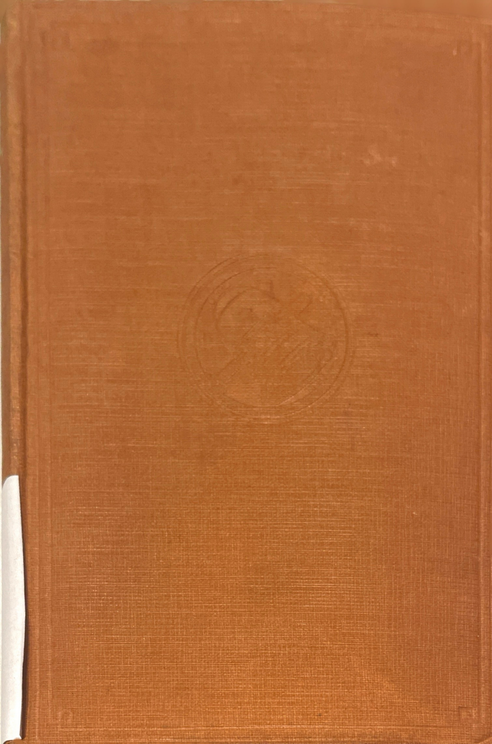

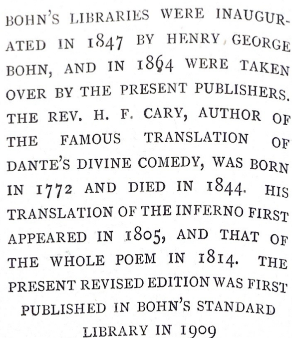

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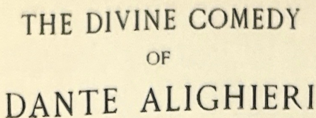

THE DIVINE COMEDY
OF
DANTE ALIGHIERI

CARY'S TRANSLATION, REVISED

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

MARIE-LOUISE EGERTON CASTLE

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It is generally better to read ten lines of any poet in the original language, however painfully, than ten cantos of a translation. But an exception may be made in favour of Cary's Dante. If no poet ever was liable to lose more in translation, none was ever so carefully translated, and I hardly know whether most to admire the rigid fidelity, or the sweet and solemn harmony of Cary's verse.

RUSKIN.

INTRODUCTION

In the *Divine Comedy*, Dante lays bare his soul. It seems to us when we read the marvellous pages, as though we had spoken with the poet himself, as though our mortal eyes had watched his face quivering with his scorn of evil, had seen it grow tender when he looked on innocence. It is the proof of his stupendous genius that he has still the power to move us, who live a life so widely different from his own. Whatever our creed may be, whatever may be our ideals, we must weep when he weeps, we must burn with his indignation. Leaning across the years he can touch us with his finger.

The immortality of Dante's work is due, not so much to the witching beauty of his style, which no translation can ever render, as to his grip on humanity.

"*Greift nur hinein ins volle Menschenleben,*" says Goethe.

"*Und wo Ihr's packt da ist's interessant.*"

This is the secret of Dante's power. He plucked the very heart out of the living folk around him; that heart still throbs in his verse. Men grow old and die, but humanity does not change.

The writings of Dante afford a complete record of his life. The *Vita Nuova* is the history of the love of his youth; the miscellaneous poems relate his movements during the time which elapsed between the death of Beatrice and the commencement of his banishment. The *Divine Comedy* is so exact a chronicle of his later doings, that it has been possible, from references in the work, to trace his wanderings and know for certain

what roads were trodden by his exiled feet. Th
precious manuscript, his *magnum opus*, was his onl
confidant. It is very much more than an account o
his Vision of Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise: it is almos
a diary. He drew his similes from what he saw as h
journeyed along the lonely perilous ways. The memorie
of green hills and running streams which haunt th
thirsty souls in Hell are Dante's memories of his own
travels. His thanks to those great lords who received
the wanderer with courtesy are set forth in the same pages
likewise his ineffaceable grudge against those who
wounded his pride. His philosophical and political
ideals are revealed in the *Divine Comedy* almost as
fully as in his treatises.

Moreover, the poem contains a wonderful gallery of portraits. Three lines from this master hand, and the portrait is there for all time, splendid in its strength, in its individuality, whether the background be the shores of Phlegethon or the woods of Eden.

Brunetto Latini, still the gentle scholar, though he treads the sands of Hell; Filippo Argenti, "that weird Florentine spirit," rending himself in one of his wonted fits of ungovernable temper, as he wallows in the mud of Styx; Belacqua, the guitar maker, hugging his knees in a dream of laziness on the slopes of Purgatory—all these portraits and many more testify to the power of the great impressionist.

