ARTHUR JOHN BUTLER

DANTE: HIS TIMES AND HIS WORK

Arthur Butler

Dante: His Times and His Work

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=24180700
Dante: His Times and His Work:

Содержание

Dante: His Times and His Work

PREFACE

This little book is mainly compounded of papers which appeared, part in the *Monthly Packet*, and part in the Magazine of the Home Reading Union. It will be seen, therefore, that it is not intended for those whom Italians call "Dantists," but for students at an early stage of their studies. To the former class there will be nothing in the book that is not already familiar – except where they happen to find mistakes, from which, in so extensive a field for blundering as Dante affords, I cannot hope to have kept it free. In the domain of history alone fresh facts are constantly rewarding the indefatigable research of German and Italian scholars – a research of which only the most highly specialised specialist can possibly keep abreast. Even since the following pages were for the most part in print, we have had Professor Villari's *Two Centuries of Florentine History*, correcting in many particulars the chroniclers on whom the Dante student has been wont to rely. This book should most emphatically be added to those named in the appendix as essential to the study of our

author.

In connection with some of the remarks in the opening chapter, Professor Butcher's Essay on *The Dawn of Romanticism in Greek Poetry* should be noticed. I do not think that the accomplished author's view is incompatible with mine; though I admit that I had not taken much account of the Greek writers whom we call "post-classical." But it is to be noted, as bearing on the question raised in the second footnote on p. 9, that most or all of the writers whom he cites were either Asiatics or nearly touched by Asiatic influences.

I have made some attempt to deal in a concise way with two subjects which have not, I think, hitherto been handled in English books on Dante, other than translations. One of these is the development of the Guelf and Ghibeline struggle from a rivalry between two German houses to a partisan warfare which rent Italy for generations. I am quite aware that I have merely touched the surface of the subject, which seems to me to contain in it the essence of all political philosophy, with special features such as could only exist in a country which, like Italy, had, after giving the law to the civilised world, been unable to consolidate itself into a nation like the other nations of Europe. I have, I find, even omitted to notice what seem to have been the ruling aims of at any rate the honest partisans on either side: unity, that of the Ghibelines; independence, that of the Guelfs. Nor have I drawn attention to a remarkable trait in Dante's own character, which, so far as I know, has never been discussed – I mean

his apparent disregard of the "lower classes." Except for one or two similes drawn from the "villano" and his habits, and one or two contemptuous allusions to "Monna Berta e Ser Martino" and their like, it would seem as if for him the world consisted of what now would be called "the upper ten thousand." In an ordinary politician or partisan, or even in a mere man of letters this would not be strange; but when we reflect that Dante was a man who went deeply into social and religious questions, that he was born less than forty years after the death of St. Francis, and was at least closely enough associated with Franciscans for legend to make him a member of the order, and that most of the so-called heretical sects of the time – Paterines, Cathari, Poor Men – started really more from social than from religious discontent, it is certainly surprising that his interest in the "dim, common populations" should have been so slight.

The other object at which I have aimed is the introduction of English students to the theories which seem to have taken possession of the most eminent Continental Dante scholars, and of which some certainly seem to be quite as much opposed to common sense and knowledge of human nature as the conjectures of Troya and Balbo, for instance, were to sound historical criticism. Here, again, I have but touched on the more salient points; feeling sure that before long some of the scholarship in our Universities and elsewhere, which at present devotes itself to Greek and Latin, having reached the point of realizing that Greek and Latin texts may be worth

studying though written outside of so-called classical periods, will presently extend the principle to the further point of applying to mediæval literature, which hitherto has been too much the sport of *dilettanti*, the methods that have till now been reserved for the two favoured (and rightly favoured) languages. Unless I am much mistaken, the finest Latin scholar will find that a close study of early Italian will teach him "a thing or two" that he did not know before in his own special subject; so that his labour will not be lost, even from that point of view. Then we shall get the authoritative edition of Dante, which I am insular enough to believe will never come from either Germany or Italy, or from any intervening country.

February, 1895.

CHAPTER I.
THE THIRTEENTH CENTURY

The person who sets to work to write about Dante at the present day has two great difficulties to reckon with: the quantity which has already been written on the subject, and the quantity which remains to be written. The first involves the reading of an enormous mass of literature in several languages, and very various in quality; but for the comfort of the young student, it may at once, and once for all, be stated that he can pretty safely ignore everything written between 1400 and 1800. The subject of commentaries, biographies, and other helps, or would-be helps, will be treated of later on. Here we need only say that the Renaissance practically stifled anything like an intelligent study of Dante for those four centuries; and it was not until a new critical spirit began to apply to it the methods which had hitherto been reserved for the Greek and Latin classics, that the study got any chance of development. How enormously it has developed during the present century needs not to be said. It may suffice to point out that the British Museum Catalogue shows editions of the *Commedia* at the rate of one for every year since 1800, and other works on Dante in probably five times that proportion.

Now, it has been said of the *Commedia*, and the remark is equally true of Dante's other works, that it is like the Bible in

this respect: every man finds in it what he himself brings to it. The poet finds poetry, the philosopher philosophy; the scientific man science as it was known in 1300; the politician politics; heretics have even found heresy. Nor is this very surprising when we consider what were the author's surroundings. Naturally, no doubt, a man of study and contemplation, his lot was cast in the midst of a stirring, even a turbulent, society, where it was hardly possible for any individual to escape his share of the public burdens. Ablebodied men could not be spared when, as was usually the case, fighting was toward; all men of mental capacity were needed in council or in administration. And, after all, the area to be administered, the ground to be fought over, were so small, that the man of letters might do his duty by the community and yet have plenty of time to spare for his studies. He might handle his pike at Caprona or Campaldino one day, and be at home among his books the next. Then, again, the society was a cultivated and quick-witted one, with many interests. Arts and letters were in high esteem, and eminence in them as sure a road to fame as warlike prowess or political distinction. From all this it is clear that the Florentine of the thirteenth century had points of contact with life on every side; every gate of knowledge lay open to him, and he could explore, if he pleased, every one of its paths. They have now been carried further, and a lifetime is too short for one man to investigate thoroughly more than one or two; but in those days it was still possible for a man of keen intelligence, added to the almost incredible diligence, as it appears to us, of

the Middle Ages, to make himself acquainted with all the best that had been done and said in the world.

This it is which forms at once the fascination and the difficulty of Dante's great work. Of course, if we content ourselves with reading it merely for its "beauties," for the æsthetic enjoyment of an image here and an allusion there, for the trenchant expression of some thought or feeling at the roots of human nature, there will be no need of any harder study than is involved in going through it with a translation. Indeed, it will hardly be worth while to go to the original at all. The pleasure, one might almost say the physical pleasure, derived from sonorous juxtaposition of words, such as we obtain from Milton or from Shelley, is scarcely to be genuinely felt in the case of a foreign language; and the beauties of matter, as distinguished from those of form, are faithfully enough rendered by Cary or Longfellow.

