

**THE GREAT ITALIANS OF THE
DIVINA COMMEDIA: A LECTURE
TO THE MEMBERS OF THE DANTE
SOCIETY, LONDON, JANUARY 9,
1907**

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WILLIAM WARREN VERNON

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*Presented to the American Dante Society
by the Author*

The Great Italians of the Divina Commedia

A LECTURE TO THE MEMBERS OF
THE DANTE SOCIETY, LONDON,
JANUARY 9, 1907

BY THE
HONBLE. WILLIAM WARREN VERNON, M.A. (OXON.)
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THE GREAT ITALIANS OF THE
DIVINA COMMEDIA

ONE striking feature of the *Divina Commedia* is the way in which Dante deals with things as distinguished from persons. He gives picturesque reality by describing objects from everyday life, and the most homely utensils of domestic furniture in Tuscany serve as his similes. He draws illustrations from the occupations and habits of the soldier; of the sailor; of the husbandman; of the shepherd; of the mountaineer; from a groom curry-combing a horse; from a scullion scaling a fish or seething flesh in a cauldron; from a cook placing stewpans together on the fire; from the blind beggars at the doors of the churches; or from the watch-dog snapping at the mendicant. His observation of things embraces every phase of the daily life of his time.

Far otherwise is it when he comes to speak of persons. All is then changed, and there is hardly a character introduced into the *Commedia* which is not one of distinction for good or evil. Hardly one can be called commonplace. That this is no accidental circumstance we have emphatic proof. In the concluding lines of *Paradiso XVII.*, Dante puts into the mouth of his great-great-grandfather, Cacciaguida, a reminder that the strictures which he is about to utter against his native country are intended to smite chiefly upon the loftiest summits, that is, upon the reputation of the Great Ones of the Land. It is for this reason that in Paradise, in Purgatory, and in Hell, those spirits only have been shown to him who are recognised by fame:

" Questo tuo grido farà come vento,
 Che le più alte cima più percote;
 E ciò non fa d'onor poco argomento.
 Però ti son mostrate in queste rote,
 Nel monte, e nella valle dolorosa,
 Pur l'anime che son di fama note;
 Chè l'anima di quel ch'ode non posa,
 Nè ferma fede per esempio ch'haia
 La sua radice incognita e nascosa,
 Nè per altro argomento che non paia."

(*Par.* XVII. 133-142.)

The instructions which Dante thus purports to have received from his revered ancestor were peculiarly congenial to his own feelings. The whole tenor of Cacciaguida's address to him in *Par.* XV. had been to demonstrate how illustrious was the descent of Cacciaguida, and consequently that of Dante, to whom pride of ancestry was as the breath of his nostrils. The acerbity of his retort to Farinata degli Uberti, in the tenth Canto of the *Inferno*, who had spoken disparagingly of his forefathers, fully demonstrates his quickness to take offence. Of the sinfulness of this Pride we know that he was fully conscious. In the thirteenth Canto of the *Purgatorio* (ll. 133-138) he has a conversation with Sapia of Siena, who, like other spirits of the Envious, is sitting on the ground with her eyelids sewn up. She asks Dante how it happens that he is able to walk about with his eyes unclosed, and breathing as he speaks. Dante had just ascended into this Cornice from the one below it, where Pride is punished, and he tells Sapia that after his death, when he comes to Purgatory, he will undoubtedly have to undergo a certain amount of penance for Envy, but only for a short time, as he has not been so great an offender in that respect. Far greater is his dread of the torment below, namely, for Pride, so that even now the burden of the Proud is weighing upon him:

"Gli occhi," diss'io, "mi fieno ancor qui tolti;
 Ma picciol tempo, che poca è l'offesa
 Fatta per esser con invidia vòlti.
 Troppa è più la paura, ond'è sospesa
 L'anima mia, del tormento di sotto,
 Che già lo incarco di laggiù mi pesa."

(*Purg.* XIII. 133-138.)

But although pride of birth was so prominent a feature in Dante's character, he recognised to the full that nobility has its responsibilities as well as its privileges. His standard of conduct was high, and he reminds his contemporaries that if they do not keep their escutcheons undefiled their distinction of lineage will soon perish:

"O poca nostra nobilità di sangue!
 Se gl'orar di te la gente fai
 Quaggiù, * * * *

Ben sei tu manto che tosto raccorre,
 St che, se non s'appon di die in die,
 Lo tempo va dintorno con le force."*

(*Par.* XVI. 1-9.)

