THE MAKERS OF FLORENCE

THE POET—DANTE

CHAPTER I.

HIS YOUTH.

It is a peculiarity of the great cities of Italy, that none of them are capitals in the ordinary sense of the word—types and representatives of the country, such as Paris is of France, or London of England. The great centres of old Italian life, Rome and Venice and Florence, are all as distinct as individuals, incapable on the spur of the moment—as has been demonstrated by recent experience—of being trimmed into any breadth of nationality, or made to represent more than themselves—the one strongly-marked and individual phase of character which their municipal separateness and independent history have impressed upon them. The action of time may fit Rome—once the mistress, and still accustomed to feel herself in one sense the capital, of the world—for becoming the capital of Italy; but it is scarcely possible to conceive a combination of circumstances which could have detached Florence from her grandiose and austere personality and made of her a national centre. So long as her dark palaces cut their stern outline against the sky, and her warlike tower
lifts itself high over the housetops, and the hills stand round her in embattled lines, must the great city remain herself—the city of Dante and Michel Angelo, sternest of poets and of painters—a grave, serious, almost solemn presence, full of passion too profound and thought too vast to be capable of light utterance, amid all the sunshine and the songs, the gaiety and levity of the South. The distinctness of her character could scarcely show itself more completely than by the close unity which exists between her and her great poet. Even to those who have never been personally impressed by the lofty, almost melancholy, seriousness of her aspect, the two images are one. Dante is the very embodiment, the living soul of Florence, living and full of the most vivid reality though six centuries have passed since his eyes beheld “Io dolce luna”—the sweet light of mortal day. Genius has never proved its potency so mightily as by the way in which so many petty tumults and factionaries of the thirteenth century, so many trifling incidents and local circumstances, passed out of all human importance for the last six hundred years, have been held suspended in a fierce light of life and reality, unable to perish and get themselves safe into oblivion up to this very day, in consequence of their connection with this one man. Even now critics discuss them hotly, and students rake into the dust of old histories for further particulars of those street riots and rough jests, six hundred years old, which led to so much blood and mischief; not that they were of themselves more important than other local medieval tumults, but because the hand of the poet has touched them, or his shadow somewhere fixed them for ever on the common recollection, as daylight now fixes so many vulgar portraits. The men who injured Florence, and those who tried to save her in that day, were of themselves no more interesting than the generations of succeeding plotters and local heroes who came after them in a perpetual succession of struggles, down to the time when anarchy and the ceaseless changes of an unsettled government found their natural quietus in the calm of absolute tyranny. But the names of the older generations are writ in brass on the glowing walls
of the *Inferno*, or in softer lines across the hopeful glades of the *Purgatorio*; while toiling historians have but succeeded in inscribing a record of the others in the undisturbed dust of here and there a library shelf.

This is what the poet has done for his generation; and it is more than Shakespeare has done for his—a difference which it is not difficult, however, to account for by the different characters of the men and the scenes in which they lived. To one poet his England was the world, full of every possible type of humanity, affording him suggestions for his Moor, his Jew, his Venetian, as well as for his Falstaff and his Prince Hal. But to the Florentine Florence in all her straitness, shut in by the walls of that *Seconda Cerkia* which antiquaries can still trace for us, was the actual universe. No Othello, no Shylock, strange to the soil, ever dawned upon his intense concentrated vision; but he saw with tremendous vividness and reality the people around him, the greatness of them and the pettiness of their sycophants—Filippo Argenti in the mud, as well as Brunetto Latini on those burning sands where fall like snow the “diluted” flakes of fire. Dante was born, lived, loved, and struggled for all the more momentous part of his life not only in that small old Florence, but in a corner of it, knowing from his childhood every individual of the vicini, and loving and hating them as only people so closely shut up together could love and hate; while Shakespeare had the freedom of the country to range through—a little youthful vagabondism at merry Stratford—a taste of the great life of his noble patrons, and of the Bohemian life of his players, and of everything that was going in the fresh island air crisped by the sea. The circumstances are as different as the minds of the two poets, if anything tangible can ever be so different as the genius of Dante from that of Shakespeare. Accordingly the Italian has lifted his entire generation with him into the skies, and by so doing has not only secured for us an acquaintance with the time which is unparalleled in minute-ness and vivid force, but has hampered us with a literature of commentary which we suppose no other writer of the modern
THE MAKERS OF FLORENCE.