It may, however, be safely assumed that few intelligent students will rest content with this amount of study. They will find at every turn allusions calling for explanation, philosophical doctrines to be traced to their sources, judgements on contemporary persons and events to be verified. On every page they will meet with problems the solution of which has not yet been attempted, or attempted only in the most perfunctory way. For generation after generation readers have gone on accepting received interpretations which only tell them what their own wits could divine without any other assistance than the text itself gives. No commentator seems yet to have realised

that, in order to understand Dante thoroughly, he must put himself on Dante's level so far as regards a knowledge of all the available literature. The more obvious quarries from which Dante obtained the materials for his mighty structure – the Bible, Virgil, Augustine, Aquinas, Aristotle – have no doubt been pretty thoroughly examined, and many obscurities which the comments of Landino and others only left more obscure have thus been cleared up; but a great deal remains to be done. Look where one may in the literature which was open to Dante, one finds evidence of his universal reading. We take up such a book as Otto of Freising's *Annals* (to which, with his *Acts of Frederick I.*, we shall have to refer again), and find the good bishop moralising thus on the mutability of human affairs, with especial reference to the break-up of the Empire in the middle of the ninth century: —

> "Does not worldly honour seem to turn round and round after the fashion of one stricken with fever? For such place their hope of rest in a change of posture, and so, when they are in pain, throw themselves from side to side, turning over continually."[1]

It is hard not to suppose that Dante had this passage in his mind when he wrote that bitter apostrophe to his own city with which the sixth canto of the *Purgatory* ends: —

"E se ben ti ricorda, e vedi lume,

[1] Otho Fris., *Annales*, v. 36.

Vedrai te somigliante a quella inferma,
Che non può trovar posa in su le piume,
Ma con dar volta suo dolore scherma."

It is hardly too much to say that one cannot turn over a couple of pages of any book which Dante may conceivably have read without coming on some passage which one feels certain he had read, or at the very least containing some information which one feels certain he possessed. A real "Dante's library"[2] would comprise pretty well every book in Latin, Italian, French, or Provençal, "published," if we may use the term, up to the year 1300. Of course a good many Latin books were (may one say fortunately?) in temporary retirement at that time; but even of these, whether, as has been suggested, through volumes, now lost, of "Elegant Extracts," or by whatever other means, more was evidently known than is always realised.

We must, however, beware of treating Dante merely as a repertory of curious lore or museum of literary *bric-à-brac*– a danger almost as great as that of looking at him from a purely æsthetic point of view. He had no doubt read more widely than any man of his age, and he is one of the half-dozen greatest poets of all time. But his claim on our attention rests on even a wider

[2] A useful list, with some account of the authors cited by Dante, is given by Mr. J. S. Black, in a volume entitled *Dante*; *Illustrations and Notes*, privately printed by Messrs. T. & A. Constable, at Edinburgh, 1890. He does not, however, include (save in one or two cases, and those rather doubtful) authors of whom Dante's knowledge rests on inference only.

basis than these two qualities would afford. He represents as it were the re-opening of the lips of the human race: "While I was musing, the fire kindled, and at last I spake with my tongue." The old classical literature had said its last word when Claudian died; and though men continued to compose, often with ability and intelligence, the histories and chronicles which practically formed the only non-theological writings of the so-called "Dark Ages," letters in the full sense of the term lay dormant for centuries. Not till the twelfth century was far advanced did any signs of a re-awakening appear. Then, to use a phrase of Dante's, the dead poetry arose, and a burst of song came almost simultaneously from all Western Europe. To this period belong the Minnesingers of Germany, the Troubadours of Provence, the unknown authors of the lovely romance – poetical in feeling, though cast chiefly in a prose form —*Aucassin et Nicolete*, and of several not less lovely English ballads and lyrics. Even the heavy rhymed chronicles begin to be replaced by romances in which the true poetic fire breaks out, such as the *Nibelungen Lied* (in its definitive form) and the *Chronicle of the Cid*.

In the new poetry two features strike us at once. The sentiment of love between man and woman, which with the ancients and even with early Christian writers scarcely ever rises beyond the level of a sensual passion,[3] becomes transfigured into a profound

[3] I do not forget Ulysses and Penelope, Hector and Andromache, or Ovid's *Heroïdes*; but the love of husband and wife is another matter altogether. The only instance in classical literature that I can recall of what may be termed the modern view of the subject is that of Hæmon and Antigone. See, on this subject, and in connection with

emotion touching the deepest roots of a man's nature, and acting as an incentive to noble conduct; and, closely connected with this, the influence of external nature upon the observer begins for the first time to be recognised and to form a subject for poetical treatment.[4] Horace has several charming descriptions of the sights and sounds of spring; but they suggest to him merely that life is short, or that he is thirsty, and in either case he cannot do better than have another drink in company with a friend. So with Homer and Virgil. External nature and its beauty are often touched off in two or three lines which, once read, are never forgotten; but it is always as ornament to a picture, not auxiliary to the expression of a mood. You may search classical literature in vain for such passages as Walther von der Vogelweide's: —

"Dô der sumer komen was
Und die bluomen durch daz gras
Wünneclîche ensprungen,
Aldā die vogele sungen,
Dâr kom ich gegangen
An einer anger langen,
Dâ ein lûter brunne entspranc;
Vor dem walde was sī ganc,
Dâ diu nahtegale sanc;"[5]

---

these paragraphs generally, Symonds, *Introduction to the Study of Dante*, ch. viii.

[4] This must be taken as referring only to European literature. Such a passage as Canticles ii. 10-14 shows that Oriental poets felt the sentiment from very early times. Is it possible that contact with the East evoked it in Europeans?

[5] "When the summer was come, and the flowers sprang joyously up through the grass,

or the unknown Frenchman's: —

> "Ce fu el tans d'esté, el mois de mai, que li jor sont caut, lonc, et cler, et les nuits coies et series. Nicolete jut une nuit en son lit, et vit la lune cler par une fenestre, et si oi le lorseilnol center en garding, se li sovint d'Aucassin sen ami qu'ele tant aimoit;"[6]

or the equally unknown Englishman's: —

> "Bytuene Mershe and Averil,
> When spray biginneth to springe,
> The lutel foul hath hire wyl
> On hyre lud to synge;
> Ich libbe in love-longinge
> For semlokest of alle thinge,
> He may me blisse bringe,
> Icham in hire baundoun."[7]

But it is hardly necessary to multiply instances. By the middle of the thirteenth century the spring, and the nightingales, and the flowering meadows had become a commonplace of amatory and

---

right there the birds were singing; thither came I, on my way over a long meadow where a clear well gushed forth; its course was by the wood where the nightingale sang."

