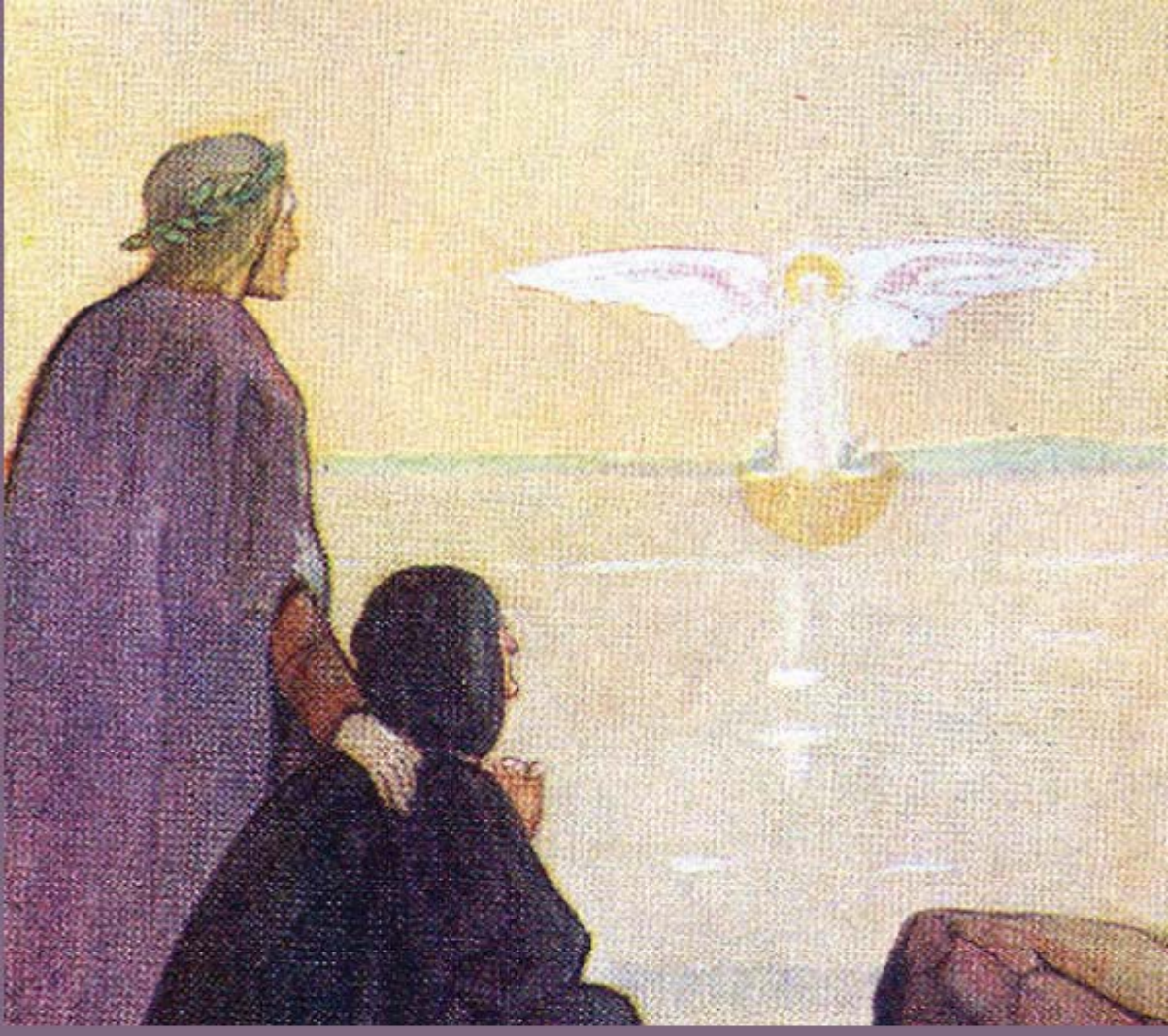


Stories from
Dante

CLASSIC LIT FOR YOUNG READERS

MARY MACGREGOR

Stories from
Dante

Mary MacGregor

Libraries of Hope

Stories from Dante
Classic Literature for Young Readers

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Stories from Dante

Told to the Children by
MARY MACGREGOR

With Pictures by
R.T. ROSE

About This Book

In the far-off days when Dante lived, those who wrote books wrote them in the Latin tongue.

Dante himself wrote the first seven cantos of his great poem in Latin. But like many another poet, he was not satisfied with his first attempt. He flung the seven Latin cantos aside and seemingly forgot all about them, for when he was banished from Florence the poem he had begun was not among his treasures.

His wife, however, found the seven cantos and tossed them into a bag among her jewels. Then she also seemed to forget all about them.

Five years later a nephew of Dante chanced to find the long-forgotten ver-

ses. He at once sent them to his uncle, who was still living in exile.

When Dante received the cantos he had written so long ago, he believed that their recovery was a sign from Heaven that he should complete the great poem he had begun.

He therefore set to work afresh, but this time he wrote, not in Latin, but in his own beautiful mother-tongue, which was, as you know, Italian.

When at length the great poem was finished, Dante named it simply, "The Comedy," and it was not until many years after his death that the title was changed into "The Divine Comedy."

A comedy was a tale which might be as sad as tale could be, so only that it ended in gladness.

In "The Divine Comedy," then, about which this little book tells, you may expect to find much that is sad,

much that is terrible. Yet you may be certain that before the end of the tale you will find in it gladness and joy.

MARY MACGREGOR

CHAPTER 1
Dante and Beatrice

More than six hundred years have passed since a little Italian boy, named Durante Alighieri, was born in Florence.

The boy grew under the sunny skies, even as the flowers grew in the beautiful city of his birth, tall, straight, strong.

While he was still a little lad, his school-fellows, as schoolboys will, found a name of their own for their comrade.

Dante they called him, finding thus a shorter, easier name than his baptismal one, Durante. Dante was the name that clung to the lad when schooldays were left behind, and Dante was still the name by which he was known when in long after years he became Italy's most famous

poet.

Spring was a gladsome time in the City of Flowers, as Florence was often called. Spring! She was welcomed with the smiles and the laughter of little children; she was greeted with the tears and the memories of the old.

Early in the month of May, when cold winds no longer blew down from the mountains, when green leaves danced and flowers bloomed fragrant in the sunlight, early in the month of May merry festivals were held.

May-day, indeed, in the City of Flowers, was the children's day.

When Dante was nine years old his father took him to one of these May-day festivals.

At the feast Dante saw among the boys and girls one little maiden, so fair, so beautiful, that his eyes had no sooner fallen upon her than he loved her with

all his heart.

Beatrice was the maiden's name, and she was but a year younger than Dante himself.

The little boy watched Beatrice as she ran hither and thither among the bright spring flowers, but no word did he speak. Perhaps he was too shy.

However that may be, it was many years later that he first heard the voice of Beatrice. Yet never did he forget the May-day when his eyes had lighted on the little maid and love had sprung up in his heart. The colour of her frock, the girdle which she wore, the ornaments that bedecked her simple beauty, Dante could tell you all about them in long after years.

And because he remembered so well, we have a picture of Beatrice, the little Florentine maiden, clad in her frock of rich dark crimson. We can see the girdle

that held the little gown in place fastened around her waist; we can catch the gleam of her necklace as she tosses back her long, fair hair.

Though Dante and Beatrice both lived in Florence they did not often see one another. Yet so great was Dante's love for the maiden that he would watch the narrow streets for many a long hour, that he might catch if it were but a glimpse of her whom he reverenced and adored.

Once, nine long years after the May-day when first he saw her, Dante heard the voice of Beatrice. She was walking in the street between two ladies, when, seeing him, she turned to greet him graciously ere she passed onward. Dante stood quite still when Beatrice had left him, glad, bewildered.

A few days later Dante grew ill, so ill indeed that he lay in bed suffering great

pain. And as he lay thus a terrible thought crept into his mind, perhaps because he himself was so weak.

"Beatrice, the most noble Beatrice, must one day die," was the thought that came to trouble Dante as he tossed upon his bed. Nor would it leave him, but ever as he grew weaker he cried, "Beatrice must one day die, the noble Beatrice must die."

Then, as he grew yet more feeble, Dante had a strange vision. He beheld many ladies passing along a road, and they were weeping and wondrous sad. The sun grew dark and the stars grew pale, and birds, even as they spread their wings for flight, fell stricken to the ground, while the earth shook as with a great storm.

And it seemed to Dante that a man stood by his bed and said to him, "Hast thou not heard the tidings? Dead is thy

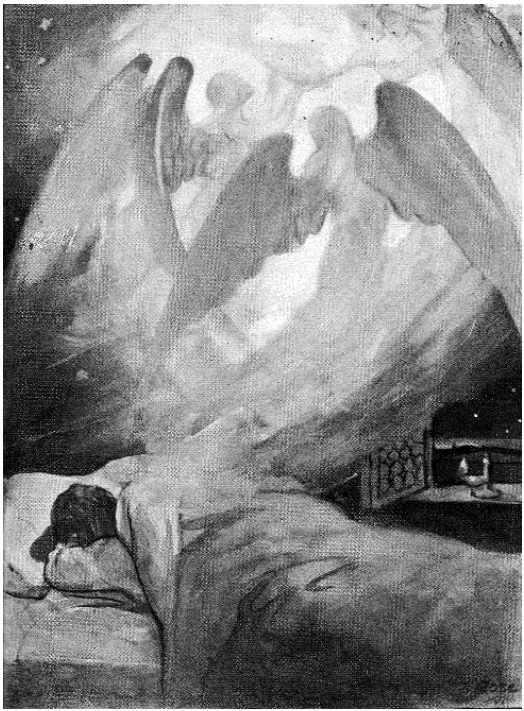
lady that was so fair."