But, for the benefit of those who have neither time nor inclination to trace Dante's history through all his works, it is well to gather together the principal facts in a short space.

Dante was the son of Alighiero di Bellincione degli Alighieri, a Guelf notary of good family and moderate income. The mother died soon after the birth of the child, and the widower married again. This is all that is known of the poet's early days, until his first meeting with Beatrice.

Dante was only nine years old when he met her, and she was a little younger. He was playing with others of his age at a May-day feast in the house of her father.

When Dante saw the pretty child, demure and grave beyond her years, clad in a straight little narrow gown of crimson, his heart went out to her in an innocent rapture. In that unforgettable hour began the love which sanctified his whole life, a love so pure and mystic that it is without a parallel in the history of humanity. The devotion, sown that May-day in the boy's mind, grew as he grew, increasing as his intellect developed, until Beatrice became to him the symbol of all beauty, of all holiness.

It seems a strange and wonderful thing to us that a man should consecrate all the love of his soul to a woman whom he could look upon but seldom—as he chanced to meet her in the street, or in church, or at the house of a friend—a woman of whom he asked nothing more than a salutation or a kind word. In those days it was not so unusual. Many men of that century enthroned another's wife as queen of their heart and served her in the fear of God. Yet never has history known so ethereal a passion as Dante's. The young Florentine matron held the heart of this mighty genius in the hollow of her hand. When she was gracious and smiled at him, he seemed to touch the uttermost bounds of bliss. If she denied him her greeting, he fell into an agony.

Whether he had ever wished to marry her, and whether the curious nature of his love would have been changed by the dear household bonds and everyday companionship, becoming at once an earthlier and a happier thing—these are but matters for conjecture.

There can be no doubt that Beatrice was a real woman. The whole tenor of Dante's verse proclaims it beyond a doubt, even had we no further evidence. But we do know a few facts about her, and these facts are very well authenticated. She was a daughter of Folco Portinari, a wealthy citizen. In 1286 she married a certain Simone dei Bardi, and she died after four years of wedlock.

Dante was frenzied with grief at her death. For nearly two years he kept himself in absolute seclusion,

devoting himself to philosophic studies, and to the compilation of that first memorial to Beatrice,—the *Vita Nuova.* This exquisite little book consists of all the lyrics which the poet wrote in praise of his lady, strung together like so many jewels on a golden thread of prose.

It was in order to rouse him from his melancholy that his kinsfolk arranged his marriage with Gemma Donati. Dante seems to have entered matrimony in a mood of complete indifference. He certainly did not love his wife, for never in all his writing does he mention her, nor the five children she bore him. Gemma seems to have been a good woman, but she was, of course, no intellectual companion for the arrogant and passionate man of genius with whom Fate had mated her.

For a while after his marriage Dante plunged himself into dissipations unworthy of so great a soul. His wife's cousin, Forese Donati, exerted the worst influence over him, an influence so strong that for the moment the poet seems to have forgotten Beatrice and his high ideals. Dante was not one, however, to tolerate the mire for long. He soon returned to his austere life, and all his days he was haunted by remorse for this sinful time.

Immediately following the reaction comes the period of Dante's political activity. Florence was in those days the centre of strife. Both the Roman Emperor and the Pope of Rome were stretching greedy hands to lay hold of the wealthy little city. Florence herself was distracted by contending factions. There were the Ghibellines, who fought for the Emperor, and their enemies the Guelfs, who upheld the temporal supremacy of the Pope. There were two sub-divisions of these parties, the Whites who represented democracy, the Blacks who were adherents of the Ghibellines and supported the old aristocratic tyranny.

Dante entered the municipal council nominally as a White, but he was very moderate in his views. He really belonged to no party in particular. Although by birth a Guelf and by conviction a devout son of the Church, he strenuously resisted the temporal power of

the Pope. Democratic at heart, he yet had the profoundest veneration for the Imperial throne.

On 15th June 1300, he was elected prior, and his masterful personality at once put him at the head of affairs. During four momentous months every move that Florence made was dictated by Dante. It was he who hurled defiance at the ambitious Boniface; it was he who exiled the leaders both of the Blacks and the Whites in the vain hope of obtaining peace.

Corso Donati, the banished chief of the Blacks, hied him to Rome, and he and Boniface laid their heads together for the destruction of the valiant Tuscan republic. The Pope changed his tactics altogether, feigned the utmost friendliness to Florence, and proposed to send Charles of Valois as "peacemaker" to the city.

Dante and his colleagues were aghast at the suggestion. They knew well enough what Boniface's "peacemaker" meant. But they resolved to meet the Pope on his own ground, and they dispatched a diplomatic embassy to Rome. Here, again, it was Dante who hurried to the Holy City and prostrated himself before the papal throne to implore that Florence might at least be spared foreign intervention.