[6] "It was summer time, the month of May, when the days are warm, and long, and clear, and the nights still and serene. Nicolete lay one night on her bed, and saw the moon shine clear through a window, yea, and heard the nightingale sing in the garden, so she minded her of Aucassin, her lover, whom she loved so well" (Lang's translation).

[7] Lud = song; semlokest = seemliest; he = she; in hire baundoun = at her command.

emotional poetry.

So far, however, poetry was exclusively lyrical. The average standard of versifying was higher, perhaps, than it has ever been before or since. Every man of education seems to have been able to turn a sonnet or ode. Men of religion, like St. Francis or Brother Jacopone of Todi; statesmen, like Frederick II. and his confidant, Peter de Vineis; professional or official persons, like Jacopo the notary of Lentino, or Guido dalle Colonne the judge of Messina; fighting men, like several of the Troubadours; political intriguers, like Bertrand del Born – all have left verses which, for beauty of thought and melody of rhythm, have seldom been matched. But the great poem was yet to come, which was to give to the age a voice worthy of its brilliant performance. It is not only in literature that it displays renewed vitality. Turn where we will, in every department of human energy it must have been brilliant beyond any that the world has ever seen. It stood between two worlds, but we cannot say of them that they were

> "One dead,
> The other powerless to be born."

The old monarchy was dying, had indeed, as Dante regretfully perceived, died before he was born, and the trumpet-call of the *De Monarchia*, wherewith he sought to revive it, was addressed to a generation which had other ideals of government; but it had set in a blaze of splendour, and its last wielder, Frederick II., was, not unfitly, known as the Wonder of the World. The mediæval Papacy, though about to undergo a loss of prestige

which it never retrieved, outlived its rival, and had seldom been a greater force in the political world than it was in the hands of the ambitious and capable Boniface VIII. The scholastic philosophy, which had directed the minds of men for many generations, was soon to make way for other forms of reasoning and other modes of thought; but its greatest exponent, St. Thomas Aquinas, was Dante's contemporary for nine years. These examples will serve to show that the old systems were capable to the very last of producing and influencing great men.

Meantime the new order was showing no lack of power to be born. Two of our countrymen, Roger Bacon and, somewhat later, William of Ockham, sowed, each in his own way, the seeds which were to bear fruit in the science and speculation of far distant ages. In the arts, architecture reached its highest pitch of splendour; and painting was at the outset of the course which was to culminate, more than two hundred years later, in Titian and Raffaelle. But in no field did the energy of the thirteenth century manifest itself as in that of politics. With the collapse of the Empire came the first birth of the "nationalities" of modern Europe. The process indeed went on at very different rates. The representative constitution of England, the centralised government of France were by the end of the century fairly started on the lines which they have followed ever since. But England had never owned allegiance to the Emperor, while France had pretty well forgotten whence it had got the name which had replaced that of Gaul. In the countries where the

Empire had till recently been an ever-present power, Germany and Italy, the work of consolidation went on far less rapidly; indeed, it has been reserved for our own age to see it completed. With Germany we have here nothing directly to do; but it is all-important to the right understanding of Dante's position that we should glance briefly at the political state of Italy and especially of Tuscany during the latter half of the thirteenth century. By good fortune we have very copious information on this matter. A contemporary and neighbour of Dante's, by name John Villani, happened to be at Rome during the great Jubilee of 1300. The sight of the imperial city and all its ancient glories set him meditating on its history, written, as he says (in a collocation of names which looks odd to us, but was usual enough then), "by Virgil, by Sallust and Lucan, by Titus Livius, Valerius, and Paulus Orosius," and moved him, as an unworthy disciple, to do for his native city what they had done for Rome. The result was the most genial and generally delightful work of history that has been written since Herodotus. Villani, who lived till 1348, when the plague carried him off, seems to have been a man of an equable disposition and sober judgement. Like Dante and all the Florentines of that day, he belonged to the Guelf party; and, unlike his great fellow-citizen, he adhered to it throughout, though by no means approving all the actions of its leaders. After the fashion of the time, he begins his chronicle with the Tower of Babel; touches on Dardanus, Priam, and the Trojan war; records the origin of the Tuscan cities; and so by easy stages comes down

towards the age in which he lived. The earlier portions, of course, are more entertaining and suggestive than trustworthy in detail; but as he approaches a time for which he had access to living memory, and still more when he records the events of which he was himself a witness, he is our best authority.

CHAPTER II.
GUELFS AND GHIBELINES [8]

Mention was made, in the last chapter, of the "Guelf" party, and this, with its opposite, the party of the "Ghibelines," fills the entire field of Italian politics during Dante's life, and indeed for long afterwards. It would be impossible in the space of these pages to follow up all the tangled threads which have attached themselves to those famous names; but since we may be, to use a picturesque phrase of Carlyle's, "thankful for any hook whatever on which to hang half-an-acre of thrums in fixed position," a few of the more prominent points in the early history of the great conflict shall be noted here.

As every one knows, the names originally came from Germany, and to that country we must turn for a short time to know their import.

About seven miles to the north-east of Stuttgart, in what is now the kingdom of Wurtemberg, is a small town called Waiblingen, where was once a stronghold, near the borders of Franconia and Suabia (or Alemannia), belonging to the Franconian dukes. Conrad, often called "the Salic," head of that house, was raised

[8] It seems proper to say that this chapter was written, and at least some of it printed, before Mr. Oscar Browning's interesting volume, *Guelphs and Ghibellines* (Methuen), appeared.

to the throne of Germany and the Empire in 1024. His line held the imperial crown for just a century, in the persons of himself and three Henries, who are known as the second, third, and fourth, or third, fourth, and fifth, according as we reckon their places among Roman Emperors or German Kings; Henry III. (or IV.) being famous as the great opponent of Pope Gregory VII.; Henry IV. (or V.) interesting to us as the first husband of the daughter of Henry I. of England, renowned in English history as the Empress Maud. The last Henry died childless in 1125. But the Franconian line was not extinct. Half a century or so before, Bishop Otto of Freising tells us "a certain count, by name Frederick, sprung from one of the noblest families of Suabia, had founded a colony in a stronghold called Staufen." Staufen, better known as Hohenstaufen, is a lofty hill about twenty miles from Waiblingen, and within the Suabian frontier. Frederick had been staunch to Henry IV. in his time of greatest difficulty, and received as his reward, together with the dukedom of Suabia, which the house of Zähringen had forfeited through disloyalty, the hand of the Emperor's daughter Agnes. By her he had two sons, Frederick, who succeeded to his own duchy of Suabia, and Conrad, who received from his uncle Henry V. that of Franconia, including no doubt the lordship of Waiblingen. At Henry's death Frederick and Conrad, being then thirty-five and thirty-three years old respectively, were the most powerful princes of the Empire. Henry had designated Frederick as his successor; but the electors thought otherwise. At the instance of the Archbishop

of Mainz, between whom and the Hohenstaufen there was no love lost, and, as it would seem, not without pressure from Lewis VI. of France, whom Henry's death had just saved from having to face an alliance between England and Germany, they chose Lothar, Duke of Saxony.

