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DANTE ALIGHIERI

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founded by William Marsh Rice in the City of
Houston, Texas, and dedicated by him to
the advancement of Letters, Science, and Art

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DANTE SEXCENTENARY LECTURES

I

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF DANTE

THE object of this lecture is to make clear the main movements and forces in the midst of which Dante's life unfolded itself. The lecture aims to recall to mind the chief features of his career, with special reference to the parallel events of his time:

In what age, then, and what places did Dante run his course of life? Dante was born in Florence in 1265, and died at Ravenna in 1321. His span of life was thus fifty-six years, thirty-five of which fell in the thirteenth century and twenty-one in the fourteenth. Dante's most impressionable years, the years in which his fundamental conceptions of life, his tastes and habits were acquired and formed, were those of the late thirteenth century, the last, and the greatest century of the Middle Ages, as it is often called by enthusiastic admirers. Dante's early manhood, his romantic love for Beatrice, which so profoundly colored all his life, his marriage with Gemma Donati, his earliest achievements, poetical and political, the composition of the "Vita Nuova," and his service on the city council also fell in this last century of the Middle Ages, more particularly in its last decade, from 1290 to 1300. In the first two decades of the fourteenth century, 1300 to 1320, when the breath of a new age began to make itself faintly felt, were spent the years of his mature manhood, the years which saw his exile

from the city of Florence, his "wandering as a stranger through almost every region to which our language reaches," as he himself says, and the productions of his matured genius, the Lyrical Poems, the "Convivio," his Latin writings, and his great masterpiece, the "Divine Comedy."

It can be seen, therefore, that Dante's life is sharply divided into two unequal portions. The first and longer portion, nearly two thirds of his life, falls in the last half of the thirteenth century, and is lived wholly in Florence and its immediate neighborhood, and under comparatively comfortable material circumstances; the second and shorter portion, a full third of his life, falls in the fourteenth century and was spent in exile, mostly in northern and central Italy, and under circumstances of humiliating and "pinching poverty," but in it Dante produced the great mass of his creative work.

To understand the details of Dante's life, particularly the reasons for his exile, some knowledge of Italian political conditions is necessary. Therefore it will be well, at this point, briefly to review the lines of historical development which throw light on those conditions.

Florence itself was bubbling and seething with new life—that young new life of commerce and industry which had already raised the middle classes of the northern Italian cities into European prominence. It had given them wealth, organization, influence, and set them at successful war against the anarchic feudal nobility which had hindered their progress. They had become factors in the tangled web of forces that strove for political mastery in the distressful Italy of that period.

At the center of this web of intrigue sat the triple-tiaraed Popes, ever watchful for the undying interests of their sacred spouse, the Body of Christ, the Church of God on earth. They were eager to build up an independent political

state. They strove with all the spiritual and worldly weapons at their command to prevent the growth of any political power in Italy superior to their own. If the Popes themselves were not to be masters of a united Italy, nobody else should.

This dog-in-the-manger policy had been that of the papacy for ages, even from the time when the Lombards, filing over the Julian Alps, had wrenched the valley of the Po, the valley of the Arno, and parts of central and southern Italy from the weakening grip of the sore beset emperors of the Eastern Roman Empire seated at Constantinople. But the Lombards, unfortunately for the peace of Italy, were not quite strong enough to seize the entire peninsula. The Pope was able to maintain a practical independence up and down the basin of the Tiber, while the cities of the southern coasts, controlled by the sea-power of Constantinople, remained under the Eastern Empire. Italy was thus broken up into three sections, of which the Lombards controlled the northern, the Popes the central section, running diagonally across the peninsula and reaching sometimes to Ravenna, while the southern third was largely in the hands of the Eastern Emperors, who also retained control of Sicily. The mastery of the northern and southern portions changed hands many times, but the Popes through fair and foul weather always maintained their hold on the central strip or some portion of it.

In the early days when the Lombards threatened to take Rome, the papal policy discovered protectors in the distant Frankish kings. These rulers destroyed the Lombard dynasty, annexed the Lombard kingdom, and greatly increased the territorial power of the papacy. Then the papacy, claiming the right to depose and elect emperors, declared the throne of the empire vacant, and conferred the Imperial title upon the greatest of the Frankish kings,

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Charlemagne. A century later the title to the empire, now known as the Holy Roman Empire, passed to the kings of Germany, who were disposed to exercise a real governing power in Italy. Thus the Popes found they had raised up a new enemy, and thereupon began the long contest of the empire and papacy that filled the annals of two hundred years, from the middle of the eleventh to the middle of the thirteenth century, 1050-1250.

The last part of the struggle, which came to an end shortly before Dante was born, and the echoes of which continued to resound in Italy while he was growing to manhood, was particularly bitter. The severity of this period of the struggle was due to a combination of causes. The most important factor was the union in one person both of the Imperial title and of the crown of the kingdom of southern Italy and Sicily. This situation called forth the utmost efforts of the Popes, for it made the prospect of the unification of Italy under a strong master alarmingly imminent. A second factor which embittered the struggle was the character of the man who controlled the combined resources of the empire and the kingdom. This man was Frederick II, the son of Henry VI, and the grandson of Frederick Barbarossa, all of the house of Hohenstaufen. Born in Sicily and bred in that semi-oriental atmosphere, strongly influenced by Arabic culture, Frederick was feared both as a political antagonist and as a free-thinking enemy of the Christian faith itself. And the papacy, too, for the greater part of the period was led by strong men and great haters, notable among them Gregory IX (1227-1241) and Innocent IV (1243-1254). It was Innocent who at the great Council of Lyons in 1245 finally declared Frederick deposed both from the empire and the kingdom, and released Frederick's subjects from their oaths of fidelity to

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him. Yet it was one thing to declare Frederick deposed and another thing to take his kingdoms away from him. For five years after the Council of Lyons till his death in 1250 Frederick held his own. But after his death the rival forces which the Popes called into the field brought death and destruction to all Frederick's descendants, and his possessions both in Germany and Italy passed into other hands.

In Italy the chief agent of the Popes' wrath was Charles of Anjou, the able brother of the great and glorious St. Louis of France, the last of the crusading kings. The summoning of Charles marked a turning-point in the history both of the papacy and Italy. Before this act, for nearly three hundred years the German kings had exercised a predominant influence in Italian affairs. From now on, for many a year, French influence was to be all powerful in the peninsula. The young French monarchy, compact and aggressive, a new force in a new age, was ready to play a leading part on the stage from which the German kingship, defeated in Italy and torn by anarchic feudalism at home, was retiring. The German kings were still to claim the Imperial title, but with no resources to rely on at home they were never again able to exercise any effective control over Italian affairs. The forces of the new day were with France, and henceforth the empire was to be but a name, and Italian unity a dream. Yet while this fact is apparent to us as we look back into the past, it was hidden from the men of that day who lived through the transition and to whom and to whose fathers the empire had been a name to conjure with. It is not strange, therefore, that even Dante's all-penetrating mind should have failed to divine the future, and that he should have clung passionately to the hope of a revival of the empire.

But to return briefly to Charles of Anjou and the story