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DANTE

IN THE LIGHT OF CHURCH HISTORY.

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About the year 1300 the peculiar development of the Middle Ages had reached its culmination; and signs began to become visible in many directions that a change of a radical character was at hand. Europe had returned from the Crusades disappointed and disenchanted, but it could not settle down again to the old routine; for it had seen in the East a civilization in many respects more advanced than its own, and, when it looked again on its familiar surroundings, it was with the feeling with which one who has been out for the first time in the big world returns to behold the narrowness and slovenliness of his native village. Of the two or three centuries before 1300 the assertion of papal supremacy had been the commanding feature; but in the hands of later popes, such as Boniface the Eighth, it had been overdone, and the part was not sustained with sufficient dignity. After all, things in this world must sooner or later be judged by their utility; and mankind were not sensible of receiving from the papacy as much as it cost. Besides, the moral scandals of the Church had entered deeply into the general mind, weakening its reverence for the ecclesiastical system. Dimly it dawned on the peoples of Europe that their re-

ligious confidence was being abused for very earthly ends, and it was too manifest that many of those who were exhorting them to live a pure and unworldly life were themselves setting an example of the reverse. For a time Scholasticism had been represented by a succession of brilliant names; but gradually it had fallen into the hands of inferior practitioners, who, though making greater claims than their predecessors, had little to show for such pretensions. Indeed, their hairsplitting distinctions and barren disputations became a byword and a proverb.

As time went on, providential events added to the unrest of men's minds and to the anticipations of coming change. The discovery of gunpowder not only rendered entirely antiquated the art of war, as it had been previously practiced, but created the expectation of the unfolding of other secrets of nature, by which the aspect of the world might be greatly altered. The invention of the art of printing operated with still more revolutionary effect, the gifted beginning to realize the magic of the printed page and to taste the thirst for literary fame in a degree never felt before. The Discovery of America and the exploits of Portugese discoverers, in other quarters of the globe, expanded the general conception of the world and created a keen curiosity for the news brought from such distant parts; while the dawning light of astronomy tended in a still greater degree to alter the centre of gravity in men's conceptions of the universe. Flight from this wicked world had been the monkish ideal, and in the teaching of the Church everything in this earthly scene was treated with contempt, for the purpose of magnifying the world unseen; but now men began to whisper in their hearts:

This world's no blot to us  
Nor blank; it means intensely, and means good,  
To find its meaning be our meat and drink.

This turning from the world unseen to the visible world, to enjoy its beauty, its work and its wonder, is perhaps

the most prominent feature of the Renaissance. In some of those inspired with the new enthusiasm it degenerated into sensualism, to which they abandoned themselves in defiance of all restraint and authority; but in more it was a refined secularism, which, without denying or fighting against the ascetic view of existence, silently abandoned it.

A name sometimes applied to the Renaissance is the Revival of Learning; and this points to one of the prominent features of this age. When Constantinople fell in 1453, the Greek scholars residing there took refuge in large numbers in the cities of the West, especially in Italy; and they brought with them the works of the great authors of their race. Settling in University towns, they opened classes for the study of Greek and soon found multitudes of eager students gathered about their feet. Even before the Fall of Constantinople, an interest in the study of the Greek classics had been awakened in Italy; one or two Greek scholars had been invited to settle in Florence and Rome; and wealthy citizens displayed enormous diligence and spent large sums of money in collecting Greek manuscripts. The masterpieces of Greek literature were translated into Latin and thus made accessible to all scholars.

Boccaccio, for example, translated into Latin both *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. A new interest in the Latin language itself was thereby created, scholars conceiving the ambition of writing, not in the barbarous Latin of the Law or of Theology, but in the style of Cicero and according to the rules of Quintilian. Under this impulse the manuscripts of the Latin classics were unearthed and the style of one great author compared with that of another; for the transcription of such manuscripts hundreds of copyists being employed by the booksellers. In some minds this occupation with the form of literature led to an absurd pedantry, anything that was ancient being regarded, as a matter of course, as superior to everything

modern; but in the men of original genius familiarity with the models of classical literature led to a closer study of the structure and capacities of their own native languages, and thus the modern languages began to be improved and adapted to literary purposes. Most important of all, however, was the pathway opened by these studies to the spirit of the classical world. By the teaching of the Church the impression had been created that whatever lay beyond the circumference of Christianity was worthless and accursed; but now, in the pages of the ancient classical authors, men obtained glimpses of a life in many respects superior to their own, more free, manly and joyous. The senerity of Plato, the universality of Aristotle, the simple dignity of Homer, the refined beauty of Virgil, the flight of Pindar, the wit of Horace—what was there in the writings of monks and schoolmen to equal these? No wonder if some were in favor of going back to paganism altogether, accounting Christianity to be merely a temporary episode of barbarism in the progress of civilization; but many more were seized with the wiser ambition of recovering from the buried past the lost treasures of humanity, and adding to the heritage acquired from Christianity the glory that was Greece and the grandeur that was Rome.

