

LA BEATRICE

(By the REV. J. KELLY, Ph.D.)

In an old house there is a staircase with a stained glass window at its head. In the window there is the figure of a saint. So that when one goes up the stairs, the image is luminous above, and through it the light shines down on the face of the climber. The memory of this comes back to me whenever I open *The Divine Comedy*, that marvellous book which fulfilled Dante's promise to say of Beatrice that which was never said of any other woman. Through the three immortal cantos he goes with his eyes on her face, through which shines on him the light behind, which grows more and more as she leads him to the White Rose at the heart of which is the Source of all light.

In the 'Inferno' he 'found himself,' like the Prodigal: and led by Virgil, who represents the teachings of philosophy, came forth into the sweet air and saw the light of the stars and heard the tremendous sea again; in the 'Purgatorio' he saw the souls joyful in their penance and finding no expiation hard, because it led them, not to the complete purification without which there could not be the vision of God: in the 'Paradiso' he saw guided him through the realms of bliss, her hand, a lady, preparing him all the way for the coming glory. The changing beauty of her face, at first bright to look upon, then with her eyes shining with heavenly love, then with a happiness brighter than the sun, then with a smile that would make a man happy in the rest, then with a holy love in her countenance, which purified his adoration from all mean desires, holy transformation, so that only God could comprehend her holiness, prepared him for the effulgence of the presence of God of which one broken ray remembered would make his poem immortal.

Who then was Beatrice? Boccaccio answers, and with him the verdict of students of Dante, that she was Beatrice Portinari, a Florentine girl of flesh and blood. Francesco Cestus boldly places himself in a minority with Mario Filicaja, Biscioni, Rossetti, and Francesco Perez, contending that she was purely allegorical. The late Martin says she was eminently human.

'The perfect woman, nobly planned
To warn, to comfort, to command;
And yet a spot still and a bright
With something of an angel light.'

Matthew Arnold says a real Beatrice was the basis of an idealization which symbolized for the poet the ineffable beauty and purity for which he longed. Palmieri thinks that though she was a woman 'in *carne et ossa*' in flesh and bone, she was not Bice Portinari, and that the name Beatrice was given her by Dante.

In the *Vita Nuova* we learn all the poet has to tell us, and all we are ever likely to learn about her. Dante records how, a boy of ten, he first saw Beatrice, a girl of nine, dressed in crimson. Nine years later he saw her a second time between two ladies, older than herself. This time he tells us that she was dressed in white and that she saluted him. He tells us how her grief and beauty on the occasion of her father's death moved all who visited her; how he met her at a wedding; how he received news of her death, a little later, followed by a vision in which she was arrayed in the same crimson robe in which she originally appeared in my eyes and she seemed as youthful as on the day I first saw her.

That is all he tells us in the *Vita Nuova*. But when he wrote *The Divine Comedy* her smile, the *santo riso*, the *dolce riso*, was still a reality to him. Undoubtedly she was no mere allegory: the reading of the *Vita Nuova* makes that point almost certain. The records of their meetings, the thoughts that inspired his sonnets, his plain reference to her death and to its anniversary all indicate a real, living Beatrice. His conception of her is certainly an idealized one, and she becomes more and more spiritual to him as the book nears completion, until after the last vision he writes: 'I saw things which determined me that I would say

nothing further of this most blessed one, until such a time as I could discourse more worthily of her. And to this end I labor all I can; as she well knoweth. Wherefore, if it be His pleasure, through Whom is the life of all things, that my life continue with me a few years, it is my hope that I shall write of her what hath not before been written of any woman. After which, may it seem good unto Him Who is the Master of Grace that my spirit should go hence to behold the glory of its lady: to wit, of that blessed Beatrice who now gazes continually on His countenance, Who is blessed throughout all ages. *Lauds Deo.*'

One thing seems clear: there could not at any time have been much material passion in the poet's love for Beatrice. After her death certainly the spiritual side was predominant. And when he came to write the great poem of the Italian language, the love which lost nothing in intensity saw her now as a spirit shining above him, beaming him towards God: *Beatrice in suso, ed io in lei guardava.*

She remains one of the originals of literature, this inspiring motive of one of the great works of all time. No matter how far away time brings us from them, she stands side by side with Dante, illumined by his glory, a beautiful radiant form in the firmament of literature. The pity of it is that so few now read that work, which deserves to be read so far more than nearly all the books that came after it, which taken in thousands could not rival in truth and beauty and wisdom a single canto of *La Divina Commedia*.

Ashburton

From our own correspondent.

June 6.

Included in the enlistments for Ashburton for active service abroad, appear the names of several of our Catholic young men.

The Catholic Club and the local branch of the Hibernian Society met in the clubrooms in a euchre match, victory resting with the Hibernian Society.

An oratorical competition amongst members of the Catholic Youth Men's Club, commenced on Tuesday evening last. The president of the club (Mr. J. A. Lennon) occupied the chair. The prize for competition was kindly donated by Mr. T. Stanton. Rev. Father O'Donnell acted as judge of the competition. The five competitors acquitted themselves creditably, their speeches proving that a little time had been spent on studying the subject matter. The judge's award placed Mr. T. M. Brophy first, with Mr. J. McAlone second.

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