All through the *Commedia* we find proofs of Dante's sympathy with the great and his contempt for the small. It was not in his nature to suffer fools gladly, and when he comes across them he takes no pains to conceal his contempt. The great-souled man (*μεγαλόψυχος*) is always treated with respect. The small-minded man (*μικρόψυχος*) receives but scant consideration. There is a notable instance in the tenth Canto of the *Inferno*, where Dante relates his interview with the high-souled Farinata degli Uberti, the great Ghibelline leader. Dante, though no

* The late Duke of Sermoneta, the famous blind Dantist, who was the lineal descendant of the great family of Caetani (or Guatani) of which Pope Boniface VIII. was a scion, once told me how much he felt the truth of this passage.

longer a Guelph, is intensely antagonistic to Farinata, who on two occasions had driven his ancestors into exile, and contemptuously reminds him, Dante, of that fact. And yet all through the conference, which is of considerable length, Dante treats Farinata with the greatest deference and courtesy. On the other hand, when the shade of the small-minded Cavalcante Cavalcanti timidly interposes in the conversation, not only does Dante represent Farinata as taking no more notice of Cavalcante's presence than as if such a person had never existed, but his own demeanour towards Cavalcante is almost as contemptuous as that of Farinata. And yet this poor-spirited soul had good claims to consideration from both of them, for Farinata's daughter was the wife of Cavalcante's son, and that son, Guido Cavalcanti, the celebrated poet, was the first and best-loved of all Dante's friends, of whom, in the *Vita Nuova* §3 he says: "Quegli cui io chiamo primo de'miei amici." His answer to Cavalcante's eager inquiry about Guido is so ambiguous that the poor father thinks his son is dead and despairingly drops back again into the flames. It is true that Dante afterwards becomes conscious of his seeming want of kindness, and asks Farinata to reassure Cavalcante about his son, but even then he rather contemptuously mentions him as *quel caduto*, and we may entertain some doubts as to whether Farinata would condescend to give the message.

At the close of Dante's long conversation with Farinata, the latter, true to his haughty character, while answering Dante's inquiry as to who are his companions in the fiery tomb, briefly mentions an Emperor and a Cardinal alone among a countless multitude, and passes over all the others as unworthy of notice:

"Dissemi: 'Qui con più di mille giaccio:

Qua dentro è lo secondo Federico,

E il Cardinale, e degli altri mi taccio.'"

(*Inf.* X. 118-120.)

This may be taken to give the keynote to the way Dante sifts the personages throughout his poem. Only two deserving of notice out of "more than a thousand"!

The first souls he encounters in Hell are those who had lived without infamy and without praise:

" la lor cieca vita è tanto bassa,
Che invidiosi son d'ogni altra sorte.
Fama di loro il mondo esser non lassa,
Misericordia e giustizia gli sdegna,
Non ragionam di lor, ma guarda e passa."

(*Inf.* III. 47-51.)

In the immediate subject to which I am inviting your attention this evening I wish to speak only of great Italians. There are, no doubt, men of other nationalities mentioned in Dante's Poem of the greatest distinction and renown, but Dante's world was Italy—his State was Tuscany—his city was Florence. He himself is the first and chiefest Great Italian in the *Divina Commedia*, for the *Commedia* is Dante himself. In his great poem he reveals his most secret thoughts, his hopes and fears, his loves and hatreds. It is a masterpiece of candid self-portraiture. Dante was fully conscious of his own greatness, and never attempted to conceal his sense of his merits. The sublime self-esteem on the part of many of the greatest men is well known, and we have notable examples in Alexander the Great and Napoleon. Boccaccio, in his Life of Dante, remarks that we may see many proofs of the contempt in which he held his own party—the *Bianchi* Guelphs—both in the actions of his life, and by his allusions to it in various passages of the *Divina Commedia*.

One of Dante's most scornful utterances was his famous speech before he departed on the Embassy to Rome, during the time that he was one of the *Priori* of Florence. It had been settled that an embassy should be sent to the Pope to oppose the coming to

Florence of Charles de Valois (surnamed *Sansterre*). And when it came to be deliberated who should be first in this legation, all said, "Let it be Dante." At which request Dante, having remained in thought some time, exclaimed: "If I go, who remains? and if I remain, who goes?"—almost as if he had been the only one among them who was worthy of estimation, and on whose account all the rest were esteemed. (Balbo's *Vita di Dante*.)

In the eleventh Canto of the *Purgatorio*, Oderisi d'Agobbio, the miniature painter, soliloquises on the emptiness of renown, and the way one great painter—Cimabue—is overtaken and passed by a younger one, namely, his pupil Giotto, after which he adds:

"Così ha tolto l'uno all'altro Guido
La gloria della lingua: e forse è nato
Chi l'uno e l'altro caccierà di nido."
(*Purg.* XI. 97-99.)

Benvenuto says that this super-eminent poet, Dante, not only ousts the two Guidos from the abode (*nido*) of fame, but also all others before himself and after himself even unto this day. More than five hundred years have elapsed since these words of Benvenuto were written, and between that time and now but one poet has flourished worthy to stand in the same rank with Dante, viz., our own Shakespeare. We must not forget, in speaking of Dante's high estimate of himself, that he relates how in *Limbo* he was welcomed into the group of the six greatest poets of the earth—himself the sixth—the others being Homer, Virgil, Horace, Ovid, and Lucan. He thus describes the scene:

"Così vidi adunar la bella scuola
Di quei signor dell'altissimo canto (*i.e.*, Homer),
Che sopra gli altri com'aquila vola.