The Renaissance began in Italy; Florence, under the rule of the Medici, leading the van, and the other cities, such as Venice, Padua, Mantua and Bologna, following; and among the famous names of the Humanists, as the leading figures of the Renaissance are called, are Petrarch and Ariosto, Filelfo and Politian, Bembo and Mirandola. From Italy it passed into Germany, where among its cultivators were Erasmus, Reuchlin and von Hutten, and into France, where it was illustrated by such names as Villon, Ronsard and Rabelais. England also had a large share in the movement; and it is only necessary to mention Dean Colet and Sir Thomas More.

If we were, however, to connect one name, for all Europe, with this movement, undoubtedly the foremost is Dante, though he stands so early in the development as not to exhibit some of the characteristics of its maturity. He was born in 1265, and died in 1321.

Dante belongs to the Renaissance by the richness of his sense of beauty and by the freedom and vigor of all his intellectual processes. Eminently modern also is his choice of the Italian language for his great poem, instead of Latin. In a treatise *De Vulgari Eloquentia* he discusses the question, in all its length and breadth, which of the two languages should be employed for such a purpose, explaining the capabilities of the vernacular for the highest tasks of literature. This was a momentous choice; because his unparalleled achievement in the national language led the way for the employment of the tongues of other countries for the like uses, and so gave a mighty impulse to national development, which was one of the leading features of the Renaissance. The Church, on the contrary, held on to the use of Latin both in her learning and in the services of the sanctuary, thus binding herself to Mediævalism and putting herself out of sympathy with the progress of the world.

Dante is, further, connected with the Renaissance by antipathy to the papacy. In his treatise *De Monarchia*—one of the most important speculations ever given to the world on the subject of the State—he maintains the divine right of the empire against the pretensions of the popes. According to him, civil government is inherent in human society, receiving its authority directly from God Almighty: the emperor receives his sword from God's own hand, not from the hand of the pope. Religion is, indeed, as essential to man as civil government—perhaps it may be said, even more essential, because it guides him to a higher destiny—but the two authorities are co-ordinate: neither is superior to the other. These speculations are of decisive importance for the comprehension of

the thought of Dante in his poetic works; because these also are dominated by the conception that, in order to attain his double destiny as a citizen of this world and as an heir of the eternal world, man requires the two-fold guidance of the State and of the Church.

Dante was born of a good Florentine family, but lost both his parents at an early age. He must, however, have received the best education the times could afford, as he is an extraordinarily learned man, versed in all the branches of knowledge then embraced in an academic curriculum and especially strong in his grasp of philosophy and theology. Before he had emerged from boyhood, he received the most profound and permanent influence of his life in a passion he conceived for a child of his own age—Beatrice Portinari, daughter of a wealthy Florentine. This grew with his growth, its intensity being unaffected, on the one hand, by the facts that his acquaintance with her was extremely slight, that she was wedded, at the ordinary age for marriage, to a rich banker, and that she died early, or, on the other hand, by the fact that he himself married another woman and became the father of a family. In this beautiful child, who grew into a woman, moving in a circle distant from his own, he had once for all seen the ideal of womanhood; he invested the object of his worship with every kind of perfection both of body and soul; and his devotion to her not only stimulated his genius but apparently purified his heart. When he meets her in heaven, in the course of his poetical wanderings through the universe, she reproaches him sharply for stooping, after losing her, to lower forms of satisfaction; but whether this refers to his marriage, or to aberrations in philosophy or theology, or to real moral lapses, due to passion, cannot be determined with certainty. If it be a confession that for a time he had strayed, under the spell of the senses, from the path of virtue, there is every reason to believe that, at any rate, the memory of Beatrice enticed him back to the way of right-

eousness. Indeed, his great poem is perhaps best understood as a symbolical account of his own conversion, through her influence, and of his efforts to live up to the ideal which the image of her had left in his mind. By the time his poem was penned, Beatrice had become to him an altogether transcendent and ideal being, advanced to the highest honors and functions in heaven; and many would regard her not as a human being at all, but only an earthly name for divine and abstract qualities.