Hearing these words Dante wept and gazed toward heaven, and behold, a multitude of angels were flying upward, and before them they bore a little cloud of exceeding whiteness.

In his dream Dante knew that the little cloud was the soul of Beatrice. He heard also the angels, as they floated upward, singing "Hosanna, Hosanna!"

Then said the man who stood beside his bed, "Come and behold thy lady." And Dante saw the body of Beatrice, and her women were covering her head with a white veil.

Now those who were nursing Dante saw the tears falling from his eyes, and they wondered why he wept. And he, waking from his dream, told them how he had seen his lady's soul, as a little white cloud, soaring upward, and his lady's body lying quiet and still on earth.



Before them they bore a little
cloud of exceeding whiteness.

Then they who tended him soothed his trouble and told him he had but dreamed, and Dante, knowing their words were true, rested, and ere long grew strong and well.

But he did not forget his dream. He would sit in his own room writing love-songs in honour of his lady and thinking of the vision he had seen. And then one day as he wrote he heard that Beatrice was indeed dead.

Dante was crushed with grief. Florence, the city that was so full of people, seemed all at once to have become empty. Beatrice was dead.

He would sit for long hours quiet and listless, caring for nothing, heedless too of all that was passing in his beloved city. Beatrice had left him, and to Dante nothing seemed of any worth.

Then, when his sadness was deepest, Dante dreamed a wonderful dream. In

this dream he saw once more the lady whom he loved so well. She was dwelling in the Paradise of God, among the angels, more fair, more radiant than of old.

Dante awoke, sad no longer. He had seen his lady, and he believed that she could see him and could help him too, though she no longer dwelt upon earth.

He knew he would never forget the wonderful vision he had seen, yet he determined to write his dream in a book. It should be a book singing the praises of his lady who dwelt beyond the stars.

And in after years, when Dante had studied, that he might write more worthily than ever before of her he loved, he did indeed tell his dream in a wonderful poem. It was thus that the Divine Comedy was given to the world.

CHAPTER 2
Dante's Exile

But before Dante wrote his great poem trouble befell him.

In those days there was no King of Italy, for each Italian city had its own ruler.

The city of Florence was governed by magistrates chosen by the people, but their power lasted only for two short months.

There were, as you may easily suppose, many quarrels among the citizens of Florence as to who should rule over them, and often they would be divided into two great parties.

So fierce was the strife between these two parties, that the one which was in

power would avenge itself on the other by banishing it from the city. Such banishment brought with it great loss and sorrow, for to the citizens of Florence their city was very dear. How could they work for her welfare when they had been robbed of their property and were without her walls?

Dante grew up amid the strife of his countrymen, and their quarrels grieved him so greatly that when he was old enough he tried to make peace prevail among the citizens. But the strife was too fierce to be overcome by his efforts.

Now when Dante was about thirty-five years of age, a Florentine, named Donati, invited Charles, a brother of the King of France, into Florence.

Donati hoped, with the aid of Charles, to secure the government of Florence for himself and his party.

Charles came, as he was invited, into

Florence, and Donati and his followers joined the French prince and fought against those who were opposed to him.

When they were victorious Donati and his party sent many of the Florentines who had fought against them into exile.

Dante was among these banished citizens, and, for he loved his city well, he was overcome with grief and indignation at his sentence.

It was indeed a cruel one, for it not only sent him into exile, but it said that should he ever attempt to enter Florence again he would be burned alive.

Now about three years after the death of Beatrice, Dante had married Gemma, a kinswoman of Donati. When he was forced to leave Florence he left Gemma and his children in the city, knowing that they would be safe with Donati the victorious citizen.

Year after year Dante hoped that he would be allowed to return to the city of his birth. But the years passed and still he was a wanderer, enduring many hardships, for he had no money to make his journeys less toilsome.

Yet Dante could bear the hardships of his lot better than he could bear his poverty, for he had a proud spirit, which chafed and grew bitter when he was forced to accept help from others.

Sometimes Dante taught in the universities as he journeyed through Italy, sometimes he did work for the government of his country. Often he was the guest of princes and nobles, yet however kindly he was treated, Dante suffered, for ever his pride whispered to him that he was but a servant, dependent on the whims and fancies of these princes and nobles.

One young prince, at whose court in

Verona Dante lived for some time, treated the exile as a dear friend, yet even there Dante's pride was restive as a high-spirited steed.

If you listen, you will hear his voice, as one day in Verona he raises it and cries out bitterly, "How salt the savour of another's bread, how hard the climbing by another's stairs."

It was during these years of wandering that Dante wrote down his dream in a wonderful poem. After it was written he longed more than ever to be recalled to his beloved Florence.

In the city of Florence stood a church dedicated to St. John, which Dante had loved from the time he was a little boy. Here he, as every other little child born in Florence, had been taken to be christened. At its font he had been given his name Durante.

"To this church, my beautiful St.

John," as he would often call it, to this church which he so dearly loved, Dante longed to go. Fain would he have placed upon his brow in this hallowed spot the crown of laurel. As a poet the crown was his mead, yet to Dante it seemed that it would lose much of its beauty, were it not bestowed upon him by his native city, in the church which had been his since he had been carried to its font to be christened.

Listen to his wistful words:

"If ever it should happen that the sacred poem, to which I have devoted my hand, and the writing of which has made me lean for years, should vanquish the cruelty which shuts me out from the dear sheepfold where I rested as a lamb, I should return with a different voice and receive on my brow the poetic crown."

Once indeed, about fifteen long years after he had been exiled, Dante might

have returned to Florence. Yet the conditions on which he might return were such as his proud spirit could not brook, no, not even for the sake of treading once again the narrow streets of his beloved city.

To pay a fine, to make a public confession of his offence, such were the terms his enemies laid before Dante. He waved the terms aside with scorn.

But the pain of exile was graven on the poet's face. If you look at the portraits taken during these last years of his banishment you will see the pain quite well. You cannot think a smile lurks round the corner of those tight-closed lips; you cannot believe hope looks out of those large, sad eyes. Nay, joy has been crushed out of the poet's life through nineteen years of exile.

Dante's last refuge was at Ravenna, where he found a protector in a rich man

named Guido, who was himself a poet. It was here at Ravenna, when he was fifty-six years old, that he died in 1321.

Then, when it was too late, Florence repented of her harshness, and begged that the body of the great poet might rest in his native city. But she begged in vain, and Dante still lies far from the beautiful City of Flowers which he loved so well.

Dante dead! Then is there no more to tell?

Ah yes, for if you will listen to the wonderful dream which the exile made into a great poem you will find yourself wandering with him in strange places. Now it will be in a dark and gloomy place where the sun never shines, now it will be on a steep mountain that points towards the light of God. And if you climb to the very top, it will be to find that with Dante you have entered into Paradise.

For in his dream Dante did indeed

journey until he stood before the throne of God.

CHAPTER 3
Dante's Dream Journey

Dreamland is a real land, as boys and girls know well. Men and women, as well as boys and girls, have wandered into this land, and they have never doubted that the sights which they have seen, the sounds which they have heard, were true.

Dante was a dreamer, and once, out of the darkness, there came to him a wonderful vision. This vision the dreamer must needs write down in a great poem. Of some of the sights Dante saw, of some of the voices Dante heard as he dreamed, I am going to tell you.

In his poem, then, Dante tells us that as he dreamed he found himself in a dark

and fearsome wood. How he had got there he did not know, he knew only that he had lost his way.

No pathway could he find leading through the tangled thicket, no light could he see shining through the dense covering of the leaves. The straight way, if such there were, was lost.

Dante wrote about this wood in which he had lost his way long years after he had dreamed, yet as he wrote he shuddered with wellnigh as great a dread as he had felt in his sleep.

"Ah, how hard a thing it is," he says, "to tell what a wild, rough, and stubborn wood this was! Even to think of it renews my fear, so bitter is it that scarcely more bitter is death."

In his dream Dante wandered now here, now there, seeking to find a way of escape from the terrors of the wood.

As he stumbled blindly along, the

tangled branches scratched his face and bruised his hands, gnarled roots ensnared his feet, and, tripping him, made him fall headlong to the ground. When he arose to struggle on with failing heart and faltering steps, it was but to be pricked and goaded by thorns and thistles.

At length he reached the edge of the wood and found himself at the foot of a steep mountain. The sun had risen and her beams were stealing down the sides of the mountain, bathing it in light.

Ah, then he had spent all night in the terrible wood. Dante shivered in his dream, thinking of its terrors. But the sun was shining now, and in the sunlight hope arose in the wanderer's heart.

He would linger yet a little while to rest after the buffeting he had met with from the branches and the thorns, and then he would climb the mountain which towered high above him.

Alas! he had climbed but a little way when he found that his difficulties were not yet ended. Before him he was startled to see a leopard. Yet though he was startled, Dante was scarcely alarmed. He even watched the nimble, easy movements of the animal with delight; he admired its beautiful, gay spotted coat. Only when he found that the leopard was barring his way did the climber's pleasure change into annoyance.

More than once, indeed, Dante turned, meaning to retrace his steps, so determined seemed the leopard that he should ascend no higher.

Yet the sun was shining so brightly overhead, the air was so full of the joys and scents of springtime, that despite the leopard, Dante's heart grew brave.

Turn back! Nay, for that would be to encounter once again the terrors of the wood. With fresh hope Dante stepped

forward, upward.

But then indeed his courage failed, and little wonder was it that it failed. For there, advancing toward him, was a lion, a lion with its head thrown back, mad with hunger.

Even the bright spring morning seemed to lose its brightness and grow pale, as though it too were struck with fear at the sight of the monster.

Moreover, worse was to follow, for listen, close at the heels of the lion paced a gaunt she-wolf. So lean was she that her very leanness seemed to tell of her greed for food.

