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DANTE'S DIVINA COMMEDIA.*

I SHALL not apologise if what I say to-day is already known to many of you. I have been asked to speak a little about Dante and especially about his greatest work, and it is necessary to touch upon many matters and many events to obtain at all a connected view of his writings. For, since the *Divina Commedia* may be said to have its origin in one special influence which shaped the poet's whole life we must glance rapidly over his history before turning to the poem itself. It is impossible in the short space of time at my disposal to do more than touch on the events of his career, and indeed the records left are so meagre, the narratives handed down to us so frequently disputed, that we cannot depend on much but the merest outline as trustworthy.

Our most picturesque account of Dante's early life comes to us from Boccaccio, who was born in 1313, eight years before the death of Dante, and whose biography should be reliable since he was so nearly a contemporary of the great poet. But a great part of his *Life of Dante*, which was written in 1351 has been rejected by competent authorities as untrustworthy, and we must therefore accept his statements with caution. The few facts of his life which I am now giving are at any rate considered reliable.

Dante, or more properly Durante Alighieri, was born in May 1265, of an honorable, perhaps noble, family of Florence, at that time one of the most flourishing cities of Europe, though disturbed like most other Italian cities with turbulent party factions. Dante was but nine years old when he first met Beatrice, the Beatrice of the *Vita Nuova*, and the *Divina Commedia*, and she was but eight. They met at the house of the little maiden's father Folco Portinari, whither Dante's father had conducted him to a May-day feast. There he beheld the little maiden, "more fit to be an angel," says Boccaccio, "than a girl." Her dress on that day, Dante tells us, "was of a most noble colour, a subdued and goodly crimson, girdled and adorned in such sort as best suited her very tender age. At that moment, I say most truly, that the spirit of life which hath its dwelling in the secretest chamber of the heart began to tremble so violently that the least pulses of my body shook therewith, and in trembling it said these words: 'Lo, a god that is stronger than I, who coming in shall rule over me.' These were the first signs of the over-powering passion which, chastened and spiritualised by her early death, followed him to the end of his life, and inspired his most noble work. We know but very

*An address given to the Levana Society by Miss L. Saunders.