Grown to manhood, Dante became immersed in the public affairs of his native city, which, in his day, were of an exciting character. More than once he fought for Florence on the field of battle; he was sent on embassies, to transact the business of the city in foreign parts; and in 1300, a date of destiny not only in his life but in the history of Europe, for it was the famous Jubilee of Pope Boniface the Eighth—he was one of the six Priors—an office corresponding with town councillor or alderman. At that time the pope was making every exertion to win influence in Florence, which he designed to add to the Estates of the Church; but Dante was utterly opposed to any such proposal and signalized his priorate by banishing the heads of the pope's faction. Banishment is, however, a game at which two can play; and, the opposite party chancing soon after to get the upper hand, he was banished himself, along with the chief of his supporters. In the years that followed he made every exertion to secure a reversal of this sentence, even going the length of taking up arms to force a way back; but, although others were pardoned and restored, the sentence on him was never cancelled. When, in 1308, a new emperor, Henry VII, was elected and came south to Italy, in order to be crowned, Dante believed that the moment for himself had come, and he greeted the approach of the emperor, who was expected to restore the banished in all the Italian cities, almost as if he had been a messiah; but again he was doomed to disappointment; for Florence placed her-

self in opposition to the emperor, and, even had Henry wished, he could have done nothing for him. In point of fact, Dante never got back, but was doomed for the rest of his life to wander as an exile from place to place. He appears never to have obtained any remunerative occupation, but billeted himself on one patron after another; and he speaks of himself as "a pilgrim, almost a beggar," and as experiencing how salt savors another's bread, and how hard is the ascending and descending by another's stairs. Numerous are the places in which he is said to have sojourned, Paris and perhaps even Oxford being among them; but at length he was able to settle down in something like a home at Ravenna. Here he was joined by his children, but not by his wife, whom he would appear never to have seen again after quitting Florence; and here he died and was buried. In time Florence came to realize how much she had lost, but, though she begged for the ashes of her most illustrious son, these proved unrecoverable, and they repose in Ravenna to this day.

But the loss of Florence and of Dante himself proved the gain of the human race. If Dante had got back, to embroil himself in the politics of the city, Florence might have obtained a chief magistrate whose record would have been an uncommon one, and Dante might have consumed considerably more corporation-dinners than fell to his lot, but the world would in all probability have missed *The Divine Comedy*; for such is the name which the principal achievement of his genius now bears. Of course Comedy is used in a peculiar sense—in the sense of a story which, after moving through many vicissitudes, has a happy ending. Apparently Dante himself called his work *The Vision*; and it is a vision of the world unseen, divided into the three compartments of which that portion of the universe was then supposed to consist—namely, Hell, Purgatory and Paradise. It is not fanciful to suppose that the tendency of the poet's mind to such a theme may have been favored by the circumstances of his lot. As he was



driven out of the world, with its enjoyments and employments, his thoughts turned to the other world, of his heritage in which no popes or priors could bereave him. More and more his apprehensions of that other world grew in intensity, till he may be said to have lived there rather than on earth. He sees everything in that world, which is so dim to the majority, as if under an electric ray; and he designates whatever he has seen in words few, strong and picturesque. Vast as the conception of the poem is, it is perfectly and almost mathematically worked out. To each of the three divisions thirty-three cantos are allotted, one being added in *The Inferno* to make up the hundred. The interior of the Inferno is measured as accurately as if it were a box; and the same order and accuracy attach to the descriptions of the other two places.

A question which often occurs to the reader is, how far Dante himself believed in the arrangements of the other world which he specifies so accurately? This is a deep question, to which it is not easy to give a simple answer. On the other hand, it may be said with perfect confidence that Dante is the most truthful of authors: every line bears the stamp of absolute sincerity. There can be no doubt whatever that he believed that the unseen world contained these three divisions—these punishments, these pains, these glories. But, on the other hand, Dante's truth is poetic truth; and of this he was unquestionable perfectly aware. He says himself that the real subject of his poem is "righteousness"; but he knew that these exact and highly colored pictures were the best means of representing to the minds he was addressing the guilt and degradation of sin, the pathos and the virtue of repentance, and the splendor and reward of perfection.