Backward and yet backward the traveller found himself forced by the terrible beasts, until once again he stood at the edge of the dark wood. The sunlight was playing on the mountain-sides, but its beams could not reach to where Dante stood, despairing, beaten.

If he could not climb the mountain would he ever reach the sunlight? In his dream it seemed to him that the shadows were thickening around him, that he was being drawn back into the dreaded wood.

Then, as he peered through the gathering gloom, Dante saw a dim figure coming toward him.

"Have mercy upon me!" he cried, "have mercy upon me, whosoever thou art, man or spirit!"

Out of the gloom came a voice, strange and hollow, as though through long silence it had forgotten how to speak.

"I am Virgil," said the strange, hoarse voice. When Dante heard these words his heart gave a great bound.

Virgil, the great Roman poet! There was none other, save only his lady Beatrice, whom he would so gladly see.

It was true that Virgil had died long

long years before Dante was born, yet he knew the Roman poet as friend knows friend. For he had read and studied all that Virgil had written, until much of the poet's wisdom had passed into his own soul. And for the Master, as Dante would often call Virgil, for the Master himself, he had both reverence and love.

In the world of dreams it seemed no strange thing to the traveller to meet the ancient poet. Timid with joy he welcomed him, then wistfully he cried, "Be thou my guide! O lead me out of the gloom; deliver me from the beasts that bar the path toward the sunlit mountain. See how they stand, fierce, watchful," and Dante pointed toward the terrible animals.

In truth Virgil had come to aid the wanderer. For Beatrice, leaving her abode in Paradise, had gone to the poet and begged him to hasten to the help of

her friend. Yet even Virgil had no power to drive away the lean she-wolf.

Therefore he answered:

"Thou must needs go by another path if thou wouldst escape from this gloomy wood. The beast which most thou fearest will suffer none to pass upward. Yea, she tears to pieces all who attempt to defy her.

"Yet if thou wilt follow me," cried Virgil, "I will lead thee by another way, a way which will lead thee into the world where spirits dwell.

"Thou shalt see the gloomy abode of those who, having done wrong deeds on earth, are now suffering in this other world for their evil-doing.

"Thereafter shalt thou reach the Mount of Purification, called Purgatory. Here dwell those who have sinned indeed, but who now are sorry for their sins and are being cleansed from all that

soiled them in their life on earth.

"If yet further thou wilt go, another spirit shall be thy guide, even Beatrice, who herself dwells, with those who were good and holy, in the very presence of the throne of God."

Dante listened with reverence to his Master's words; then as they ended, he cried, "Bard, lead thou on, I follow close behind."

And indeed, so fearful was Dante, lest he should again find himself alone in this strange land, that he made speed to plant his feet in the very footprints made by his Master as he moved onward.

CHAPTER 4
The Gate

As Dante set out with Virgil on his wonderful journey the shadows of evening fell around them. On earth the long day's work was ended, and weary men and women were laying down their burdens that they might rest until a new morning dawned. But for Dante there was to be no rest that night.

He had set out bravely, eagerly, as you know, to follow his guide, but ere he had taken many steps the pilgrim's courage began to ebb.

What if after all he was not worthy to undertake this pilgrimage through the Eternal land? What if he was not worthy to follow so wise a guide as the ancient

Roman poet? Ah, he had been rash to attempt a journey so full of unknown perils, Dante thought to himself, foolish even to dream of it.

Now this way, now that, his thoughts swayed him, until his purpose to follow Virgil grew weak, and he called out to him to stay his steps.

"Master," cried the perplexed traveller, "Master, if I venture on this journey I begin to fear that it will end in folly. Thou art wise and canst understand my doubts. Tell me, then, what shall I do?"

"Fear has fallen upon thy soul," answered his guide, "craven fear, which makes thee afraid to go forward. Yet if thou wilt hearken to my words thy terror may vanish, even as the mist vanishes before the sun."

But there was little need to bid Dante be attentive to the words of his guide, for even as Virgil began to speak the pilgrim

knew that it was of Beatrice, of his beloved lady, that he was to hear.

"Ere I came to thine aid," said the ancient poet, "I sat in my place in the eternal world. Suddenly I heard a voice, gentle, soft, call to me. Turning I saw a fair and radiant lady by my side. Her eyes shone brighter than the morning star as she begged me to go to the aid of her friend. He was in a desert place she said, bestead by sore dangers. Even now she feared lest she had sought my help too late.

"Hasten thou then to save him from his fate," cried the lady. "Thus shalt thou comfort me, for I am Beatrice, who thus entreat thine aid. If thou wilt do my will then shall thy name be often on my lips when I kneel at the feet of my dear Lord."

"As her words ceased the lady turned aside her head, and lo! tears were glistening in her starry eyes. Then did I

hasten to thee that I might do her behest. I have saved thee from the beasts, why dost thou now fear to follow me? Doth not courage spring up in thy heart since so blessed a lady, even Beatrice, careth for thy safety?"

And indeed Dante had forgotten all his fears. His beloved lady had thought of him, had sent to rescue him from danger! What room was there left in his heart for fear?

In a loud undaunted voice he cried, "O full of pity she who thus succoured me, and courteous thou who so obeyed her call. No longer do I dally with vain fears. Lead on, O Master, for I follow with unfaltering steps."

Thus in steadfast mood did Dante follow his guide along the dark and wooded path.

Ere they had journeyed far they came to a large gateway. Over the gate was

engraved an inscription which the pilgrim stayed to read.

Surely never a sadder line has been written than the last line which Dante read as he stood thus without the gate.

"All hope abandon, ye who enter here." As the words sank into his mind he glanced timidly at his guide. Virgil would surely not lead him within the gloomy portal.

"This gate," said his guide, "is the entrance into the Inferno." Now Inferno is the Italian name for Hell.

"Master," said Dante, "these are hard words that are inscribed above the entrance."

Virgil saw the fear that was in Dante's heart steal up over his pale cheeks, and he answered:

"Here thou must leave distrust behind thee," but as he spoke he cast a look of encouragement upon his follower, and

stretching out his hand held Dante's firmly in his own. Thus the poet entered the Inferno.

Even as he stepped within the portal, groans and cries seemed to fill the air. So doleful were the sounds that the pilgrim himself wept for very pity. Around him pressed a great crowd of spirits as they hurried hither and thither, wringing their hands or smiting them loudly together.

"What race is this, O Master?" cried Dante, bewildered by the tumult around him.

"These," answered Virgil, "are those who, when they lived on earth, were too indolent to be either good or bad. They let the years slip by unheeding, serving neither God nor the Evil one, but thinking only of themselves."

Then as Dante watched them, with less pity now than scorn in his eyes, he saw that many of the crowd were rushing

after a banner that floated aimlessly in the air. And he knew that just in such a way on earth their empty lives had drifted, now here, now there.

One spirit amid the crowd Dante recognised. He had been a simple priest until the people raised him to the high honour of Pope.

But Pope Celestine had no wish to face the duties and the dangers of so great a position, and ere long, Dante tells us, he, "from cowardice, made the great refusal." Slipping from the Pope's chair he resigned his post that he might live his life in lazy ease.

But here, on the outskirts of the Inferno, Virgil would not linger. He hastened his companion onward through the crowd of spirits, until they came to the bank of a river named Acheron.

There by the side of the river stood another group of spirits, waiting, watch-



For ever and for ever he must ply
his bark from shore to shore.

ing. Dante too watched, and ere long he saw coming towards them a boat, in which sat a ferryman. He was an old, white-haired man named Charon. His was a task that never ended, for ever and for ever he must ply his bark from shore to shore.

At Charon's approach the crowd of downcast spirits huddled more close together.

Then the old ferryman mocked at them with cruel words, telling them that he would row them across the river to a land from which they would never return, nor need they ever expect to see the light of the sun shining upon the other shore. Henceforth they would dwell in darkness, while bitter cold or burning heat would torment their spirits.

The miserable crowd, wailing as they listened to Charon's words, stepped into the boat, which was now fastened to the

bank.

Nor dared any of them linger, for should they do so, well they knew that the old ferryman would seize his oar, and beating them with it, would speedily drive them into the bark.

Now when Charon's eyes fell upon Dante, who was still dwelling in the body which was his on earth, his anger knew no bounds. Sternly he bade his strange visitor to begone, for he was used to ferry only evil spirits across the river.

But as Dante did not stir from the spot on which he stood, Charon shouted to him again to begone.

"By some other passage must thou reach the opposite side," he cried; "a swifter, lighter bark must carry thee across."

"Nay," said Virgil, speaking now for the first time since they had reached the river-bank, "nay, anger not thyself,

Charon, for it is willed in Heaven that thou shalt take this pilgrim across the river in thy bark."

Sullenly, on hearing these words, the old man made room for his strange passenger, and Dante, with Virgil by his side, entered the boat. Charon then began to row toward the other bank.

"Son," said Virgil to Dante, "wonder not at the ferryman's rough words. Never before hath a good spirit passed across this river, therefore it is that Charon dislikes to have thee in his bark."

As Virgil ceased speaking a flash of lightning lit up the gloomy region, then the ground around them trembled violently. Dante, over-powered with fear, lay in the bottom of the boat as though sunk in sleep. Nought more did he know of the passage across the river.

When at length he was roused by a terrible peal of thunder, he was no longer

in Charon's boat, but standing on the edge of a great abyss.

This borderland of the Inferno was called Limbo, and in this place Dante saw some strange sights, heard some strange voices.

CHAPTER 5
The Green Meadow

Limbo was well known to the ancient Roman poet, for it was there that he himself abode.

The Inferno was a great gulf or pit, and round this pit were many different circles in which different sins were punished.

Now Limbo was the first circle, but in it dwelt, not those who were being punished, but those who had lived before Christ came to earth, those whom we often call heathen. Thus, as you may imagine, many great and noble men, whose names you have often heard, were there.