We will now quote Otto of Freising once more. "Up to the present time," he says, writing of the year 1152, "two families have been famous in the Roman Empire, about the parts where Gaul and Germany meet, the Henries of Waiblingen, and the Welfs of Altdorf." The Welfs go back to by far the greater antiquity. They probably did not originally belong to the Bajovarian stock, for we read elsewhere that they had "large possessions in the parts where Alemannia meets the Pyrenæan Mountains," as Otto usually designates the Alps west of the Brenner. This Altdorf is a village near Ravensburg in Wurtemberg, between Ulm and Friedrichshafen. We first meet with the name in history about the year 820, when the Emperor Lewis I., "the Pious," married as his second wife Judith, "daughter of the most noble Count Welf." Somewhere about the middle of the tenth century, a Rudolf of the race was Count of Bozen. His son Welf took part in the insurrection of the Dukes of Worms and Suabia against their step-father Conrad II., "the Salic," and lost some of his territories in consequence, Bozen passing to Etiko, an illegitimate member of the same house. The family must have soon been restored to the imperial favour, for before 1050 Welf III. appears as Duke of Bavaria.

At his death, without issue, in 1055, he was succeeded by the son of his sister, who had married Azzo II. of Este. This Welf IV. fought on the side of Henry IV., against the revolted Saxons at the Unstrut, but soon rebelled himself. He became for a time the husband of the "great Countess" Matilda of Tuscany. Through him and his son Henry, "the Black," the line was maintained; and though during the period at which we have arrived the head of the family for several generations bore the name of Henry, it is usually spoken of as "the house of the Welfs,"[9] and the name is borne by some member of the family at most times. At the accession of Lothar II. the head of the house was Henry, surnamed "the Proud." With him the new emperor at once made close alliance, giving him his daughter Gertrude in marriage. Henry's sister Judith was already married to Frederick of Suabia, but he sided with his father-in-law, and a struggle began which lasted for ten years, and in which the Hohenstaufen brothers had not entirely the worst of it. Conrad was actually anointed at Monza as King of Italy; but in the end, through the intervention of St. Bernard, peace was made, and lasted during the few remaining months of Lothar's life. At his death in 1137 Conrad was elected. His first act was to take the duchy of Bavaria from

[9] It may not be out of place here to correct the vulgar error that "Guelf" is in any sense the surname of our Royal family. The house of Brunswick is no doubt lineally descended from these Welfs of Bavaria; but it has been a reigning house since a period long antecedent to the existence (among Teutonic peoples) of family or surnames, and there is no reason for assigning to the Queen the Christian name of one of her ancestors more than another – "Guelf" more than "George."

Henry, and bestow it on Leopold, the Marquis of Austria, his own half-brother, and whole brother to Bishop Otto, the historian. Henry died very soon, leaving a young son, afterwards known as Henry "the lion," and a brother, Welf, who at once took up the quarrel on behalf of his nephew. He beat Leopold; but when, emboldened by this success, he proceeded to attack the Emperor, who was besieging the castle of Weinsberg, in Franconia, he suffered a severe defeat. At this battle we are told the cries of the contending sides were "Welf!" and "Waiblingen!" Why the name of an obscure fortress should have been used as a battle-cry for the mighty house of Hohenstaufen, we shall probably never know; it may be that it was a chance selection as the password for the day. However that may be, the battle-cries of Weinsberg were destined to resound far into future ages. Modified to suit non-Teutonic lips, they became famous throughout the civilised world as the designations of the two parties in a struggle which divided Italy for centuries, and of which the last vibrations only died down, if indeed they have died down, in our own day.

Of all faction-wars which history records, this is the most complicated, the most difficult to analyse into distinct issues. The Guelfs have been considered the Church or Papal party; and no doubt there is some truth in this view. Indeed, there seems to have been some hereditary tradition of the kind dating from a much earlier generation; long, in fact, before the Ghibeline name had been heard of. When, as we have seen, Countess Matilda of Tuscany, the champion of Gregory VII., was looking out for a

second husband, she fixed upon Welf of Bavaria, presumably the "dux Noricorum," who, as Bishop Otto tells us, "in the war with the Emperor, destroyed the cities of Freising and Augsburg." Their union did not last long, for Matilda seems to have been hard to please in the matter of husbands; but the fact of his selection looks as if he had been a *persona grata* with the Papal See. It is somewhat significant, too, that Machiavelli regards the contest between Henry IV. and the Papacy as having been "the seed of the Guelf and Ghibeline races, whereby when the inundation of foreigners ceased, Italy was torn with intestine wars." Yet we may shrewdly suspect that it was not so much any special devotion to the Church, as the thwarted ambition of a powerful house, which made the Welfs to be a thorn in the side first of the Franconian, then of the Suabian Emperors.[10] At any rate, when a representative of the family, in the person of Otto IV., at last reached "the dread summit of Cæsarean power," the very Pope, whose support had placed him on the throne, found himself within little more than a year under the familiar necessity of excommunicating the temporal head of Christendom. Still, in Italy no doubt the Guelfs, politically at any rate, held by the Church, while the Ghibelines had the reputation of being, as a party, at least tainted with what we should now call materialism. It will be remembered that among the sinners in this kind, who occupy the burning tombs within the walls of the city

[10] Hallam considers that hostility to the Empire was the motive principle of the Guelf party in Lombardy; attachment to the Church in Tuscany.

of Dis, Dante places both the Emperor Frederick II., the head of Ghibelinism, and Farinata degli Uberti, the vigorous leader of the party in Tuscany, while the only Guelf who appears there is one who probably was a very loose adherent to his own faction.