In reading *The Divine Comedy* a beginner finds many impediments. The architectural plan of the different places is not easy to master, especially of the Inferno; and one is confused with the various means by which the pilgrim is

conveyed from one point to another. Then, there is a profusion of allegory; and this, which pleased the mind of our ancestors, as we see, for example, in our own Spenser, is to the modern man a weariness of the flesh. Lastly, the references to the history of the Middle Ages, and especially to the history of the Italian cities and states, would require for their complete elucidation an extent and minuteness of knowledge not possessed by one in ten thousand even of the educated. But the best way is to pay no attention to these difficulties, but read on. Imperceptibly they disappear, and one acquires such familiarity with the whole as enables one to perceive which things ought to be mastered at whatever cost and which can be neglected without loss. To students of Church History the historical difficulties gradually clear up. Indeed, there is no better preparation for reading Dante than the study of Church History, and, on the other hand, there is nothing which sheds on Church History a more fascinating light than *The Divine Comedy*. In its cantos the principal figures with which the students in a Church History class must be making acquaintance appear in poetical illumination—Constantine, Justinian, Charlemagne, Frederick I, Frederick II, Gregory the Great, Innocent III, Boniface VIII, Benedict of Nursia, St. Bernard, St. Domenic, St. Francis of Assisi, St. Augustine, St. Jerome, Anselm, Albertus Magnus, Bonaventura, Thomas Aquinas and many more. Although Dante may be called the herald of the Renaissance, his is still more truly the mind in which the Middle Ages are summed up; indeed, the entire history of Christendom, in both its beliefs and practices, down to his time, is reflected in the magic mirror of his genius.

*The Divine Comedy* is supposed to be dated in the year 1300 and to describe the experiences of a week, from the morning of Good Friday to the Friday following. In reality the poem was not only penned, for the most part at least, after this, but many events are referred to which

happened later; these, however, are introduced as future events, which are foretold by the several characters with whom the pilgrim converses. It will be remembered that 1300 was the year of Dante's priorate, but it may also have been the year of some inward crisis, of which this poem is the symbolical record.

He finds himself lost in a wood and exposed to danger from the wild creatures inhabiting it; when a guide appears, sent from a lady in heaven, who is no other than Beatrice; and this turns out to be the poet Virgil, of whom Dante was a devoted student. He has been commissioned to be Dante's guide, and actually accompanies him, helping him over the difficulties of the way and explaining countless novelties which they encounter, till the pilgrim has traversed both Hell and Purgatory. Beyond this point the heathen poet cannot go; and this is an indication that the revelations of Hell and Purgatory are intended to teach the path to natural virtue, the higher attainments of the theological virtues requiring a different guide.

If the reader can conceive a section, in the shape of a child's spinning top, being hollowed out of the earth's interior, the oval end being Jerusalem and the pointed end at the centre of the globe, he will have an accurate idea of what Dante imagines Hell to be. But this huge hollow is divided into numerous sections or circles, descending in parallel galleries from the widest end to the narrowest; and, in these, different kinds of sinners are punished with different kinds of torments. The deeper the pilgrims descend, the sins get worse; but their arrangement does not correspond with that of any heathen or Christian moralist. Only it proceeds on the recognized principle that sins of the senses are the less and sins of the mind and spirit the more guilty. Dante describes them all, unfolding the most extraordinary ingenuity in fitting to the several sins their several punishments. The latter are often horrible and heartrend-

ing, yet the gloom and terror even of Hell are relieved by many a touch of tenderness and sympathy, as he introduces personages who are suffering in the different circles and narrates the circumstances in which they fell. The most notable of all such cases is that Paolo and Francesca, who sinned by loving not wisely but too well, and even in Hell are not divided. The very lowest circle of all is reserved for traitors; and here Lucifer himself is frozen in ice, while he champs in his mouth the betrayer of our Lord.

There is a gruesome fascination about *The Inferno*, which probably causes it to be more read than *The Purgatorio* or *The Paradiso*. But those who stop short make a mistake; for there is no falling-off in the later parts of the poem. On the contrary, none can know the full range of Dante's music who have not tasted the sweetness of *The Purgatorio* and listened to the strains, almost unearthly in their variety and splendid as the songs of seraphim, in *The Paradiso*.