As Dante gazed into the dark abyss he shuddered, then turning to Virgil he

asked him if any who entered Limbo were ever delivered from its gloom.

"Once," answered Virgil, "a powerful One entered Limbo, a powerful One wearing a crown as sign of victory." He had drawn with Him many out of the circle of Limbo. Adam, Eve, Abel, Noah, Moses, Abraham, King David, and many another whose names you have often heard, did Christ (for it was He who in His great might entered the Inferno) take with Him out of the shades into the light of God.

"And now will we pass into this gloomy circle," said Virgil. "Follow close after me as I lead the way."

As he spoke Dante, glancing at his Master, saw that he had grown pale.

"If thou, my Master, art afraid, how dare I go further!" he cried.

"Not fear but pity made my cheeks grow pale," said the poet, and he pressed

on into the first ledge that circled the abyss.

Here there broke no sound of weeping on the pilgrim's ear, only the air seemed to tremble with the sighs of many souls.

As they pushed their way through the dimness, Dante saw in the distance a bright flame burning. The flame lit up one part of the gloomy region.

"What favoured ones dwell in this brighter domain?" he wondered.

As though in answer to his thought, Virgil told Dante that here dwelt those who on earth had won great fame by their work.

Even as his Master spoke, Dante saw four mighty spirits turn their steps toward them.

As they drew near, one of them saluted Dante's guide, crying, "Honour to the bard who returns to us again."

Now in his dream Dante's heart leaped with gladness, for he knew that he was in the presence of those who had been great on earth.

Then as Virgil told his follower the names of the four who had come to welcome him, Dante bowed his head in all humility. He was standing before four of the world's greatest poets.

He who had greeted Virgil came forward first, holding a keen sword in his right hand. This was Homer, the Greek poet, who had written about the Siege of Troy in a book so full of adventures that some day you will wish to read it. Moreover Homer has been called the sovereign poet, the "Lord of Highest Song," and such a one you would certainly wish to know.

Following Homer were Horace, Ovid, and Lucan, three Latin poets. They talked eagerly with Virgil, and when they

heard that his follower was a poet, even as was each of them, they beckoned to him to join them.

As he approached the group they greeted him courteously, and he shared in the converse of these famous spirits. That he should, even for a short time, be admitted to this group and be made, as he tells us, "the sixth amid so learned a band," was joy enough to console Dante for all the terrors through which he had passed.

Still talking, the six poets turned and walked toward the lighted region of Limbo.

We wonder of what these strange companions would speak, but Dante, when he comes to write his great poem does not tell us. He has not forgotten, but he tells us only that silence is fitting. It may be that he thought that those who read his poem would scarce value as they

should the thoughts of these great men.

Onward still the six poets moved, until they reached the foot of a magnificent castle. The castle was surrounded by seven high walls and a stream, clear and sparkling.

The little company crossed over the stream as though they were walking on dry land. Then, passing through the seven gates, Dante saw before him a fair meadow. Never, not even in his own beautiful Florence, had Dante seen grass so green, flowers so rare, as he now saw waving in the light.

Seated on the green grass were many more of the world's great men. The pilgrim saw that they all bore upon them the sign of their nobility. When they moved they moved without haste and with an air of authority; when they spoke, which was but seldom, Dante heard that, "all their words were tuneful

sweet."

If I were to tell you the names of all the famous men and women whom Dante saw that day in the beautiful meadow, the list would be a long one.

Some there were who had gained their great renown on the battlefield, as Hector and Æneas, who both fought in the Siege of Troy, and also Brutus, who was a Roman patriot. There was, too, Saladin, the Sultan of the Turks, who had been the terror of all good Christians when he lived on earth.

Dante, as he looked at Saladin, remembered that it was told of him, that when he lay dying, he bade his people bury him with no worldly honours. Only his shirt was to be fastened as a flag to the point of a lance and to be carried thus before him as a standard. A priest, with plain vestments, was to go before the standard crying aloud that all might hear,

"Saladin, conqueror of the East, of all the greatness and riches he had in his life, carrieth not with him anything more than his shirt."

But not alone those who had won fame by the strength of their own right arm sat in the peaceful meadowland.

Those too were there whose pen had been to them a weapon dearer than any sword, however keen, could be.

Plato, Socrates, Aristotle, with grave eyes and lofty brows, were there, happy in the companionship which they had never enjoyed on earth.

Cornelia, the Roman matron, was there, she who is better known as the "Mother of the Gracchi," because of her great love for her two sons, Tiberius and Caius Gracchus.

When they were still little boys a lady one day came to see Cornelia their mother.

The lady was rich and very proud of her rings, her necklaces and all her other ornaments. She had shown these to Cornelia as they sat and talked together, and then suddenly she said, "Show me now thine ornaments."

Tiberius and Caius had just come into the room, and Cornelia, putting her arms around them, answered her rich friend quietly. "These are my jewels," she said.

But I must not stay to tell you more stories of the great men and women Dante saw in this portion of Limbo.

The poet himself was not allowed to linger long in the beautiful meadow, for before him was still a long, long journey.

Homer, Horace, Ovid, and Lucan now joined the other spirits, while Virgil lead Dante away, where the air was no longer quiet, away from light into darkness.

CHAPTER 6
The Dismal Swamp

Leaving the first circle of the Inferno Virgil now led Dante down into the second. Though it was smaller in size than Limbo, yet it held within it more of suffering and despair.

At the entrance stood a monster called Minos. Half man half beast he seemed to Dante as he gazed, now upon the face, which was twisted into a horrible grin, now upon the tail with which he lashed his victims.

For as the spirits flitted before him, Minos passed sentence upon them. Were they doomed to punishment in the second circle, the terrible judge gave them two strokes with his tail. If it was the

third, fourth, fifth, sixth circle in which they were to dwell, three, four, five, six times would the dread lash descend upon them.

Or, as there were nine circles in the Inferno, there were times when seven, eight, or nine strokes fell upon the unhappy victims before they knew to which circle they were condemned.

Now as Dante continued to gaze upon Minos, the monster stayed his task to shout angrily to the stranger that he should not enter the second circle.

"Beware that thou trust not him who seeks to lead thee hither," he cried. "Be not deceived, for it is no easy matter to enter here, though the entrance is wide."

"Thou canst not bar the pilgrim's way," said Virgil, as he heard the angry words of Minos. Then, even as he had subdued Charon, the old white-haired ferryman, so now he quieted the monster

Minos.

"Torment thyself not," he continued, "for it is willed in Heaven that my follower should pass through thy domain. And in Heaven, as thou dost know, both will and power are one."

Then Minos, grinning more horribly than ever, let the poets enter.

In the second circle a great storm was raging. The wind blew the spirits hither and thither, knocking them helpless to the ground, from whence arose groans as of a sea risen and tempest-tossed.

Here, as in Limbo, were many of whom Dante had read when he studied history in his beautiful city of Florence.

Cleopatra, a great Queen of Egypt, was here; Helen of Sparta too, for whose sake a great war, called the Trojan war, was waged. Dido, the Queen of Carthage, was here. It was in a great poem written by Virgil himself that Dante had

read about this Queen. As he looked at her now he remembered how well she had loved the hero Æneas. So well indeed had she loved him that when the hero sailed away to win renown, leaving her behind at Carthage, she commanded a great funeral pyre to be built, and flinging herself upon it, was burned to death.

Virgil pointed out these spirits to Dante and many more. Name after name he recalled to his follower, telling him too their history, but by the time his Master had told him, it might be a thousand, Dante's attention began to wander.

With a sudden quick interest he was watching two out of all the crowd of spirits. So frail they seemed to him, so fond, even as doves driven before the wind, yet ever desiring to wing their flight homeward to some sweet long lost nest.

"Bard," cried Dante, "fain would I

speak with these, who, borne by the wind, come so swiftly toward us."

Virgil bade him call to them as they drew nearer.

"O wearied spirits," cried Dante, "come hither to speak with us, if this ye may do unhindered."

Paolo and Francesca, for these were the names of the spirits to whom Dante called, stayed their flight. They were Italians, Dante's own countrymen, whom he might easily have known on earth, for he was no longer a boy when they were put to death.

"Since thou hast pity for our evil plight," they answered, "we would pray for thy peace were the Great King our friend." Then as they told their sad story Dante wept for pity, and ere they ended, so great was his compassion, that he sank fainting to the ground. Thus grievous to him seemed their woeful tale.

When Dante opened his eyes once more he found that the wind-swept spirits were no longer within sight, while he himself was with Virgil in the third circle. Here the greedy, the gluttonous were being punished. As their sin was a horrible one, so also was their doom.

They were forced, these greedy ones, to lie in the mire, while on them descended an endless storm of hail and snow and heavy rain.

Cerberus, a dog with three huge heads, in which glared eyes crimson with rage, Cerberus trampled upon these wretched spirits, bit them, barked at them, until they would fain have lost their power to feel, to hear.

When Cerberus saw the two poets it seemed that they would be destroyed. For the huge dog opened wide his jaws and seemed ready to spring upon them. But Virgil, stooping to the ground, lifted

great handfuls of earth which he flung into the beast's mouth, and thus they passed him by in safety.

As the two poets moved onward, one of the spirits raised himself from the mire and with a cry recognised Dante. This was Ciacco, which is the Italian name for hog, and by this name he had been called in loathing of his greed.

Ciacco was a Florentine, though indeed he had never been a worthy citizen of so fair a city as Florence.

Dante, though filled with horror at his sin of gluttony, stopped at his cry, and for a short time they talked together.

Then Virgil called to his follower to leave Ciacco, and together they passed on into the fourth circle.

At its entrance, Pluto, the god of riches, was stationed, muttering foolish words in a hoarse voice, which made Dante fear.

