

Dante

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This little book is in part compiled from Dettinger's "Dante," edited by H. S. Bowden. We are indebted to Messrs Alinari, of Florence, for permission to reproduce as frontispiece their photograph of the Giotto portrait of Dante.

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Life of Dante

The thirteenth century presents some marked and striking contrasts. We see in strange conjunction, Christendom united in the ranks of the Crusaders, and its civil head, the emperor, himself under ban of the Church; Theology perfected by the genius of St Thomas, and the widespread Pantheism of Arabian philosophers; sanctity renewed by St Dominic and St Francis, and the wild profligacy of the Cathari and kindred sects; a general revival of the arts, and outbursts of savage barbarism; the sublime sequences of the *Dies Irae* and the *Stabat Mater*, and the scurrilities of the troubadour love-songs; the Holy Roman Empire claiming universal jurisdiction, nationalities asserting their independence, and the urban democracies in revolt.

In this age of contrasts, in the year 1265, Dante was born, and his life and his works reflect its lights and shadows. Florence, his birth-place, had been long the very centre of the strife between Guelphs and Ghibellines, the supporters respectively of the Church's liberties and the imperial pretensions.

Family and Ancestry

Dante's ancestors were Guelphs. The most important of them, Cacciaguida, married a lady of Ferrara, Aldighiera of the Aldighieri, and tells in the "*Commedia*" (Par. xv, xvi) his own story, and how he died in a Crusade and came from martyrdom to this peace, "*e venni dal martiro a questa pace*" (Par. xv, 148).* He fell in the second Crusade, which was preached by St Bernard, 1146-7.

Dante's father was a professor of law, and apparently possessed a moderate but sufficient income. His mother, Donna Bella, died during his infancy, and his father does not seem to have long survived her. Yet Dante, though young, independent and with easy means, did not, "as many noble youths do nowadays," says Boccaccio, "form habits of idleness and vice, but from his boyhood gave himself indefatigably to study, heedless alike of cold and heat, of food and sleep or of any bodily discomfort."

Education and Early Influences

His special predilection was for the Latin poets. He valued those authors, not only as models of style, but, especially in the case of Virgil, as teachers of deep natural truths. But," continues Boccaccio, "above all else he devoted himself to learn in reality the hidden things of heaven; and he arrived in theology at such a knowledge of the nature of God and of the angels as is far beyond the mind of man."

During his earlier youth, Dante seems to have pursued his studies undisturbed by political strife. His chief instructor was Brunetto Latini, a philosopher of great repute, the author of the "*Tresor*," a kind of encyclopaedia of all the sciences, yet at the same time a poet and statesman, and holding the office of secretary to the republic. Dante expresses his gratitude to Brunetto for his valuable and patient teaching "hour by hour" (Inf. xv, 82-85).

The Meeting with Beatrice

This strange seriousness and detachment finds its explanation in an event which took place when Dante was but nine years old, and furnishes the key to his whole life and above all to his great work. It was on the first of May, in the full beauty of an Italian spring, and a day when all Florence was in *fiesta*, that he was taken to an entertainment at the house of a neighbour, Folco Portinari.

There he was set to play with children of his own age, among whom was a child of eight years old, Bice or Beatrice, the daughter of his host. She seemed to him the type of all that was lovely, graceful and attractive, yet withal possessed of a rare modesty and gravity of speech. Her delicate features shone with such an angelic purity as to destroy of itself everything corrupt. With the sight of Beatrice began Dante's "*Vita Nuova*," for the love of her possessed his mind, and led him ever to higher things.

Literary Friendships

The earliest and most intimate friend of Dante appears to have been Guido Cavalcante. "*Mio primo amico*," Dante calls him; and to him the "*Vita Nuova*" is dedicated. He, too, was one of the first creators of Italian lyric poetry. Rich, highly gifted, a bold soldier and an ardent Guelph, Guido was a prominent personage in Florence in Dante's time. But by a strange turn of events, Dante, then his political opponent, seems to have had part in sending him into exile. He died in 1300.

A later friend was another lyric poet, Cino da Pistoja. He was a professor of law, and seems to have won Dante's friendship by responding in verse to his first sonnets.

The Age of Poetry

The thirteenth century witnessed a new flowering of poetry in the vernacular languages of Europe. In Italy particularly, the influence of the Provençal troubadours had inspired a school of lyric poets who elevated the Italian language to heights of beauty and expression previously unknown. Dante was both heir to this tradition and its greatest master, transforming the language of poetry into a vehicle capable of expressing the highest theological and philosophical truths.

This study presents Dante not merely as Italy's greatest poet, but as a Christian thinker whose Divine Comedy represents one of the supreme achievements of Catholic literature, embodying in verse the theological vision of St. Thomas Aquinas and the mystical tradition of the Church.