It will be remembered that the Inferno terminates at the center of the globe. Now, if it be supposed possible to proceed from this point, by some passage through the bowels of the earth, and come out on the side of the globe opposite to Jerusalem, there will be found the Purgatorio. It is based on a vast island, rising sheer out of the sea, and it narrows towards the top, which, however, is flat. Up its sides, from base to summit, winds a spiral path; and this is the way of purification. It is divided into seven portions, in each of which one of the seven deadly sins is expiated, namely, pride, avarice, luxury, envy, appetite, anger, sloth; the poet here, it will be observed, adopting the ordinary scholastic division of these sins. It will be noticed that here the sins of the mind and spirit are at the bottom, as being furthest from perfection, and those of the flesh are above, as being nearer to it.

The entrance to the upward path is by three steps under an overhanging archway; and these are of marble, white, purple and red respectively, symbolizing penance in its three constituents, contrition, confession, satisfaction. At the entrance to each of the terraces are figured examples of the virtue contrary to the vice punished in it, so as to encourage those who are striving to escape from its hold, while at the upper end are examples of the consequences of the vice, to stimulate in the opposite way. At the upper end of each terrace stands the angel of the virtue opposed to the deadly sin there expiated, to pass those on whose period of expiation has terminated.

Dante's Purgatory, unlike his Hell, stands wholly in the open-air; and joyful it is for the pilgrim, emerging from the region below, to come out into the morning sunshine and to experience day by day, as he ascends the slope, the interchange of day and night. This corresponds well with the spiritual atmosphere of the place, which, in spite of the exquisite purgatorial pains, is, all the way, one of hope. And the whole mountain rocks with joy, and praises burst from the toiling figures, whenever it is announced that anyone has completed the ascent and attained to the Earthly Paradise, which forms the top of the mount.

When we come to the third part of *The Vision*, we have to remember that Dante's heaven is that of the Ptolemaic astronomy—that is to say, it consists of a number of concentric circles, of which the earth is the stationary center. The first of these heavens is that of the Moon; and, after it, we have the heavens of the planets—of Mercury, Venus, the Sun, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn. Beyond these is the heaven of the Fixed Stars; and, highest of all, is the Empyrean, the goal to which the inhabitants of all the lower heavens are tending. These various provinces of the kingdom of heaven are severally presided over by angels, archangels, principalities, powers, virtues, dominations, thrones, cherubim, seraphim—names

in which will be recognized the hierarchy of superhuman beings constructed by Dionysius the Areopagite—and these exert on the inhabitants of the circles committed to their charge influences corresponding with their own peculiar properties, as these have been defined by Dionysius and the other mystical authors who developed his system.

In the Earthly Paradise, which, as has been remarked, forms the summit of Purgatory, the poet had been met by Beatrice, who now acts as his guide, Virgil having returned to his own place. The gaze of Beatrice is fixed on God; and, Dante's being fixed on her, he is borne upwards from Purgatory to the heaven of the Moon by an impulse which makes his passage thither as swift as lightning; and, by the same easy transit, he passes, when the time has come, from heaven to heaven. The farther they ascend, the countenance of his guide grows the more beautiful, and his joy the more complete.

He is recognized by many an old acquaintance, as he passes; and interesting personages detach themselves from the companies of the blessed, to enter into conversation with him on the problems which have started themselves in his mind in the course of his pilgrimage. *The Paradiso* is fuller than the preceding parts of discussions on profound themes, such as Freewill and the Atonement, which may not add to the excellence of the poetry, but certainly increase the interest for the historical student.

When the pilgrim reaches the borders of the Empyrean, where the peculiar abode of God Himself is situated, he has to surrender the guidance of Beatrice, who is not at liberty to proceed farther, and he is handed over to the care of St. Bernard. This friendly saint not only explains many novelties but entreats from the Virgin Mary that there may be granted to the mortal under his charge a sight of the divine essence, as a vision of Jehovah was of old vouchsafed to Moses, when he was placed

in the cleft of the rock. The prayer being granted, Dante sees face to face the mystery of the Trinity.

In that abyss  
Of radiance, clear and lofty, seemed, methought,  
Three orbs of triple hue, clipt in one bound;  
And from another one reflected seemed,  
As rainbow is from rainbow; and the third  
Seemed fire, breathed equally from both. O speech,  
How feeble and how faint art thou, to give  
Conception birth!

Not only is he unable to express what he saw; but, at the time, he could not long endure the sight. Still, he was satisfied; and—what is more—he felt that, in some degree, he had been changed into the image of that whereon he had been privileged to look. Mind and heart were one with the mind and heart of God; and—these are the last words of the divine poem:

Like a wheel in even motion,  
His will moved onward, by the love impelled  
That moves the sun in heaven and all the stars.