But Virgil turned upon the monster crying, "Peace," and at his voice Pluto fell to the ground and the poets passed into his domain unharmed.

It was a strange sight which met Dante's eyes here, where both those who loved money too well and those who spent it too lavishly were punished.

The misers and spendthrifts were divided into two companies, which ceaselessly hurled great stones against each other.

Those who had hoarded their money cried as they dashed their stones against the spendthrifts, "Why cast away?" to which the spendthrifts ever answered, "Why hold fast?" And this they said in mockery of each other's actions when on earth.

But time was fleeting and Virgil hurried Dante on towards the fifth circle, in which lay a dismal swamp, the waters of

which were thick with mud. Sluggishly the waters of the swamp ran into a lake called Styx.

Under the marsh Dante could see the forms of innumerable spirits, who struck and beat at one another, while their faces were distorted with rage.

These were they who on earth were overcome by anger and pride. Fixed in the muddy swamp, they cry out in their misery, "Sad once were we, in the sweet air made gladsome by the sun, because in our hearts we carried angry tempers. Now in these murky waters are we sad."

The two poets walked along the side of the dismal swamp, until they came to a tower, built on the edge of the lake called Styx.

As they stood beside the tower, they saw flame signals flash from the battlements, and soon these were answered by the same signals from a tower on the

farther side of the lake.

No sooner was this done, than the poets saw a boat coming swiftly over the water, rowed by a fierce ferryman, who seemed eager to greet some fated spirit.

"Phlegyas, Phlegyas," cried Virgil, "the prey for which thou hopest awaits thee not. Thou shalt ferry us across the lake, but we come not to tarry in thy dark abode."

The ferryman concealed his wrath as well as he was able, while Virgil stepped into his boat, bidding Dante follow closely at his side. Only when he, the living man, entered the boat, did it seem weighted as it should be. Then swift as an arrow Phlegyas sped the boat across the lake.

In this lake, which was part of the fifth circle, dwelt those who on earth had been proud and quarrelsome.

Now as the boat went on its way, one

of these spirits who was being punished for his pride and angry temper rose from the water and cried to Dante, "Who art thou, who comest thither while still clothed in thy body?"

"I come but to pass through this region," answered Dante. "But who art thou thus disguised by the mud of this dismal lake?"

"One, as thou seest, who mourns," answered the spirit sadly.

Then all at once Dante recognised the man. He had been a Florentine noted for his pride and quarrelsome ways. In his pride he had often ridden through the narrow streets of Florence, with his horse's feet shod with silver. And as he rode he would carelessly crush against the walls man, woman, or child who crossed his path. By the people he was named Argenti, which means silver, because his horse's feet were shod with

that metal.

"I know thee well," cried Dante, but in his voice was scorn and loathing of the man he remembered.

Argenti's evil temper was roused by Dante's tone, and he stretched out his cruel hands toward the bark. Perchance he hoped to drag his fellow-citizen down with himself into the mire.

But ere he could find vent for his anger Virgil thrust his hands away and pushed him down again into the water. Then turning to his follower he flung his arms around his neck and kissed his cheek, telling him that the scorn he had shown to Argenti was well deserved.

"Master," answered Dante, "fain would I behold that spirit plunged more deeply in the mire, before we reach the other side."

Dante's words strike a chill to our heart, so harsh they seem, so cruel, but

to his guide they were nor unpleasing. And almost at once a tumult arose in the waters, and as the boat sped onward the two poets heard voices crying, "To Argenti, to Argenti."

Looking back, they could dimly see angry spirits rushing up to the proud Florentine and dragging him down, down into the depths of the lake.

CHAPTER 7
The Closed Gates

Meanwhile the boat drew near to the city of Dis. Through this city the poets must pass ere they reached the lower circles of the Inferno.

From fortress and from castle, lights glowed dully through the dimness, then flashed and flared as though the city were a flame of fire.

Phlegyas steered his boat into the moat which surrounded the city, and Virgil and Dante were close beneath the great walls, strong as iron, which guarded the entrance into Dis. Now the city of Dis was in the sixth circle of the Inferno.

It seemed impossible to find an opening by which to enter the city, but

Phlegyas, nothing daunted, rowed round and round the walls, until at length he found a spot on which to land his passengers.

"Go forth," he cried to them roughly, "go forth, the entrance is here!"

The two poets thus bidden landed, but the gates of the city were closed, so there they stood, outside the iron walls, looking up at the towers which glowed red as with fire.

Even as they gazed upwards, thousands of angry spirits crowded to the edge of the turrets, and looking down, cried angrily, "Who is this living man who dares to enter the realms of the dead?"

Virgil, knowing that their wrath was ready to fall upon Dante, begged to talk with them alone, and to this they agreed.

"Yea, come thou alone," they answered the Roman poet; then pointing to his follower, their voices rose again in

hate. "Let him go," they screamed, "him who hath been so bold as to enter these regions before his time. Let him find his way himself out of these climes, but as for thee, thou shalt tarry with us."

You can imagine Dante's dismay as he listened to these words. Even with his guide the way was hard and perilous, without him he would certainly be lost.

"O my Master," he cried, "desert me not! If we may not go onward let us retrace our steps together."

"Fear not," said his guide. "Await me here, for I will never leave thee alone in this dread world."

Then Virgil walked onward and the spirits rushed down to the gates, opened them, and came out to meet the Roman poet.

Dante could not hear their voices, but from where he stood he saw that after Virgil had spoken a little while, the

spirits turned and hastened back within the gates, leaving the poet still standing without.

Slowly, with downcast eyes, Virgil came towards Dante. As his follower watched him and saw how crestfallen, how hopeless was his Master's appearance, his heart misgave him. Yet though Virgil's looks were despondent his words were brave.

He assured Dante that the demons should yet be vanquished, that indeed one "whose hand was strong" was already on his way to give them aid.

After these words the Master stood listening, silent, expectant. Then he murmured to himself, "We must win this fight, we cannot do otherwise. Yet, how long, how long it seems ere the promised help arrive."

Thus as they stood waiting, Dante raised his eyes again to the summit of a

tower. More terrible than ever was the sight that met his eyes.

There, amid the flames, stood three women, women so fearsome that, long before, they had been named the Furies. Around their waists twined a serpent with three heads, while coils of vipers, instead of locks of hair, curled around their brows.

So loudly did the Furies shriek, so cruelly did they smite themselves, that Dante clung in terror to his Master. As they saw his fear the Furies mocked and cried, "Hasten, Medusa, hasten, thou shalt change this mortal into stone."

Now Medusa, upon whom the Furies called, was a woman who had this dread power. She could turn into stone any one who but so much as glanced at her.

When Virgil heard the three Furies call for Medusa, he knew the danger in which his follower stood. He immediate-

ly bade Dante turn round, so that even should the awful face of the Gorgon, as Medusa was called, appear, he would see nothing of her.

Then, to make his follower even more secure from the fate which threatened him, his guide laid his own hands across Dante's eyes.

But now, in the moment of their utmost need, a strange sound broke upon their ears. The waters of the lake had risen and the waves crashed loudly upon the shore as though driven onward by a mighty wind.

At the sound Virgil withdrew his hands from Dante's face and bade him look across the lake. And as Dante obeyed, his fears all took flight, and he felt safe and glad as a little child.

For over the dismal waters, moving with unwet feet as though He were on dry land, came a mighty One. His left

hand was raised to brush aside the thick fog from His face, but never for a moment did His footsteps linger.

As He drew nearer Dante could see how great His majesty, how holy His anger. Thus when Virgil bade the poet to bend before this Holy Presence, Dante was swiftly on his knees, his head bowed in all humility.

From their towers the spirits too saw the approach of the Heavenly Messenger, and fled, that they might hide themselves from His Presence.

When He reached the gates the Holy One touched them with a wand and they flew open wide. Standing on the threshold of the city the Messenger rebuked the spirits, then without a word to the two poets, He turned as though beset with many cares, and Virgil and Dante saw Him cross again to the other shore.

As He vanished from sight the poets

turned and entered the wide-open gates of the city of Dis.

Virgil and Dante were now in the sixth circle, where the violent were being punished.

They looked around them, perhaps expecting to see streets and houses in the city. Instead they saw only a desolate waste, throughout which tombs were scattered. From these tombs, as from the towers, flames burst fiercely forth.

Were there spirits suffering in these flaming sepulchres? Dante wondered.

Even as he turned to his guide, the question on his lips, a figure raised itself from out of one of the tombs, and the poet beheld Farinata, a noble of his own city, Florence.

Farinata had been a great soldier, and his prowess had more than once delivered Florence from great evil.

Thus it happened that when the

party to which he belonged was in power, it purposed to destroy Florence and all its beautiful buildings. Among all those who loved the city, there was found none that day brave enough to raise his voice on its behalf save Farinata. He boldly forbade the cruel sentence to be carried out, saying that he, for one, had endured many hardships and fought many battles that he might be able to dwell in peace in his own city. And, for he was a noble and a famous soldier, his voice was heard and obeyed. Florence was saved from destruction.

It was with this man then that Dante talked in the city of Dis, talked of that other city which was so dear to them both.

But their words were broken in upon by another spirit, who was the father of one of Dante's great friends. He begged the poet to tell him of his son's welfare,

which Dante gladly did ere he was hurried onward by his guide.

The journey that lay before them was still a long one, and Virgil led Dante out of the sixth circle into a deep valley.

CHAPTER 8
The Living Forest

Climbing a steep mountain Dante and his guide reached the verge of a precipice. On the edge lay a monster named Minotaur, guarding the descent into the seventh circle.

With taunts and mocking words Virgil angered the creature until in impotent fury it withdrew.

"Run to the passage," cried the Bard, seeing that the entrance was for the moment unguarded. And then, as Dante obeyed, a terrible descent began. The two poets climbed over rocks, crept round crags, while huge boulders, set in motion by Dante's feet, dashed down into the abyss before their eyes.