That was perhaps the one false step that Dante made. By his absence he left the state without a head. While he was in Rome, Charles of Valois presented himself before the walls of Florence. Had Dante been there, he would, no doubt, have spurred the city to resistance. As it was, the citizens listened to the Frenchman's fair words, and opened their gates to his army. Once within the town, Charles threw off the mask of friendship. The Blacks rushed to arms and joined his standard. Then began such scenes of plunder, murder, and fire, as had never been known before even in the stormy annals of Tuscany.

Charles and his creatures began their rule by pronouncing sentences of exile and confiscation on those whom they deemed dangerous opponents. Naturally, one of the first of those upon whom their vengeance fell, was Dante.

Thus did it happen that the poet, hurrying homeward at the news of the disaster, was checked at Siena by the tidings that he was henceforth an exile and a beggar.

For a long time Dante did not lose hope of returning to his beloved city. He joined the armies of banished Whites, and took part in several encounters with his own countrymen. But every attempt failed, and the gates of Florence remained inexorably closed.

Once, indeed, the heart of the poet was warmed by a great hope. The Emperor Albert of Austria was succeeded in the year 1308 by his nephew Henry of Luxemburg. The new Cæsar started his reign as an Apostle of Peace. He commenced a journey round his Empire, endeavouring to reconcile conflicting parties, to force cities to take back their exiles,to govern all his dominions in a happy unity.

Breathlessly Dante watched the progress of these schemes. Success at first seemed to wait upon the Emperor, but a few towns remained defiant and unyielding; among them was Florence. And before Henry could bring the city of flowers to submission he sickened of a fever and died in the autumn of 1313.

With him died the last of Dante's hopes. Henceforth the poet wandered over the face of Italy, a broken-hearted man. From time to time he accepted the hospitality of some great lord, dwelling beneath the stranger's roof for a while, and eating the bread of charity in bitterness of spirit. But he could not long endure the restrictions of these petty courts, and he soon went forth to resume his travels. He was grown strange, and dark mooded, chary of words, biting in his sarcasm when he did speak, full of scorn for the world's meanness, yet withal full of enthusiasm in any noble cause.

On these wanderings, Dante carried his manuscript with him, and day by day added to the precious scroll. "This is the work," he says, "which has made me lean for many years." The gradual etherealisation of his mind is shown in the development of the Epic.

The thirty-three terrible cantos of the Inferno were written when Dante's own soul was passing through a

veritable hell-fire of anger, hatred, and pain, during the early part of his exile.

The tender verses of the Purgatorio belong to the time when his spirit was rising above the sorrow and sin of the world to find consolation in religion.

The Paradiso belongs to that last period of his life when he had entered into an unearthly peace. He had climbed the Holy Mountain, and standing there on the cold and lonely peak, he looked down at the hurrying throng in the valleys. Here his soul knew strange communion with his long dead love. And when Death came to him, it was in no unknown or terrifying guise. Beatrice took him by the hand and led him into the pearl-pale heaven of his dream.

It was only quite at the end of his life that Dante found a permanent resting-place. Guido da Polenta, Lord of Ravenna, offered him a refuge in a manner so honourable and friendly, that even the haughty poet found nothing to resent.

Here Dante spent a few happy years before his death, still working at the *Commedia* and lecturing to a small body of students who clustered round the master. But the cruel fate which had pursued him all his life would not allow him to end his days in peace. One last crushing disappointment was in store for him.

A disagreement arose between Ravenna and Venice. The powerful sea-republic threatened to pour its armies into the land of Dante's patron, and ruin stared Guido in the face. The poet, who cleaved with all his generous soul to the one man whom he called friend, came forward at this juncture and offered his services to the Count of Polenta. He was conscious, as genius must always be, of his own greatness. He thought that if he went as ambassador to Venice, he with his powerful arguments, his eloquence and logic would be able to make terms of peace and avert the impending disaster.

It was with these high hopes that Dante set off by sea to the Doge's court. But in a little while he returned to Ravenna, along the pestilence-haunted shore, broken-hearted, fever-stricken, with scarce the strength to

speak his evil tidings to his friend. The Venetians had received the embassy with scorn, had heaped insults upon Dante, and had even refused him the safe and wholesome return journey across their sea.

Dante never lifted his head again. This last sorrow—a sorrow for another—had crushed him utterly. He did not live to see the war cloud break in ruin upon Ravenna. He passed but a few fevered days upon the bed in his great stone-walled, tapestry-hung chamber in Guido's palace; then his mighty spirit was set free on the 14th of September 1321, the feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross.