

ST. JOSEPH'S MEN'S CLUB, DUNEDIN

The members of St. Joseph's Men's Club and their friends attended in large numbers in St. Joseph's Hall on Monday evening of last week, when the inaugural lecture of the session was delivered by the president (Rev. Father Buckley), who selected for his subject, 'Dante and the *Divina Commedia*.' The lecture was copiously illustrated by limelight pictures, the lantern being manipulated by Mr. Simpson.

Rev. Father Buckley, in his introductory remarks, said that the *Divina Commedia* justly occupies a place among the greatest poems ever composed. Besides initiating a literature, and moulding the language of a nation it is a monument stronger than brass, *aere perennius*, of a great Italian genius. It ranks with the *Iliad* and the works of Shakespeare, and enjoys the distinction of being the first Christian epic. For European literature it is what Homer's works were for that of Greece and Rome. It is no exaggeration to say that of all poems it is the loftiest and soars above all others in its daring flight. Throughout its pages the author's life may be traced, for in those harrowing scenes of the unearthly we never lose sight of the writer—of his life and characteristics. Dante was born at Florence—the city of all flowers and the flower of all cities—some sixty years before Chaucer. Before he had completed his ninth year the future poet had conceived a romantic attachment for a maiden who had just entered hers but who never lived to know the fame she has acquired. It was at a festival in Florence that the soft and dreamy boy met Beatrice Portinari for the first time. 'She was dressed, he tells us, 'in a subdued and becoming crimson, and adorned as to suit her tender age.' He compared her to the youngest of the angels, and thought her so noble and praiseworthy that he applied to her the words of Homer: 'No child of man was she but rather the offspring of gods.' He would wait for her longingly in the street of Florence to catch a glimpse of her countenance as she took her walk of an afternoon. He would stand upon the bridge that spans the Arno; he would sit, poor love-sick youth, at the spot even now called Dante's corner, that he might calm his eyes by one glance of her beauty. But Beatrice acknowledged his attention no more than to bow and pass. She gave no mark of encouragement, no hope that he should ever win her hand. Precisely nine years to a day, Beatrice was walking with two lady companions through the streets of Florence when she met and spoke to our poet for the first time. Dante stood abashed. She turned her eyes, he says, and of her ineffable courtesy she saluted me so virtuously that I seemed to enjoy the utmost limits of happiness and bliss. But Dante was like many young men, he wooed one and wed another. Beatrice Portinari died at the young age of twenty-four, and Dante, after composing several sonnets in her honor, decided to write no more until the time should come when he could speak of her more worthily. To attain this end he applied himself diligently to study. No branch of the sciences then known was overlooked, and the result of his labors was the *Divina Commedia*.

The poem is a kind of *Pilgrim's Progress*, the work of a wanderer—for Dante was banished from his native city of Florence. It takes the form of a difficult and perilous journey—through the nine circles of Hell, up the steep and toilsome mountain of Purgatory, and on still and on through seven successive planets—until he is admitted to the presence of the Deity, and given a glimpse of the mysteries of Heaven.

Dante was a genuine admirer of nature, and was as capable of appreciating the beautiful as well as describing the grotesque. He watched the varied movements of birds, and describes them in simple but expressive words. At one time it is the water birds rising aloft in round or long array. Another time it is the rooks, bestirring themselves at dawn of day, or the plaintive swallow saluting the approach of morning. Again, how descriptive are the hours of the day—the cheering fragrance of a morning in May under an Italian sky; the restful calm, and the pure air that

brought him unwonted joy as he issued forth from the deadly gloom of the Inferno. There is not an hour of the day which he has not graphically depicted—the red clouds at sunset, the darkness falling on the earth at evening, the lingering shadows on the mountain tops. Dante died an outcast at Ravenna in his 56th year. Florence, the disdainful, paid him no tribute of respect, raised no monument, shed no tears. Ravenna rejoices at her privilege to be the perpetual guardian of Dante's ashes.

'Ungrateful Florence Dante sleeps afar,
Like Scipio: buried by the upbraiding shore.'
—Byron.

Rev. Father Buckley then dealt with Dante's account of his wanderings in the lower regions.

The lecture was listened to with the closest attention throughout, and at its close Father Buckley was accorded a hearty vote of thanks on the motion of Mr. J. Atwill.

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