Less justified, it would seem, is the idea that the Guelfs were specially the patriotic party in Italy. No doubt the Popes at one time tried to pose as the defenders of Italian liberties against German tyrants, and some modern historians, forgetting the mediæval conception of the Empire, have been inclined to accept this view. But when it suited his purpose, the Pope was ready enough to support an "anti-Cæsar" who was no less a German, or even to call in a French invader. The truth is that at that time (and for many centuries afterwards), no conception of "Italy" as a nation had entered into men's minds. We do not always realise that until the year 1870, the territory, well enough defined by Nature, which forms the modern kingdom of Italy, had never, except indeed as part of a far wider Empire, owned the rule of a single sovereign. Patriotism hardly extended beyond the walls of a man's own city. Even Dante feels that residence in Lucca, Bologna, or Verona is an exile as complete as any, and that his only *patria* is Florence, though it may be safely said that to him, if to any living man, the idea of an Italian nation had presented itself.

The one argument which we can find to support this view lies in the fact that while the chief Guelf names are those of burgher families, many of the leading Ghibeline houses

were undoubtedly of German origin. At Florence the Uberti, at Bologna the Lamberti, show their descent in their names. Villani tells us that the Emperor Otto I. delighted in Florence, "and when he returned to Germany certain of his barons remained there and became citizens." The two families just mentioned are specified. So far, then, the Guelfs may be regarded as representing native civic liberties against an alien feudal nobility, and the struggle between the two factions will fall into line with that which at a somewhat later date went on in Germany between the traders of the cities and the "robber-barons" of the country. In this aspect we may see the full meaning of Dante's continual allusion to the sin of avarice, under the image of the "wolf;" an allusion, again, which the original name whence the Guelf party took its appellation would specially point.

How and when the names first appeared in Italy we do not know. The first manifestation of resistance on the part of the cities to the Imperial control was given when Milan withstood Frederick Barbarossa – in defence, it may be noted, of its own right to oppress its weaker neighbours; but during the war which followed, and which was terminated by Frederick's defeat at Legnano, the head of the Welfs, Henry the Lion, was for most of the time fighting on the Imperial side, and though he deserted Frederick at the last, he does not seem to have given any active help to the Lombard League. Yet it may well be that in his defection we have to see a stage in the transition from Welf to Guelf. It is, however, not in Lombardy, but in Tuscany, that the

names of Guelf and Ghibeline, as recognised party designations, first appear. Machiavelli says – perhaps by a confusion with the Black and White factions, of whom we shall hear later – that they were first heard in Pistoia; but however this may be, they would seem to have been definitely accepted by 1215, to which year Villani assigns their introduction into Florence.

We have now reached the first date, it may be said, which students of Dante will have to remember; a date which to him, and equally to the sober chronicler Villani, marked the beginning of troubles for the city which both loved as a mother, though to the greater son she was "a mother of small love." The occasion is so important that it ought to be related in the historian's own words: —

> "In the year of Christ 1215, one Messer Bondelmonte, of the Bondelmonti, a noble citizen of Florence, having promised to take to wife a damsel of the house of the Amidei, honourable and noble citizens; as this Messer Bondelmonte, who was a gay and handsome cavalier, was riding through the city, a lady of the Donati family called to him, speaking evil of the lady who had been promised to him, how that she was not fair nor fitting for him, and saying: 'I have kept my daughter here for you,' showed him the maiden; and she was very fair. And straightway falling enamoured of her, he gave her his troth, and espoused her to wife; for which cause the kinsfolk of the first promised lady gathered together, and being grieved for the shame that Messer Bondelmonte had wrought them, they took on

them the accursed quarrel whereby the city of Florence was laid waste and broken up. For many houses of the nobles[11] bound themselves together by an oath to do a shame to the aforesaid Bondelmonte in vengeance for those injuries. And as they were in council among themselves in what fashion they should bring him down, Mosca of the Lamberti said the ill word: "A thing done hath an end," meaning that he should be slain.[12] And so it came to pass; for on the morning of Easter Day they assembled in the house of the Amidei by St. Stephen's, and the said Messer Bondelmonte, coming from beyond Arno, nobly clad in new white clothes, and riding on a white palfrey, when he reached the hither end of the Old Bridge, just by the pillar where was the image of Mars, was thrown from his horse by Schiatta of the Uberti,[13] and by Mosca Lamberti and Lambertuccio of the Amidei assailed and wounded, and his throat was cut and an end made of him by Oderigo Fifanti; and one of the counts from Gangalandi was with them. For the which thing's sake the city flew to arms and uproar, and this death of Messer Bondelmonte was the cause and beginning of the accursed Guelf and Ghibeline parties in Florence, albeit that before this the factions among the nobles of the city had been plenty, and there had been the parties I have said, by reason

[11] Observe that the Bondelmonti were comparatively newcomers. They had originally belonged to Valdigreve, and had only lived in Florence for some eighty years at the date of this event. Hence they were looked upon as upstarts, and not properly speaking, nobles at all. See *Paradise*, xvi. 133-147.

[12] *Hell*, xxviii. 106.

[13] Possibly "by the Uberti lot."

> of the conflicts and questions between the Church and the Empire; but through the death of Messer Bondelmonte all the families of the nobles and other citizens of Florence took sides with them, and some held with the Bondelmonti, who took the Guelf side and were its leaders, and others with the Uberti, who were head of the Ghibelines. Whence followed much havoc and ruin to our city, and one may think that it will never have an end if God put not a term to it."[14]

The historian proceeds to enumerate the noble families who joined either side. Curiously enough, they were at first evenly divided – thirty-eight to thirty-eight. Not much is to be inferred from the names, though it is somewhat significant that of those, some half a dozen families in all, whom Villani, himself a Guelf, notes as having only recently attained to nobility, all joined the Guelf party. There seems also to have been a tendency for Ghibeline houses to become Guelf, which is not balanced by any defections in the opposite sense, so that the balance of parties was soon disturbed in favour of the Guelfs. At first, however, though "there was a division among the nobles of the city in that one loved the lordship of the Church, and the other that of the Empire, yet in regard to the state and welfare of the commonwealth all were in concord."

This state of things did not last long. In 1220 Frederick II. was crowned Emperor at Rome. Up till that time he had been more or less a *protégé* of the Popes. First Innocent III., then Honorius III.,

[14] Villani, *Croniche*, v. 37.

had kept a fatherly eye upon his youth and early manhood, and for a time Church and Empire seemed to pull together. Honorius had, indeed, occasion to write severely to him more than once, but there was no breach of the peace. The accession of Gregory IX., in 1227, changed the aspect of affairs. Before the year was out, Frederick, like most of his predecessors for 200 years past, was under the ban of the Church: and from this time forward there was an end of peace and quiet government in Northern Italy. "Before Frederick met with opposition," Dante makes a Lombard gentleman of the last generation say, "valour and courtesy were wont to be found in the land which Adige and Po water; now may any man safely go that way, who through shame has left off to converse with good men or approach them."[15]

Florence seems to have remained longer than most of the chief cities aloof from the main contest. She had her own wars with Pisa, beginning with a private quarrel at the Emperor's coronation (in which we are expressly told that both parties united), and afterwards with Siena; and the great houses did a certain amount of private fighting; "but still the people and commonwealth of Florence continued in unity, to the welfare and honour and stability of the republic." In 1248, however, Frederick turned his attention in that direction, moved, it may be, by the growing strength of the Guelfs. His natural son, Frederick of Antioch, was sent with a force of German men-at-arms, and after some fierce street fighting, the Guelfs were driven out.