At length they arrived at the foot of the precipice in safety. Before them flowed a red, red river, and in this river all those who had slain others upon earth were now forced to dwell.

Yet, lest they should try to escape from the stream, thousands of Centaurs paced along the banks, armed with sharp arrows. These Centaurs were strange creatures, half man half horse, and had often been heard of in the early ages of the world.

They aimed their arrows at the condemned spirits, should they ever venture head or shoulders out of the red river, further than their punishment allowed.

Seeing Dante and his guide, three of these Centaurs rushed toward them, their arrows strung ready for flight.

"Stand!" cried one of the creatures, "and tell from whence ye come. If ye come near I draw my bow."

But Virgil spoke courteously to the Centaurs and told them how Dante had been entrusted to his care by one of the blest spirits. Moreover, he begged from them a guide, which was granted to him without a murmur.

Along the bank of the red river the Centaur guide led the two poets. As they passed onward Dante saw some spirits who were in such deep water that it reached even to their brows.

The Centaur paused to tell the poets the names of these, names, many of them, renowned for their wicked deeds.

A little further along the water grew less deep, reaching only to the throat of the spirits, and so it continued to grow more and more shallow until they came to a ford. Here the river merely lapped the feet of the spirits or of those who passed over it. Virgil and Dante, led by the Centaur, crossed by the ford over to

the other side. Here their guide left them, and recrossing the stream went back along the bank of the red, red river.

But to the poets the way seemed as bewildering here as on the other side of the stream. They found themselves indeed at the edge of a strange forest, a forest unlike any Dante had known on earth.

No pathway was there, nor even a narrow track worn by passersby. Leaves there were in plenty, but among them glistened no green ones; all were dull, dead. The branches of the trees were gnarled and crooked, and on them fruit was there none, but thorns there were, many and poisonous.

No song of joyous birds echoed through this sunless wood, but Harpies sat upon the gnarled trees and wailed drearily.

Now a Harpy was a monster with the

wings and claws of a bird, with the body of a woman, and with a face pale from hunger. Little wonder was it that Dante shrank from entering so dark and dismal a forest.

But as he followed his guide Dante was bewildered by other sounds than the wailing of the Harpies. It seemed to him that all around the air was full of the sobbing and the sighing of human souls.

The poet looked around him, peered behind the trees and through the branches, yet saw no one.

Then said his Master, "Pluck one of these brown branches and thou wilt soon understand what now bewilders and dismays thee."

Dante put out his hand as he was bidden and plucked a bough from a wild thorn tree.

No sooner had he done so than a strange thing happened.

The thorn tree itself began to speak in a piteous voice.

"Why doth thou tear me?" it wailed, while drops of brown blood oozed out of its trunk. "Is there no pity in thy heart that thou pluckest my leaves? Once these trees which thou seest around thee were men. Learn therefore to treat us with forbearance."

The voice died away, but tears now fell from the spot from which Dante had wrenched the branch.

In haste the poet dropped the twig which he held in his hand. Now, indeed, he understood.

The trees were in very truth human beings, who, because on earth they had slain their own bodies, were being punished in this terrible way. The sobs and sighs he had heard were in very truth those of these unhappy spirits.

Virgil too was sorry for the pain that

he had caused, and begged to know who thus pled for pity. "Tell us thy name," said the Master, "and my follower shall speak of thee when he returns to earth. And by his words shall he atone for his unwitting roughness to thee here."

"I am Piero delle Vigne," answered the tree, in a tone of great grief.

Dante knew the man well. He had been one of the people, but by his eloquence and learning had risen to fame, and had become the Chancellor of a great Emperor.

So greatly had the Emperor trusted and honoured Piero that the courtiers had grown jealous.

They therefore wrote letters to an enemy of the Emperor, and to these letters they signed Piero's name. Then in their cruel jealousy the courtiers had sent the letters to the Emperor that he might believe that Piero had betrayed his

secrets to his enemy.

And the wicked plan was successful. Piero's master read the letters, and seeing that they were signed with his favourite's name, he at once thought that Piero was a traitor and commanded that his eyes should be put out.

Disgraced and in despair, through no fault of his own, Piero's courage had failed, and he no longer cared to live. In his cowardice he put himself to death. It was for this sin that he was now a human tree in this strange forest.

Dante was still talking to Piero and thinking sadly of his story when he was interrupted by a loud noise.

Trampling down bushes, knocking off twigs and leaves in their desperate haste, Dante saw two spirits, fleeing as from some great terror. Swiftly behind them came a band of gaunt, fleet mastiffs.

One of the spirits, named Jacopo, as he ran, stumbled against a tree and fell, bruising the trunk and shaking off its leaves as he did so.

Then the mastiffs rushed upon Jacopo, and rent him in pieces.

Meanwhile, the tree which had been so rudely shaken moaned bitterly, "O Jacopo, Jacopo, why didst thou stumble against me? Sorely hast thou wounded me!"

Dante, full of pity for the spirit, stooped, and lifting up his scattered leaves, restored them to the stricken tree.

Leaving the forest, Virgil and Dante now reached a dreary plain. They were in another division of the seventh circle, where those who had been violent against the great God Himself were punished.

On the edge of this desolate plain the

two poets stayed their steps. Thousands of spirits were here, weeping, weeping. Some lay on the ground prostrate, some crouched close together, some paced ceaselessly up and down the plain.

Upon these wretched spirits a great storm was falling, a storm of fire-flakes, which they tried in vain to thrust aside with their hands.

As the two poets passed along, one of these spirits recognised Dante, and catching hold of his robe, he cried out, "O marvel! is it thou?"

The poet bent down to see the face of the spirit who thus held him, and in wonder he beheld his own old tutor, who had also been his friend. Sadly he said, "Ser Brunetto, art thou here?"

"Let me walk with thee a little way," pleaded his old friend, and to this Dante gladly consented.

Together they paced along the fire-

flaked plain, talking of the old days in Florence, the old studies. Yet, over all the joy of meeting, Dante felt the shadow of great pain that Brunetto should have done such evil that he must endure so great a punishment.

Ere they parted, his tutor begged Dante to take care of the great work he had written on earth. This was a book called "The Treasure." And we can well believe that Dante would gladly promise to do so, as he said farewell to his old friend and tutor Ser Brunetto.

CHAPTER 9
The Monster Geryon

The deeper Dante penetrated into the Inferno, the more terrible it grew.

Virgil had now brought his follower to a fearful chasm, at the foot of which lay Malebolge, where fraud and deceit were punished. Malebolge was in the eighth circle.

Over the chasm fell a stream that plunged into the gulf beneath with a deafening din.

Virgil bade Dante loosen the girdle which was round his waist and give it to him. Then when his follower had obeyed, Virgil flung the girdle down into the abyss, and stood watching, watching.

Slowly, as he gazed, out of the gloom,

a shape came swimming upward, a shape which, Dante tells us, might well have made the stoutest heart fearful.

The name of the terrible monster that approached was Geryon. Virgil signed to him to come to the land, and Geryon obeyed, laying his head and body on the edge of the precipice, while his tail still swung over the gulf up which he had ascended.

Sending Dante farther along the plain, Virgil strove to pacify the monster, and persuade him to carry Dante and himself down into the abyss.

He succeeded in his plan, and when Dante came back to the spot where he had left Virgil, it was to find him standing there no longer, but already seated on the back of Geryon, the formidable monster.

"Be thou brave!" the Master cried to his dismayed follower. "Be thou brave,

and mount, for down into this abyss must we descend. Mount thou before me, that so the Geryon's tail shall leave thee unharmed."

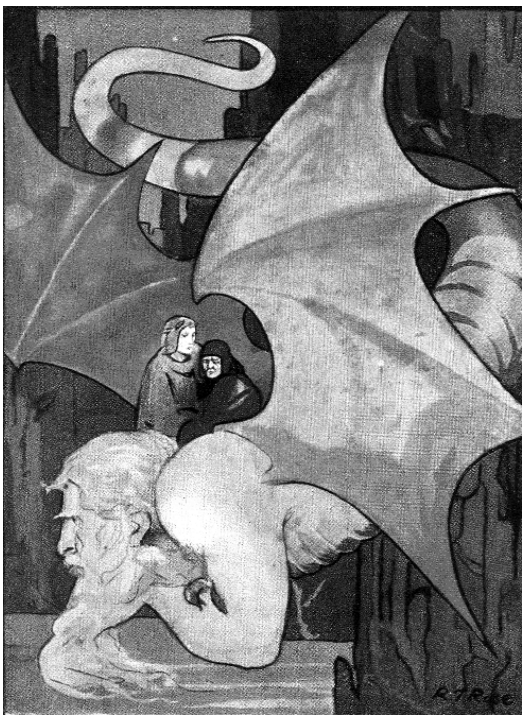
One had no need to be a coward to tremble before this new peril. Even the bravest might well quail if ordered to mount so fearsome a steed, and Dante shivered as though seized by an ague fit.

Then, ashamed thus to fail in courage before his Master, the poet conquered his fear and leaped upon Geryon's huge shoulders.

Fain would he have cried to Virgil, "Look that thou clasp me firm," yet his trembling lips refused to form the words.

But words were needless, for no sooner had Dante seated himself in front of his Master than he, clasping his charge firmly in his arms, bade the monster start on his perilous descent.

Slowly Geryon moved out from the



He plunged into the gulf.

land, and turning, until his head was where his tail had been, he plunged into the gulf.

Beating the air with his huge claws, Geryon sailed down, down, until at length he landed his burden on a rock at the foot of the abyss.

Darkness and wailing surrounded the two poets who had now reached the lower depths of the Inferno, called, as I have told you, Malebolge.

