Justice did my most high Author move,
And I have been the work of Power divine,
Of supreme Wisdom, and of primal Love.
No creature has an elder date than mine,
Unless eternal, and I have no end.
O you that enter me, all hope resign.”

Immediately beyond this gate swarms a throng of despicable souls, refuse even in hell, mere self-seekers; the “spued-out, lukewarm” ones, so to say. These left behind, and the river Styx passed over, a painless, hopeless region is entered,—the permanent home of Virgil, with all other virtuous heathens who lived and died before our Lord Christ was born: painless, because their lives were good; hopeless, because they lacked faith. Beyond

this point of our pilgrims' journey peace, even hopeless peace, finds no place. A furious, whirling storm is the first torment they encounter. Thenceforward, from agony to agony they plunge deeper and deeper into the abyss of Hell, meeting sinner after sinner whose ghastly story is told at more or less length, until they reach the visible, abhorrent presence of Lucifer, who from "perfect in beauty" has by rebellion become absolute in hideous horror.

Mid-Lucifer occupies the earth's center of gravity. Virgil, with Dante clinging to him, clambers down the upper half of Lucifer and climbs up the lower half, whereby the twain find themselves emerging from the depth of Hell upon the Mountain of Purgatory.

This Purgatory is the domain of pain and hope,—finite pain, assured hope. Again a number of episodes charm us while we track the pilgrims along the steep ascent, until, on the summit, they reach the Terrestrial Paradise; and here, the shade of Beatrice assuming in her own person the guidance of her lover, Virgil vanishes.

Under the guardianship of Beatrice, Dante mounts through eight successive Heavens to that ninth which includes within itself all blessedness. In each of them he encounters jubilant souls grown loquacious by impulse of charity, delighting to share with him their edifying experiences, to resolve his doubts, to lighten his darkness. All culminates in an unutterable revelation of God made Man and the All-Holy Trinity in Unity.

Chief among Dante's works, and in itself complete, the Divine Comedy yet requires an introduction if we would fully understand its starting-point. Our poet's earlier work, the "Vita Nuova," composed of alternate prose and verse, supplies that introduction. There we read an elaborate continuous exposition of his love for Beatrice, interspersed with ever-renewed tribute of praise from his lowliness to her loftiness; interspersed, too, with curiosities of structure and perhaps of style which some may deem pedantic. In the following passage Dante relates how, by means of a dream, he experienced beforehand what

anguish should befall him on the death of Beatrice ("Vita Nuova"):

"In myself I said, with sick recoil:
'Yea, to my lady too this Death must come.'

Then saw I many broken hinted sights
In the uncertain state I stepp'd into.
Meseem'd to be I know not in what place,
Where ladies through the street, like mournful
lights,

Ran with loose hair, and eyes that frighten'd you
By their own terror, and a pale amaze:
The while, little by little, as I thought,
The sun ceased, and the stars began to gather,
And each wept at the other;
And birds dropp'd in mid-flight out of the sky;
And earth shook suddenly;
And I was 'ware of one, hoarse and tired out,
Who ask'd of me: 'Hast thou not heard it
said?
Thy lady, she that was so fair, is dead.'

"Then lifting up mine eyes, as the tears came,
I saw the angels, like a rain of manna,
In a long flight flying back heavenward;
Having a little cloud in front of them,
After the which they went and said, 'Hosanna';
And if they had said more, you should have heard.
Then Love said, 'Now shall all things be made
clear:
Come and behold our lady where she lies.'

"These 'wilderling phantasies
Then carried me to see my lady dead.
Even as I there was led,
Her ladies with a veil were covering her;
And with her was such very humbleness
That she appeared to say, 'I am at peace.'"

(D. G. Rossetti.)

Such readers as would fully enter into the mind of Dante—as fully, that is, as ordinary intelligences can hope to explore the extraordinary—must not limit themselves to the Divine Comedy and "Vita Nuova," but must study also the "Convito" (Banquet), a philosophical work, besides minor poems, epistles, and Latin compositions. On the threshold of such studies, I bid them good-bye in our great author's own words:

"Se Dio ti lasci, lettor, prender frutto
Di tua lezione."

(May God vouchsafe thee, reader, to cull fruit
From this thy reading.)

Christina G. Rossetti.