[15] *Purgatory*, xvi. 115.

The Ghibeline supremacy was short-lived. Their nobles, especially the great house of the Uberti, became unpopular by reason of the exactions which they enforced; they got beaten in a fight with some of the banished Guelfs at no great distance from the city; and before the end of 1250 a meeting of "the good men," as Villani calls them, or, as we should say, the middle class, limited the power of the Podestà,[16] and appointed a Captain of the People to manage the internal affairs of the city, with a council of twelve Elders. Other important changes were made at the same time, and the new constitution – the third recorded in Florentine history – was known as the "Primo Popolo." The death of Frederick in the same year still further weakened the Ghibelines. Some of them were banished, and the exiled Guelfs were recalled. Peace, however, seems to have been kept between the parties for some time, and when in 1255 Count Guido Guerra on his own account expelled the Ghibelines from Arezzo, the Florentines restored them, and lent the Aretines money to pay a fine which the Guelf chief had inflicted; "but I know not if they ever got it back," says Villani.

Again the compromise proved unstable. Manfred, Frederick's

[16] The name *Podestà* originally denoted the chief authority of a city or county, whether vested in one person or several. Frederick I. established Imperial officers under this title throughout Tuscany near the end of his reign, and for some time the Podestà was regarded as the Emperor's delegate. Before the end of the century, however, they had become municipal officers, gradually displacing the former consuls from the chief position. About 1200 the custom of choosing them from the citizens of some other town than that in which they officiated, seems to have become established; the native consuls being their councillors.

natural son, to whom, during the childhood of his young nephew, Conradin, the championship of the Hohenstaufen cause had fallen, was daily increasing in strength. His orders came to the Ghibelines of Florence to crush the popular party; and the latter, being warned in time, drove out all the great Ghibeline families. Two years later these had their revenge. On September 4, 1260, a date much to be remembered in the history of these times, the banished Ghibelines, aided by eight hundred of Manfred's German horse, seized the opportunity of hostilities between the Florentines and the Sienese to meet their opponents in a pitched battle. This took place on the Arbia, near the fortress of Montaperti, to the east of Siena.[17] The Guelfs were utterly routed, partly, it would seem, through the incompetence of some of the Elders who accompanied the army, and who, civilians though they were, overruled the judgement of the military leaders, and accepted battle under unfavourable conditions; and partly through the treachery of some Ghibelines who, not having been exiled, were serving in the Florentine host. Readers of the *Commedia* will remember the name of Bocca degli Abati, placed by Dante in the lowest pit of hell.[18]

Sixty-five of the leading Guelf families fled to Lucca, while the Ghibelines entered Florence, and appointed Guido Novello, of the great house of the Conti Guidi, Imperial Podestà. A meeting of the leaders of the party from Pisa, Siena, and Arezzo

[17] *Hell*, x. 96.

[18] *Hell*, xxxii. 81, 106.

was held at Empoli, and a proposal was made on behalf of the rival cities, to raze Florence to the ground as a fortified city, and so preclude her revival as a Guelf stronghold. For once, however, a man was found to set patriotism above party. The great Farinata degli Uberti, whose wise counsel and warlike skill had mainly contributed to the victory, rose, with the same magnificent scorn, we may suppose, that Dante afterwards saw him display for the torments of Hell,[19] and let it be known that, so long as he had life in him, he would resist any such measure at the sword's point. Count Giordano, the commander of the Germans, who had convened the meeting, gave in, and Florence was saved.

This was the last gleam of success which the Imperial cause was to enjoy in Tuscany for nearly half a century. Soon after the battle of Montaperti, Urban IV. was elected to the Papal See. He was a Frenchman by birth, "son of a shoemaker, but a valiant man and wise," says Villani. In view of the growing power of Manfred, vigorous steps had to be taken. The exiled Florentine Guelfs had made a fruitless attempt to effect a diversion in Germany, by inciting the young Conradin to oppose the acting head of his house. This old expedient having failed, Urban turned his eyes towards his own country. Charles of Anjou, brother of Saint Lewis, was at that time, next to the reigning sovereigns, the most powerful prince in Christendom, and to his aid the Pope appealed. Himself a man of Puritanical strictness in his life, and devoted to the Church, Charles was ready enough to accept the

[19] *Ibid.*, x. 36.

call, which appealed alike to his principles and to his ambition, and to act as the champion of the Holy See against the dissolute and freethinking Manfred; and the influence of his wife, the only one of Raymond Berenger's four daughters who was not actually or in prospect a queen,[20] was thrown on the same side. After keeping Easter 1265 at Paris, Charles set out, and landed at the mouth of the Tiber in May. In December he was crowned at Rome King of Naples, Sicily, and Apulia. Two months later, at the end of February 1266, Charles and Manfred met near Benevento. After some hard fighting, of which the German troops seem to have borne the brunt, the battle was decided against Manfred by the desertion of his Apulian barons, and he himself was slain. His defeat gave the final blow to the Ghibeline cause in Tuscany. Only Pisa and Siena remained faithful. In Florence an attempt was made to avoid civil strife by the device of doubling the office of Podestà. Two gentlemen from Bologna, Catalano de' Malavolti and Loderingo de' Landolò, a Guelf and a Ghibeline,[21] were appointed, and they nominated a council of thirty-six, chosen from both sides. But this plan did not work well. Party spirit had grown too violent to allow of half measures, and before the year was out the people rose again, and the Ghibelines were banished for good and all.

[20] *Paradise*, vi. 133.

[21] They seem to have acted on the principle of filling their own pockets, rather than of maintaining order; and are placed by Dante among the hypocrites, in the sixth pit of Malebolge (*Hell*, xxiii. 103). They belonged to the order of Knights of St. Mary, popularly called Jovial Friars.