4

world has ever called forth. We will not attempt to follow the
crowd of learned Italians who live and breathe and have their
being in Dante through the many convolutions of history which
sometimes bid fair to strangle, like the Laocoon, the poet himself
and his great poem in their multiplied and intricate folds. Indeed
we think the time has come when, in as far as the Divina
Commedia is concerned, a reverse treatment would be advan-
tageous, and those parts of the poem which belong to humanity,
and are everywhere comprehensible, might be separated from
those which are woven into the tangled web of Tuscan history.
However, our present occupation is with the man rather than
the poem, so far as the great, impassioned, intense spirit who
wrote it can ever be detached from that memorable record of him-
self and his age, in which all the lofty but fierce passions, all the
exquisite softenings of feeling, all the strange exalted thoughts,
rigid opinions, antiquated learning, and profound humanity of
the man are and continue as if he still lived among us. What
Dante is in the Divine Comedy we know—how Dante grew to
be what he is, and among what surroundings, he himself has
left us the means of finding out, aided by a band of patriotic
biographers, such as do honour to the unswerving faithfulness
of Italian enthusiasm for the greatest poet of the race.

The little Florence in which Dante was born was very much
unlike the noble and beautiful Florence which is now, like
Jerusalem, a joy of the whole earth, and whose splendour and
serious beauty seem to justify the wonderful adoration of her
which her children have always shown, and which this her
greatest son made into a kind of worship. The high houses
that rose in narrow lines closely approaching each other, with a
continual menace, across the strait thread of street, had not yet
attained to the characteristic individuality of Tuscan architecture.
The beautiful cathedral, which so many a traveller, thoughtless
of dates, has contemplated from the Sasso di Dante with a dim
notion that Dante himself must have sat there many a summer
evening watching the glorious walls rise and the great noble
fabric come into being, had not, even in the lower altitude given
to it by Arnolfo, begun to be when the poet was born. The old Bargello and the Palazzo Vecchio were still in process of building. Santa Croce, Santa Maria Novella, and Giotto's lovely Campanile were all in the future with all their riches. The ancient Badia, or Abbey of Florence, still struck the hour, as the poet records, to all the listening city; and though the bridges, curiously enough, had all been built, there was scarcely as yet any Oltr' Arno, only a very small scrap of that side of the river being inclosed within the second circle of walls, which extended from the Ponte delle Grazie, or Rubaconte, newly built, to the Ponte alla Carraja, also new, and so round by San Lorenzo and the Square of the Cathedral, then cumbered by houses and occupied only by the ancient little church of Santa Reparata, facing the Baptistery, the only one of the great group which existed in Dante's day. Very different then must have been that double square. The Baptistery had not even got its coating of marbles, but was still in flint, grey and homely, when the child of the Alighieri was christened there; and little Santa Reparata, with its grave-yard round it, lay deep down as in a well in the heart of the tall houses. The Baptistery, too, was surrounded by graves, its square being filled up by sarcophagi of a still older date, in which—a curious fancy—many of the greater families of Florence buried their dead. The tower of one of the great houses in the square was called Guardia-morte, "watcher of the dead," so closely round that little centre of the buried clustered the houses of the living. But to the old church of the Baptist, the "bel San Giovanni" of the poet, every child of Florence was carried, then, as now, to be made a Christian. That great solemn interior, still and cool and calm amid the blazing sunshine, remains alone unchanged amid all the alterations around. The graves have been cleared away, the great Duomo has been built, the tower of Giotto, airy fabric of genius, defying all its tons of marble to make it less like a lily born of dew and sunshine, has sprung up into the heavens; but San Giovanni is still the same, and still the new Florentines are carried into its serene
solemnity of gloom to be enrolled at once in the Church and in the world by names which may be heard of hereafter—as was the infant Durante, Dante, prince of poets and everlasting ruler of Florence, in the year 1265, in that month of May which, under Tuscan skies, is the true May after which in our northern latitudes we sigh in vain.