Malebolge means ugly pits or holes, and as Virgil and Dante walked along a rough and difficult path, they looked down into many of these holes. In each they saw many thousands of spirits who were suffering for the deceits and frauds they had practised on earth.

Virgil even took Dante into one of these pits, and so terrible were the sights he saw that the poet wept bitterly.

When the Master saw his dismay he

caught his charge up in his arms and carried him, as though he were a child, up to the cliff that spanned the gulf between the pits of Malebolge.

In the next hole into which the poets looked those were punished who, on earth, had cheated with money which belonged to the State or with that which belonged to their friends.

Those guilty of this sin were plunged into a ditch of boiling pitch, from which there seemed no escape. For demons, with hooks in their hands, stood over the pit and dragged the spirits back, did they try to flee from their punishment.

As Dante gazed down at the black pitch he heard Virgil give a sharp cry. Turning round he saw a demon behind him, on whose shoulders sat one who had been a cheat, and as Dante turned, he saw the demon throw his victim into the ditch and rush back for yet another.

Then his Master bade Dante hide behind a rock, while he went forward to speak to the demons alone, even as he had done before the gates of Dis.

As the Roman poet advanced, the demons sprang toward him, their hooks poised, ready to seize a new prey.

But Virgil faced them without flinching, and bade them not dare to touch him, at the same time demanding that he might speak with one of their number.

Cowed by the courage of the Roman, the demons sent Malaconda to listen to his words.

"Malaconda," said Virgil, "it is Heaven's decree that I should lead another through this wilderness. Hinder us not."

Then the demon dropped his weapons at his feet and submitted to Virgil's power.

Turning to the other demons Malaconda said, "We have no power to strike

this man."

When Virgil heard these words he called to Dante, who was still crouching behind a rock, to come to him.

As Dante moved swiftly toward his Master the demons pressed around him, and the poet feared lest after all Malaconda had no power to stay their wrath.

He did indeed reach Virgil's side in safety, yet ever and anon he heard the demons whisper one to the other, "Wilt thou that I touch him with my hook?" And others would answer, "Even so, even so, miss not thy aim."

But Malaconda too had heard the whispers of his demons and bade them stay their mischievous plans. Then, calling ten, he sent them with Virgil and Dante to show the poets the way by which they should go.

Dante could scarce follow their guides, so fearful was he of their ways, for

as they walked along they baited the miserable spirits with their hooks.

Then as one of them escaped from his tormentors, the demons, seeing no other prey, turned upon Dante with threatening looks.

The poet saw them drawing closer and yet more close to him, their hooks ready to entangle him. Escape seemed impossible, for before him lay a steep and rocky precipice.

At the sight of his peril, however, Virgil flew to his follower's aid.

Listen to the beautiful words in which Dante, writing his poem in after years, tells of the love and tenderness of his Master.

"Suddenly," wrote Dante, "my leader took hold upon me, as a mother woke by the noise of fire, seeing the flames near her, seizes her child, and flies, nor waits to think that only her nightgown covers

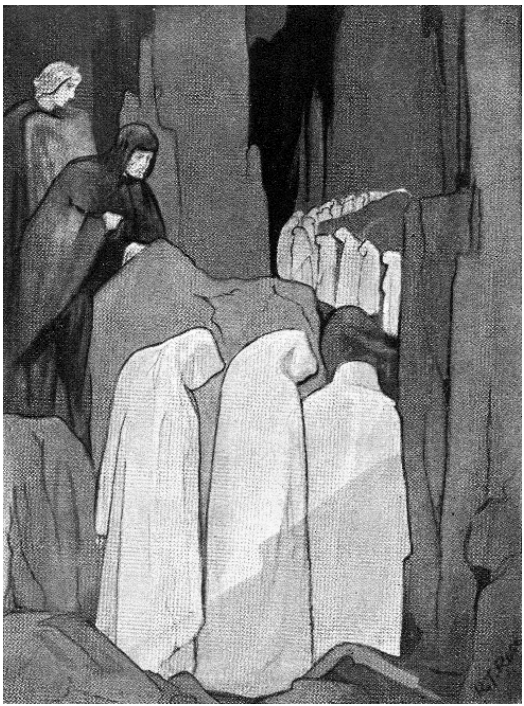
her."

Virgil, indeed, bearing Dante safe in his arms, sped swiftly down the steep precipice and the demons were left far behind.

Now in the next pit the poets saw a strange procession of Hypocrites. These "painted people," as Dante calls them, had large cloaks flung around their shoulders. These cloaks had hoods such as monks would wear. The Hypocrites wore them drawn over their heads, and they looked bright, being overlaid with gold, but in reality they were made of lead and their weight was hard to bear.

Indeed so heavy were they that those who wore them could walk but slowly and painfully, and as they moved along they wept. Also they seemed faint as though from toil.

Virgil and Dante seemed to these Hypocrites to be walking at a great pace,



A strange procession of hypocrites.

though, in truth, their steps were slow.

Two of the spirits besought them to pause until they reached them. Then as the poets lingered they drew near, and begged Dante to tell them who he was who had entered the dwelling of the Hypocrites.

Dante answered that he was a Florentine who had been born and bred in the beautiful city of Florence; that he still wore the body which had been his since he was born though he was passing through the world of spirits. "But tell me who are ye?" he added.

"We were joyous Friars," answered one of the spirits sadly. And Dante needed to be told no more, for well did he know the order to which they belonged.

Clad in robes of white, with sable mantles and arms on which were wrought a red cross with two stars, the joyous Friars had often walked along the

narrow streets of Florence.

Their work was to care for widows and orphans who had none other to protect them and their property. But the robes of the Friars were but a mask under which hid ofttimes greed and selfishness. Their lives were full of ease, and they grew rich on the gold that should have belonged to the widows and orphans. Such had been the lives lived by the two joyous Friars who had spoken to Dante from one of the pits of Malebolge.

On and on through the pain and terror of this eighth circle the poets passed, until at length all the pits were left behind, and they were ready for the descent into the last circle of the Inferno.

As they waited to find a way into the lowest depths a horn pealed long and loud; so loud it pealed that, compared with it, a blast of thunder would have made but a slight noise.

Dante's eyes tried to pierce the mist that he might see who blew the horn, but nothing could he see, save, as he thought, a city of mighty towers.

"Master!" he cried, "what land is this?"

"Thou seest not clearly," said the Master; "these are not towers but giants who loom through the mist," and as he spoke Virgil caught his charge gently by the hand to comfort his fear.

"When they were close to the great giants Virgil spoke to one of them and begged him to bring them to the ninth circle.

Then the giant stooped, and stretching out his hands lifted Virgil up in them, while he, the Master, at the same moment seized Dante in his arms. Thus the two poets, making but one burden, were gently lowered by the mighty giant and placed upon a frozen lake. The poets had

reached the lowest circle.

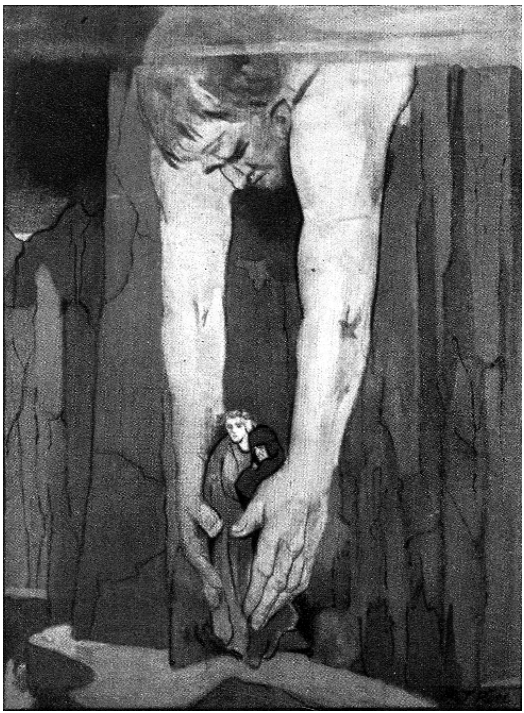
Of the terrible sights which they saw in this place I will not stay to tell you, save that here, among other traitors, the poet saw the Arch-traitor Judas, who had betrayed Jesus with a kiss.

Then slowly advancing toward them came the banners of the monarch of this awful realm, and behind the banners was the monarch Lucifer himself.

And now the journey through the Inferno was ended. It needed but to find a way out of the depths into which they had descended.

Virgil did not hesitate. Bidding Dante cling fast to him, the Master boldly made a ladder for himself of the monarch of the realm.

He scaled up the tremendous limbs and body of Lucifer, and lo! stepping free of him the two poets found themselves at the opening of a cavern, into which



The poets had reached
the lowest circle.

streamed the glad light of day. Through the cavern Virgil and Dante hastened, until they stood once more under the blue sky, the sparkling stars.

And to the wearied poets, vexed with the sight of sin and suffering, the light was good, and a pleasant sight it was to behold the stars.

CHAPTER 10
The Mount of Purgatory

It was on Good Friday, when, as you know, all good Christians are full of grief, remembering the sufferings of their Lord, it was on Good Friday that Virgil and Dante had entered the Inferno.

It was Easter, when all good Christians are full of joy, remembering that their Lord is risen, it was early on Easter Monday that the two poets came forth from the lower world.

To enter the Inferno, you remember, the poets had to pass through the portal of a gate bearing the terrible words, "All hope abandon, ye who enter here."

But in Purgatory, through the seven circles of which Virgil was erelong to lead

Dante, hope abounded. It was true that those who had gained an entrance to this mount suffered, ere they were set free from the sins which had clung to them on earth. Yet each one bore his pain with gladness, knowing that when at length his spirit was purged from all that was not good and beautiful, he would be able to reach the summit of the mount. And from that summit there would be but a step into Paradise, the Paradise of God.

