

One afternoon Honeywood and Kevin stood before the portal of San Zeno, that curious portal, with its columns supported by leonine, sphynx-like creatures that seem to guard jealously the hoarded treasure of nine centuries accumulated within. Rich, bizarre, unique, are the outer forms and expressions of this old church. A sort of magnificent grimness in the design of the building, lightened and softened by the delicate quaintness of the ornamentation encrusted upon the entrance and front, takes a curious hold upon the imagination. Weird sculptures enrich the portal, including a version of the story of the wild jager, Theodoric, at a stag-hunt, surrounded by hounds; the demon, to whom he has sold his soul for pleasure, grinning at him from a corner; Scripture subjects surmounting and emphasising this uncanny legend; while a strange benediction surmounts all—the hand of the Almighty raised in blessing and warning, carved out of the stone above the door. Higher still the wheel window, with beauty to attract the eye, startles the fancy with its almost mocking meaning, showing Fortune at her pranks, a king at top of the wheel, a beggar at bottom. The whole seems the work of a Christianity powerful and gigantic, but only half-tamed, with a soul vividly awake to God, but an imagination still darkened by influences of paganism, and crossed by an innocent and child-like freakishness: a Christianity still of the sword and club, needing and receiving angelic visions to soothe its savage fervor into peace, a Titan with one foot in hell and the other in heaven, but both arms grasping the cross.

CHAPTER XXIX. THE AMPHITHEATRE.

By night Kevin and Honeywood would sit together on the summit of the amphitheatre in the moonlight, and their talk was of the great poet and exile whose footprints are all over Verona.

Said Kevin:—"If we could call the spirit of Dante to our presence, there would be no more fitting place than this. Imaging the glorified vision rising from the circular, almost fathomless pit of shadow into these upper rings of light, with a gleam from paradise on the strange, strong brow—all harsh lines of pain and bitterness smoothed away for ever."

"You feel sure it would be a glorified vision?" said Honeywood.

"I do. I feel sure he has long since passed through that fire he describes, which pains and purifies, yet consumes nothing but sin; and that he is safe in the fields of bliss."

"In all that I have read of him lately," said Honeywood, "nothing struck me so forcibly as his description of the shock of inward revelation, by which the soul in the Purgatorio became suddenly aware that it was thoroughly pure and fit for the presence of God. Enough had been suffered, the trial was ended, and the last soil of sin having vanished, had left the spirit free to perceive its own perfection and the immediate happiness awaiting it—without voice from above or below to convey the blessed news."

"It is believed," continued Honeywood, "that the spectacle of this amphitheatre, seen as we see it now in the moonlight, suggested to Dante the plan of the *Inferno*, with its ever-narrowing and descending rings: light circling round the top, getting gradually lost in an all but bottomless pit. It is easy to imagine the sad exile, with his proud, sore heart and burning imagination wandering about here by night, when the great nobles, his patrons, were either feasting noisily or sleeping off the effects of their dissipation. We are told that Can Grande said to him one day, with a savage rudeness that seems to belong to his rough name, 'How is it that you who are so inspired and so learned amuse the Court of Verona less than the buffoon who is just now delighting?' And Dante answered, in his own lofty, scathing way, 'People are usually pleased with those who resemble themselves.' After such a little passage of bitterness as this between him and the rude man whom he loved and whose bounties he accepted, he may have turned on his heel, and, scaling these solemn heights, have plunged into the depths of his

Inferno, there forgetting the pains of this world in the more intolerable woes of another."

"Then you think Can Grande was not a real friend?" said Kevin.

Truly his friend, but the Mastinos were a savage race; and when the Great Dog barked, doubtless, Dante writhed in his dependence. I am glad to find, however, that there is one writer of modern days (Ampère) who refuses to believe in the cruel play upon the word 'scala' in the sad lines:—

Thou shalt by trial know what bitter fare
Is bread of others: and the way how hard
That leadeth up and down another's stair.

Doubtless, Dante, in his weary wanderings, hurled down from his high place, separated from 'each beloved thing,' banished under pain of a fiery death from his adored Florence, found the bread he ate bitter, and the road he travelled hard. The way ever up and down another's stair must be at times a sad pilgrimage even to the meekest feet, and Dante was not meek; but I for one am glad to agree with the thoughtful and eloquent writer who denies that a great soul could revenge itself on a benefactor by means of the stiletto, and plant a covert sting in the hand that had shielded him."

"How these two cities, Florence and Verona, are bound to the name of Dante," said Kevin. "Florence was the one beloved by him, and yet it seems to me that the mark of his presence is more impressed upon Verona."

"I feel with you. Florence had him in his youth, in the days of his love-dream; the mystical atmosphere of the Vita Nuova surrounds him there. She also possessed him in the days of his political life, in the hours of his triumph and power. But the Dante we best know, the sad, strong face, seamed with suffering and crowned with laurel, haunts Verona, and is more visible here than anywhere else in the world. This is the spot that knew him in the zenith of his great fame, when Florence cruelly rejected him. Had he remained in his high place in Florence, who can say whether the *Divina Commedia* would ever have been written?"

"Was it not begun before his exile?"

"Begun, but tossed aside in the storm of active political life. Five years of turmoil in banishment had passed when his nephew found in an old family receptacle a scroll of some few cantos, the beginning of the *Divine Comedy*, and sent it to the exile. Receiving it, all the poet awoke in his passionate, disappointed heart, so torn by worldly strife, and, as if called by Heaven, he threw himself into the task and accomplished the real work of his life."

"Are we not told that he wrote *Inferno* among the hills of Lunigiana, at the castle of the Baron Malaspina?"

"He may have written part of it, have finished it there; but I believe that the plan of it was conceived in Verona. The hills had their share in supplying the scenery, I dare say. Take this moon-gilded amphitheatre and lose it in some strange, lone, hollow wilderness of Nature,

Within a forest dark,
For the straightforward pathway had been lost,

and you can gain some idea of the first suggestion of that 'desert slope at a mountain foot' where the firm foot ever was the lower.

Said Kevin:—"Long before I ever heard of Dante, when I was an almost unlettered boy on an Irish mountainside, I knew by heart the strange tale of the voyage of St. Brendan, a saint of my land, 'a holy man of Yrlonde,' who sailed in search of an island peopled by the souls of the blessed, and who met with strange adventures upon islands of Purgatory and islands of the damned. Many a time I lay in the heather, looking earnestly along the sea-line for a glimpse of Hy-Brasil, the Island of the Blessed, which our people believe is sometimes visible for a moment in the evening light. I was also familiar with the stories from