Only five years before, Florence herself, with all her fame and promise unfulfilled, was as near destruction as ever city was—not by her enemies, but by her own sons born in her bosom. The ceaseless and sickening struggles of the Guelfs and Ghibellines had begun some time before, and once all the Guelfs and once all the Ghibellines had been banished from the city, when the victory of Montaperti made the Ghibellines masters for the second time of the town. It seems incredible after all we have heard and said of the intense devotion of Italian citizens of those times to their city, that there actually was a discussion between the victors whether or not they should destroy altogether the home out of which, as the most dreadful of punishments, each faction in its turn drove its opponents; but such was the case. After this victory of Montaperti, a general meeting of the Ghibelline party was held at Empoli, where this proposal was made, and, supported warmly by the delegates of all the other Ghibelline cities, would certainly have been carried out, save for the resistance of Farinata degli Uberti, a member of a family so thoroughly detested in Florence that their palace had been quite recently destroyed, as Jericho was, under penalties against any one who should attempt to rebuild it. Farinata was the sole Florentine bold enough to stand up for the city in which his paternal home had been razed to the ground. The reader of the Inferno will remember the fine passage in which his great deed has been made immortal. It is one of the most remarkable in the whole poem. The great Ghibelline, raising himself from the sepulchre in which he is imprisoned, lifting up breast and brow “as if he held hell in scorn,” and the old Cavalcanti beside him, who, hearing the name of the mortal visitor, immediately rises too, to look if
his Guido, Dante's friend, is with him, are among the most impressive figures in all that gloomy landscape. "I was not alone," says Farinata, "in the deeds which moved the wrath of

Florence against my race; but alone I stood when all around me would have destroyed Florence, and defended her with open face." ¹ This extraordinary risk, from which the city, rising

¹ Those to whom this beautiful passage is familiar will bear us no malice for repeating it here, and those who have forgotten it will, we trust, be pleased to have it recalled to them. Dante has penetrated into the city of Dis, and, traversing the ring of burning sepulchres which surround the walls, talking with Virgil, is suddenly addressed by one of the sufferers:—

"'O Tuscan, thus with open mortal speech,
That by the burning city living goes,
Please you to pause a while when here you reach;
THE MAKERS OF FLORENCE.

into so much importance, escaped only by the patriotism of one of those party leaders who were her ruin, is as notable as anything in the exciting record of her tumultuous history.

When Dante, however, grew old enough to mark the world about him the days of Ghibelline triumph were over, and the Guelfs had again got the upper hand. They, too, had banished and confiscated, right and left, as soon as their turn came, as indeed all parties continued to do in Florence, whatever they