CHAPTER III.
DANTE'S EARLY DAYS

In the month when Charles of Anjou sailed up the Tiber to Rome, a child was born at Florence to a citizen named Alighiero, son of Bellincione. We do not know for certain his *casato*, or family name. Bellincione's father was another Alighiero, or, as it was originally written, Aldighiero. His father was Cacciaguida, who had a brother named Eliseo; from which it has been conjectured that he may have belonged to the prominent house of the Elisei, which is known to have existed as far back as the beginning of the eleventh century, since it was not uncommon for members of a family to bear the founder's name. We know, further, that the name of Alighiero came into the family with Cacciaguida's wife, who belonged to some city near the Po, probably Ferrara, where a family of Aldighieri is known to have existed.[22] In any case, it was originally no Florentine name, and it may be doubted if it ever was recognised as the appellation of a family. True, Dante is once or twice referred to as "Dantes de Alegheriis," but this may be due to the fact that he was known

[22] It may be noted that the name is undoubtedly Teutonic. The suggested derivations from *aliger*, "the wing-bearer," and the like, are purely fanciful. The first part of the word is doubtless *alt*, "old," which we have in our own Aldhelm; the termination is the *geirr*, or *gar*, which occurs in all Teutonic languages, and means "spear." Dante (= Durante) was a common Christian name.

to have had recently two ancestors of the name. He himself, if we may trust the evidence of letters ascribed to him, seems to have written "Dantes Alligherius," while his son calls him Dantes Alighierii, and himself Petrus Dantis Alighierii, "Peter, son of Dante, son of Alighiero." In the official Florentine documents, where his name occurs, it is "Dantes Allegherii" or "Dante d'Alighiero," "Dante the son of Alighiero," and no more. The form "degli Alighieri," which would indicate a true family name, we find in no undoubtedly contemporary document.

In view of this initial uncertainty, the discussion whether the poet was of "noble" family or not seems a trifle superfluous. His great-great-grand-father, Cacciaguida, is made to say (*Par.*, xv. 140) that he himself received knighthood from the Emperor Conrad III. (of Hohenstaufen). This would confer nobility; but it would appear that it would be possible for later generations to lose that status, and there are some indications that Dante was sensitive on this point. At any rate, it is pretty clear that his immediate ancestors were not in any way distinguished. The very fact that he was born in Florence during a period when all the leading Guelfs were in exile shows that Alighiero was not considered by the dominant Ghibelines a person of too great importance to be allowed to remain undisturbed in the city.

Of Dante's boyhood and early youth we have only stray indications, and those mainly gathered from his own writings. We can, indeed, form a pretty clear notion of what he *was*, but we know little enough about what he *did*. From a very

early period he was made a hero of romance. Without going so far as some recent writers, both German and Italian, who seem to look upon every statement of early biographers with suspicion, while regarding their silence as good evidence that what they do not mention cannot have happened, we must admit that we cannot with certainty date any event in the first thirty years of Dante's life. Still, we can infer a good deal. He must unquestionably, during this time, have read a great deal, for it would have been impossible for a man wandering about from place to place, and intermittently busied in political affairs, to have amassed in seven or eight years the amount of learning which the *Commedia* by itself shows him to have possessed. He must have been recognised at an early age as a young man of marked ability. His intimacy with the old statesman Brunetto Latini, who died in 1294, and his friendship with Charles of Anjou's grandson, Carlo Martello,[23] the young King of Hungary, who was at Florence in the same year and the following, are sufficient to prove this. Neither Brunetto, the most learned man of his age in Florence, and, as we should say, a man of "society" as well, nor a prince who, had he lived, would have been one of the most important personages in Europe, was likely to have distinguished with his friendship a young man of twenty-nine, not of the highest birth, unless he had already made himself

[23] Doubts have even been thrown on Dante's friendship with this young King. To these we can only reply that, if it is not implied by *Par.*, viii. 55, it is impossible to draw any inference whatever as to Dante's life from any line of the poem.

notable for intellectual eminence.

One event occurred during Dante's youth, in which he is so generally believed to have borne a part, that it will probably come as a shock to many people to learn that this belief rests only on the statement of a writer who was not born till nearly fifty years after Dante's death. On St. Barnabas's day, June 11, 1289, the Florentine Guelfs met the Ghibelines of Arezzo, in whose ranks many of their own exiles were fighting, in a plain called Campaldino, belonging to the district of Certomondo, which lies in the Casentino, or upper part of the Arno valley. The Florentines gained a complete victory, though only after a hard fight, in which many of the chief Ghibeline leaders lost their lives. The event was one of great importance, and Villani recounts it in very full detail.[24] Dante also refers to it in one of the best-known passages of the *Purgatory* (v. 92). It is quite possible that he himself may have taken part in the battle; but if he did so, it is somewhat strange that none of the earlier commentators, including his own son, nor any biographer of the fourteenth century, should have known of it, or, knowing of it, should have thought it worth recording; and that it should have

[24] The conclusion of his account is picturesque enough to deserve reproduction. "The news of the said victory came to Florence the very day and hour when it took place; for the Lords Priors having after dinner gone to sleep and rest, by reason of the anxiety and watching of the past night, suddenly came a knock at the door of the chamber, with a cry, 'Rise up, for the Aretines are discomfited;' and when they were risen, and the door opened, they found no man, and their servants without had heard nothing. Whence it was held a great and notable marvel, seeing that before any person came from the host with the news, it was towards the hour of vespers."

been left to Leonardo Bruni of Arezzo, writing after the year 1400, to make the first reference to so noteworthy an incident in Dante's early career. Leonardo (whose "Life" will be found in Bianchi's edition of the *Commedia*) quotes, indeed, a letter, said to have been written many years afterwards by Dante, in which reference is made to his presence in the battle; but this letter has long disappeared, and it is to be noted that the biographer does not even profess to have seen it himself. There is, it must be said, in the *Hell* (xxii. *init.*) one allusion to warlike operations in the Aretine territory of which Dante claims to have been an eye-witness; but as none of the early commentators seems to refer to Campaldino in connection with this passage, it tells, if anything, against the received story.

Another event, sometimes assigned to the period of Dante's life before his banishment, has somewhat more evidence in its favour. That he visited Paris at least once in the course of his life, the early authorities are agreed; but Villani, Boccaccio, and Benvenuto of Imola, all writing in the fourteenth century, make the visit to have taken place during his exile. It is not until we come to John of Serravalle, Lord of Fermo, who as Bishop of Rimini attended the Council of Constance, and there, at the request of the Bishops of Bath and Wells and Salisbury, prepared a Latin version of the *Commedia* with commentary, that we find mention of an earlier visit. His testimony is a little suspicious, because in the same sentence he also asserts that Dante studied at Oxford, a statement which, without strong confirmation, it would

be very hard to accept. On the other side, it may be said that the silence of the older biographers is not conclusive evidence against the early study at Paris. Dante also went to Bologna, as it would appear, both before and after his banishment; yet while Villani and Boccaccio only name the latter visit, Benvenuto speaks only of the former. It is therefore quite possible that all three may have ignored the first period of study at Paris, or, if there was but one such period, may have assigned it to the wrong part of Dante's life. *Primâ facie* it is more probable that he would have undertaken both the long journey and the course of study in his days of "greater freedom and less responsibility," than when he was not only engaged upon the composition both of his great poem and of several prose treatises, but was taking an active share in political work.

