

**THE ANTE-
PURGATORIO OF
DANTE ALIGHIERI**

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The Ante-purgatorio of Dante Alighieri by Dante Alighieri & T. W. Parsons

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THE
ANTE-PURGATORIO
OF
DANTE ALIGHIERI.

TRANSLATED BY
T. W. PARSONS.

LONDON:
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1876.

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THE first nine Cantos of the 'Purgatorio' of Dante are but preliminary to the rest; and several German critics have adopted the title of 'Ante-Purgatorio,' by which Italians have sometimes distinguished them. It is not until the opening of Canto X,

'Là dove 'l Purgatorio ha dritto inizio,'

that we pass the threshold of the gate which leads to the several rounds of penance.

The present translator, being occupied with other portions of the 'Divine Comedy,' feels free to postpone for a time the publication of his complete version of the Purgatory, together with such notes as may have approved themselves the fruit of a long study. But as these nine Cantos have already appeared in the 'Catholic World,' and as they form one recognised division of the poem, they are now reprinted for the use of those who have desired to possess them in one collection.

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*'Every branch that beareth fruit
He purgeth it,
That it may bring forth more fruit.'*

IN perusing this version of the 'Purgatorio' of Dante, the reader may profitably direct his attention less to any dogma of the Church or any formula of a special creed, than to the allegorical sense of the poet, founded, as it must be acknowledged by all Christian believers, upon the facts of our nature and the history of the human heart. 'The Romish doctrine concerning purgatory' may be combated as an article of faith, but must be admitted as a true statement of the condition of mankind, religiously considered. The wretched state of man 'living without God in the world;' the self-conviction of sin; the necessity of a Saviour; and the possibility of attaining, through the heavy passages of contrition and the wearisome stages of penance, to the 'peace which passeth understanding,'—is the sum of the doctrines embodied in the 'Divina Commedia.'

Dante, having partly in imagination, and partly (as we may justly suppose) in reality, passed through the torments of the life of sin and passion and unbelief that make the hell of this world, has come to the *antipodes* of his poetical creation, whose way is up the toilsome hill of penance to the terrestrial paradise of pardon and peace. Still, as in the infernal realm, under the guidance of his master in song, Virgil, he is met by another pagan spirit, Cato the Suicide, of Utica, who teaches him the first lesson to be learned before the soul of man can enter into the penitential state,—and that lesson is *humility*. The 'lowly reed' wherewith Dante is instructed to gird himself (v. 90) is typical of that which He bare in His hand who wore at the same time the crown of thorns, and who said, 'Learn of me, for I am meek and lowly of heart.'

TRANSLATION
OF THE
ANTE-PURGATORIO OF DANTE.

PURGATORIO.

CANTO FIRST.

THE little vessel of my genius now
Hoists sail o'er better waves to follow helm,
Turning from sea so terrible its prow :
And I will sing now of that second realm
Wherein are purified the souls of men
Until of heaven they worthy shall have grown.
But here dead poesy must rise again :
O sacred Muses ! I am now your own ;
Nor let Calliope here fall below
But soar to my* song ! with that epic strain
Whereof those wretched magpies* felt the blow
So that their hope of pardon was but vain.

* Verses 10 and 11 :

'Soar to my song,' &c.

' . . . magpies,' &c.

Ovid tells the story of the nine daughters of Pierus—Pierides—who

Of oriental sapphire one sweet blue
 Which overspread the beautiful serene
 Of the pure ether, far as eye could view
 To heaven's first circle, brightened up my mien,
 Soon as I left that atmosphere of death
 Which had my heart so saddened with mine eyes :
 The beauteous planet* which gives love new breath
 With laughing light cheered all the orient skies,
 Dimming the Fishes that her escort made :
 Then, turning to my right, I stood to scan
 The southern pole, and four stars there surveyed—
 Save the first people, never seen by man.

challenged the Muses to sing, and being defeated, were changed into *mappies*. As the Muses were also called Pierides,—

'Dulcem quæ strepitum, Pieri ! temperas,'

a familiar verse of Horace,—it has been supposed that the victorious Muses took the name of the vanquished maids.

In this lofty invocation Dante, many times before depressed and faltering, becomes fully conscious of his powers, and, by this allusion to the chattering fowl of antiquity, whose successors in every age fret the genuine poet, gives vent to his native scorn for all the pretenders of his art. Horace, in his *Ode to Calliope*,

'Descende celo, et dic age tibiâ
 Regina longum, Calliope ! melos,'

uses the ordinary style of poetry : 'Μῆνεν ἀειδε, θεῶν,'—'Musa, mihi causas memora,'—'Sing, heavenly Muse !' &c. Dante is the first who boldly craves the goddess of epic song to be his *follower*.—'seguitando 'l mio canto.'

A curious commentator might infer from this how hard a step to Purgatory a nature like Dante's found it to gird his spirit with that 'reed of humility.'

* Venus.

Heaven seemed rejoicing in their blazing rays.

O widowed north, how much art thou bereft
That constellation hidden from thy gaze !

Ceasing my look, a little towards the left
(The pole whence now the Wain had disappeared)

I turned, and saw an old * man all alone
Near me, whose aspect claimed to be revered ;

More might no father claim it of a son.
His beard was long, and streaked, as was his hair

Which fell in two lengths down his breast, with white.
The rays of those four sacred splendours there

So sprinkled o'er his countenance with light
It seemed to me the Sun before me stood !

And thus he spake, shaking those reverend plumes :

CATO.

' Say, who are ye 'gainst the dark stream who could

Fly, as ye have, the eternal dungeon's glooms ?
Who was your guide ? Who lighted you the way

Escaping forth from that profoundest night
Which makes the infernal valley black for aye ?

The laws of that abyss, are they so slight ?
Or is the purpose changed which heaven did please,
That ye condemned approach these crags of mine ?'

* Cato of Utica.