To me the language of your utterance shows
That from that noble land you take your birth
To which perchance I brought too many woes.'
Suddenly came this voice, that issued forth
From out a tomb; at which I faltering drew
A little closer to my leader's worth.
He said to me: 'Turn; know you what you do?
'Tis Farinata who, thus raised upright,
From brow to girdle shows himself to you.'
I had already fixed on him my sight.
Proudly his brow and breast upward he swayed,
As one who held this hell in high despite.
With eager hand and quick my leader made
Between him and the sepulchre a way,
And thrust me there. 'Thy time is brief,' he said.
When to the tomb's foot I had made my way,
He looked at me; then, with a half-disdain,
Questioned me thus: 'Thy fathers? who were they?'
To do his will eager I was and fain,
And all recounted to him, hiding nought.
A little rose his eyebrows proud: again
He spoke: 'Fiercely adverse were they, in thought
And deed, to me, my party, and my race:
So were they twice to flight and exile brought.'
'If they were exiled, driven from place to place,'
Quickly I said, 'yet home they found their way;
Your faction never learned that happy grace.'
Then rose there suddenly from where it lay
Unseen, another shade, the face alone
O'er the tomb's edge raised, as one kneeling may,
And round me looked, gazing, as if for one
Who might perchance be following after me;
When it was clearly seen that there was none:
called themselves—the Guelfs and the Ghibellines to-day, the Neri and the Bianchi to-morrow; after a while, the Albizzi and the Medici, the Arrabians and the Piagnoni: the name mattered little, the thing existed through century after century. When it was not two parties which contended for the mastery, it was two families, a still worse kind of faction. The reader will not expect, nor we trust desire, a recapitulation and description for

Weeping—'If these blind prisons thus you see,' He said, 'and thread by loftiness of mind, Where is my son? why is he not with thee?' I said: 'Not by myself my way I find; And unto him who leads and makes it plain Thy Guido's soul perchance was ne'er inclined.' Thus by his words and manner of his pain Guided I was to answer full and right, So clear I read his meaning and his name. 'How saidst thou?—was? Ah, lives he then no more? Strikes his dear eyes no more the blessed light?' When he perceived me pause, and I forbore Unto this question any quick reply, Prostrate he dropped, and thence appeared no more. But that heroic shade whose prison I Had first approached and by whom still remained, Unchanged in aspect and in gesture high, Moved not, but the first argument maintained. 'If,' she said, 'they have badly learned that art, By that, more than this bed, my soul is pained. But ere the queen who rules this gloomy part Shall fifty times uplift her gleaming face, That lesson, hard to learn, shall crush thy heart. If in the sweet world thou wouldst e'er find grace, Tell me why thus 'gainst all who bear my name The people rage, and hard laws curse and chase.' I answered him: 'The bitter strife and shame That dyed the flowing Arbia crimson-red Has in our temple raised such height of blame,' Sighing, he said, and shook his mournful head: 'In these things was not I alone, nor could, Without grave reason, be by others led. But I stood sole, when all consenting would Have swept off Florence from the earth; alone And openly in her defence I stood.'"
the hundredth time of the political faith of the Guelfs and the Ghibellines. Probably at their beginning, as we have already said, the former were supposed to be on the side of the Church as the grand arbitrator of all national concerns in Europe, and the latter to look to the Emperor as holding that supreme position; but it would be rash to conclude from this that either Church or Empire had much share in the thoughts of these pugnacious Florentines, whose personal feuds and hatreds, one neighbour against another, were infinitely more real and vivid than anything so far off as Pope or Emperor. Between the two central points of the city—the great public square surrounding the Palazzo Vecchio, the seat of government so to speak, where all public business was transacted, and the other square in which now rises the cathedral—lies an obscure little opening among the thronging houses, in which the little old homely church of San Martino still stands, and where in the thirteenth century the houses of the Alighieri stood. An old doorway opposite, almost the only remnant of the original house, which is still used for homely, every day purposes, shows where the "Divino Poeta" was born. Between this church and the old walls of the second circle was the scene of his life—not Florence, but his street and quarter of Florence, among the neighbours who, closely packed together, made part of each others' lives as only in the tiniest and most primitive of villages neighbours can do nowadays. Each family held together in its cluster of houses, building on new stories, thrusting forth new chambers as the branches of the tree grew, and the name increased in numbers and strength. The Portinari, the Donati, the Cerchi, inhabited each their palace-colony, their homely fortress, side by side with the Alighieri. They were neighbours in the most absolute form of the word. Impossible to know each other more closely, to be more completely aware of each others' defects and weaknesses, of each others' virtues and good qualities, than were the generations which succeeded each other in the same hates and friendships as in the same names and houses. Thus the boy Durante, Alighieri's son, no