Again, the allusion in the *Paradise* to the lectures of Sigier bears all the stamp of a personal reminiscence; just as the allusion to the dykes along the coast of Flanders to illustrate those which form the banks of the river Phlegethon, could hardly have occurred to one who had not seen them with his own eyes, though the biographers mention no journey to Flanders. But Sigier's lectures and his life too were over by 1300.

Another little bit of evidence may be given for what it is worth. Any one who has read the discourses of Meister Eckhart, the founder of the school of German mystics, will be struck by the frequent and close resemblances, not of thought only, but of expression and illustration, which exist between him and Dante.

So frequent and so close are these, that the reader can hardly conceive the possibility of their being due to mere coincidence.[25] But Eckhart preached and wrote (if he wrote) in German, a language which we have no reason to think that Dante knew; so that the exchange of ideas between them, if any, must have taken place by word of mouth, and in French or Latin. Now, Eckhart was for a long time in Paris – so long that he seems to have been known as "Master Eckhart of Paris" – and left that city in 1302. If he and Dante ever met, it must have been in Paris (for though Eckhart went to Italy in 1302, it appears to have been only on a journey to Rome, the last place save Florence where Dante would then have cared to show himself), and that at some time before 1300.

Lastly, we may question if Dante would have chosen Paris as a place of residence while Philip the Fair was on the throne of

[25] We find close resemblances between Dante and the founder of German mysticism. Not only in similes and illustrations, such as the tailor and his cloth, the needle and the loadstone, the flow of water to the sea, the gravitation of weights to the centre; or in such phrases as Eckhart's "nature possesses nothing swifter than the heaven," or his use of *edilkeit* "nobility," in reference to freewill, *la nobile virtù*. These may have been, in some cases were, borrowed by both from a common source, though the fact of their so often borrowing the same things is suggestive. So, too, both Dante and Eckhart quote St. John i. 3, 4, with the punctuation adopted by Aquinas, *quod factum est, in ipso vita erat*– "what was made, in Him was life" – though the Vulgate and St. Augustine prefer the arrangement of the words familiar to us in our own version. But when we find such an unusual thought as that in *Par.*, viii. 103, 104, of the redeemed soul having no more need to repent of its sins, expressed in almost similar words by Eckhart, it is hardly possible to believe that it occurred to both independently. There are many other instances, but it would occupy too much space if I were to give them here.

France.

If, then, he did visit France before his exile, we can date the visit with some certainty. It can hardly have been before 1290, the year of Beatrice's death, nor after 1294, the year in which Carlo Martello came to Florence. Dante's marriage, again, in all probability took place somewhere about the latter year. We know nothing directly of Dante's doings in this interval; nothing, at any rate, inconsistent with his having been for some considerable period away from Florence.

But we have kept till the last the subject which to many is the only one associated with Dante's younger life. What, it will be said, about Beatrice? The fashionable theory nowadays seems to be that there undoubtedly was a lady at Florence of that name, the daughter of Folco Portinari, that she was married to Simone de' Bardi, a member of that great family who were Edward III.'s bankers, and that she died in the flower of her youth. But, say the modern Italian and German writers, this lady – Frau Bardi-Portinari, the latter call her – had no more to do with Dante than any other Beatrice in history. This will seem to many who do not realise on how slight a basis the identification of her rests, to be the very wantonness of paradox. These may be startled to learn that the whole story depends upon the veracity of one man, and that a professed writer of romantic fiction. It is from Boccaccio, and from him alone, that we have learnt to see in Dante's mystical guide and guardian, in the lost love of his early years, only the idealised and allegorised figure of Folco

Portinari's daughter. What, then, is his evidence worth? To this we can only reply, that Boccaccio was born eight years before Dante's death; that he lived in Florence from his childhood; that he must have spoken with scores of people to whom the social and literary history of the years preceding 1290 was perfectly familiar; that both Dante and the husband of Beatrice were prominent men; and that Boccaccio can have had no motive for making a statement which, if untrue, he must have known to be so. Further, if the statement had been untrue, it would surely have been contradicted, and some trace of the contradiction would have been found. But, on the contrary, it seems to have been accepted from the first. It is repeated by Boccaccio's younger contemporary and disciple Benvenuto of Imola, who himself lived for some time in Florence, before all those who would be able from their own recollection to confirm or deny it would have passed away. And Benvenuto, it may be noted, though devoted to Boccaccio, was no mere student, but a shrewd and critical man of the world. Dante's son Pietro, indeed, says no word to show that Beatrice was anything but a symbol, and in this some of the other early commentators follow him. But this would prove too much. Whether she be rightly identified with Beatrice Portinari or not, it is impossible for any reader possessing the least knowledge of the human heart to see in the Beatrice of the *Commedia* a symbol merely. Not to mention that it would be quite contrary to Dante's practice thus to *invent* a personage for the sake of the symbol, it is absurd to suppose that the "ten years' thirst"

which the sight of her relieves, "the eyes whence Love once took his weapons," and such-like expressions were intended primarily as references to a neglected study of theology or a previous devotion to a contemplative life. The omission, therefore, of the commentators who interested themselves mainly in the allegory to tell us about the real Beatrice cannot be used as evidence against her existence.

The first supporter of what may be called the "superior" view – namely that the whole story of Beatrice is purely allegorical – was one Giovanni Mario Filelfo, a writer of the fifteenth century, born more than a hundred years after Dante's death. As a rule, where his statements can be tested, they are incorrect; and on the whole his work appears to be a mass of unwarranted inferences from unverified assertions. It was not till recent times that his theory on the subject found any defenders.

We may, then, pretty safely continue in the old faith. After all, it explains more difficulties than it raises. No doubt if we cannot free ourselves from modern conceptions we shall be somewhat startled not only by the almost deification of Beatrice, but also by the frank revelation of Dante's passion, with which neither the fact of her having become another man's wife nor his own marriage seems in any way to interfere. It needs, however, but a very slight knowledge of the conditions of life in the thirteenth century to understand the position. As has been already pointed out, the notion of woman's love as a spur to noble living, "the maiden passion for a maid," was quite recent, and at its first

growth was quite distinct from the love which finds its fulfilment in marriage. Almost every young man of a literary or intellectual turn seems to have had his Egeria; and when we can identify her she is usually the wife of some one else.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.