As day dawned Virgil and Dante stood under a cloudless sky. Before them they could catch a glimpse of a sea, a wide-stretching sea, still, save for the gentle rise and fall of the little waves.

They had seen the light of the rising sun, these little waves, and were glad.

Long, long the travellers gazed toward the distant sea, then Dante, turning, saw that he and Virgil were no longer alone. Beside them stood an old

man, whose face shone as the brightness of the sun, while over his shoulders hung his long white hair, and on his breast lay his long white beard.

A reverend figure the old man looked, and such indeed he was. For he was none other than Cato, a great Roman writer, who now guarded the shores of Purgatory.

"Who are ye?" cried Cato, looking upon Virgil and his charge; "and how have ye escaped from yonder prison-house?" and he glanced toward the cavern by which the poets had left the Inferno.

Virgil bade Dante fall on his knees before the venerable old man, while he himself answered Cato:

"A lady from Heaven," he said, "sent me hither; therefore, I beseech thee, give me leave to conduct my charge through the seven circles of the mount which

thou dost guard."

"It is enough for me that thy request is urged in the name of a blessed dame from Heaven," answered Cato. "Go, therefore, gird thy follower with a reed which grows yonder by the lone seashore. Bathe thou also his face, that the stains of tears and smoke, which his journey has left upon him, may be removed. Then, as the sun rises higher, thou shalt see where thou canst most easily ascend the mount."

As Cato ceased speaking he disappeared from sight, and Virgil and Dante walked toward a meadow where the grass was yet damp with dew.

Here the Master stooped, and laid his hands upon the grass. Then with the morning dew he removed from his follower's face all trace of smoke and tears.

Onward still they walked, until they had reached the lonely shore. Once more

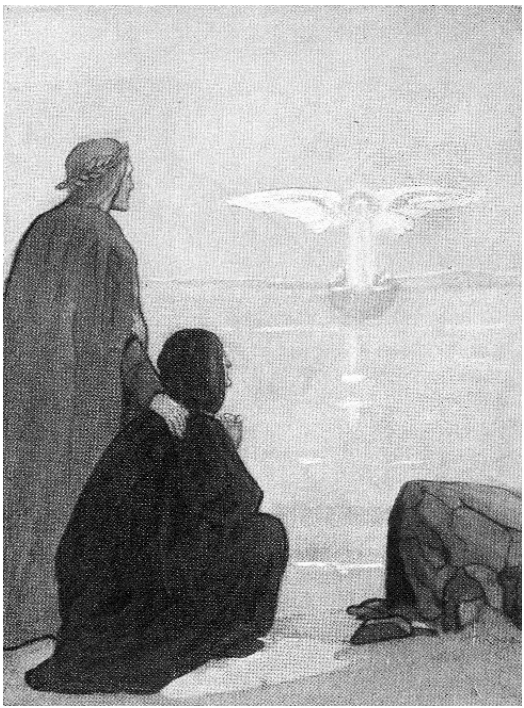
the Master stooped, and plucking a reed, girded it around Dante's waist. And, in place of the reed the Master plucked, another at once sprang up.

Now a reed was an emblem of humility, and Dante being girded with a reed was thus surrounded by this rare and beautiful grace.

Standing by the water's brink, the travellers tarried, dreaming of the journey which lay before them. As they dreamed, Dante saw a light upon the sea, a light which moved toward them more swift than any bird. Larger, brighter grew the light; greater, deeper grew the wonder in the poet's heart.

He turned to his Master. He, too, was gazing across the sea, yet no word did he utter.

As the light drew nearer yet, it spread itself out, and Virgil knew the glistering white wings of an angel of God.



Brighter and yet more bright
shone the Bird of God.

"Down, down!" the Master cried, turning to Dante. "Bend low thy knees, fold thy hands. Behold, God's angel draweth nigh!"

The heavenly Pilot, for such indeed was the angel, stood upright in the prow of a boat, guiding it without oars or sail other than his own white wings.

Nearer and nearer yet drew the bark, and brighter and yet more bright shone the Bird of God. Before the splendour of his white wings Dante bowed his head until it touched the ground.

In the bark sat more than a hundred spirits singing a Psalm, which, if you wish, you can read in your own Bible. For it was Psalm 114 which the spirits sang, beginning, "When Israel came out of Egypt."

As the boat reached the shore the angel blessed each soul, making upon it the sign of the Cross. Then, as they left

the bark, the angel sped back across the sea, swiftly, as he had come, his bright wings growing pale on the distant shore.

Left alone, the spirits looked around bewildered. Seeing Virgil and Dante, they begged to be told the way to the Mount of Purification.

"We also are strangers," answered Virgil, "nor have we been here long before you. By a rough way and hard have we come, therefore no new ascent can dismay us."

As Virgil spoke the spirits had drawn closer to Dante, and had seen that he breathed and had a body such as they had had on earth. In awe they gazed upon him, growing pale in their great wonder.

But one of them, forgetting wonder in joy, rushed forward to embrace the poet. Here, on the lonely shore, had he indeed found a friend.

Only when the spirit spoke, however, did Dante recognise him by the unusual sweetness of his voice.

He was Casella, a musician who had dwelt in Florence, and who had often set Dante's beautiful love-songs to music. Moreover he had sung them to the poet in a voice so pure, so sweet, that never could he forget it. Oft had its beauty banished care from Dante's soul.

"If thou still hast power, sing to me as of old!" cried Dante, overjoyed to see his friend.

Without a moment's delay Casella began to sing one of Dante's own beautiful songs. Softly the clear voice rose upon the quiet sea-shore, then more strong, more joyous yet it soared, even as the lark soars, upward. Dante, with Virgil and the other spirits, forgot, as they listened, all else save the music of the marvellous voice.

Suddenly, above the voice of the singer, rang the stern tone of the guardian of the mount.

Cato was in the midst of the rapt throng of spirits, bidding them loiter no longer, but haste to the mountain, there to begin their ascent toward Paradise.

No sooner was Cato's voice heard than Casella's song ceased. Then, even as a flock of timid doves forsake their corn if aught alarm them, the spirits hastened away to the mountain-side. Virgil and Dante followed them, but the Master's head was bowed, for he was grieved that he had lingered by the way.

And now a strange thing happened. Dante, looking before him, saw that the sun had cast his shadow on the ground. Startled, he looked again. Where was his Master's shadow? It also should be there on the ground before him, unless indeed Virgil had forsaken his charge.

Dante turned. Nay, his Master was there, though his shadow was not to be seen. What could it mean?

But Virgil did not explain. He but bade him fear nothing, though spirits cast no shadows as did his human body.

The poets had now reached the foot of the mountain, but so steep it seemed, so rugged, that they could scarce hope to ascend it without wings.

As they looked, dismayed, at the heights which towered above them, a band of spirits timidly drew near, the more timid as their eyes fell upon the shadow cast by Dante's body on the ground.

They took courage, however, to point out to the travellers a narrow opening in the mountain, by which they might begin their ascent. Yet so steep was the path that Virgil and Dante were forced to scramble upward, using their hands

and knees as well as their feet.

Ere long Dante began to lag behind his Master.

"If thou tarry not I shall be left alone," he cried, panting, to Virgil, who was still toiling upward.

"My son," answered the Master, "seest thou yon ledge that winds round the hill? Thither will we climb ere we seek to rest."

Spurred to fresh efforts by his Master's words Dante at length reached Virgil's side, and together they sat down on the narrow pathway.

But Dante, glancing at the heights above him, was full of foreboding. Would he ever reach the summit?

Virgil, seeing that his follower was downcast, bade him be of good cheer. "On the Mount of Purification," said the Master, "the steepest part is at the beginning. The higher thou climbest the

easier will the ascent become, until at length, when it becomes as easy to mount as for a ship to sail with the tide, thou mayest know that the end of the journey is near."

As Virgil's words ceased a voice startled the travellers. "Yet perchance thou mayest be forced to rest ere the ascent grows easy."

Turning round, the two poets saw a huge boulder, beneath whose shade leaned several spirits. They seemed scarce able to stand for very laziness.

One among them had indeed already sat down. His arms were around his knees and his head was bent down to rest upon them.

"See, Master!" cried Dante. "See, here is one lazier than if laziness were his sister."

The spirit, it may be, heard Dante's words, for without raising his head he

murmured mockingly, lazily, "Thou art very valiant. Up then and reach the summit."

Dante, half laughing at his indolent ways, stooped to catch, if he could, a glimpse of the spirit's face.

Why, it was Belacqua who had mocked him thus, Belacqua, the maker of musical instruments, noted long ago in Florence for his lazy, indolent ways.

"Wherefore sittest thou here, Belacqua?" said Dante to the idle Florentine. "Art thou lazy even as of old, or dost thou wait for a guide to lead thee onward?"

"I may not go on," said the spirit; "the Angel of God who is seated at the portal will not let me pass. Here must I stay as many years as I dwelt idly upon earth."

Before Dante could answer his old friend Virgil was calling to him to hasten onward after him to the next ledge of the

mountain.

As the poet sped along after his guide, he passed many bands of spirits. Again and again the different bands stopped to point at Dante's shadow while they whispered the one to another.

Dante was curious to hear what the spirits were saying, for well he knew it was of him they spoke. Slow, and yet more slow, grew his footsteps, until Virgil turned and sharply reproved his loitering charge.

"Why dost thou listen to the babblings of the crowd?" said the Master. "Come thou swiftly after me, nor heed their foolish whisperings."

Dante quickened his steps in silence, blushing with shame at his dear Master's reproof. Now all this while Virgil and Dante were but on the outskirts of the realm through which they had yet to journey. Neither they nor the spirits

whom they met had yet reached the gate which would admit them into the seven circles of Purgatory.

As the poets still toiled upward in search of the gate, they saw a spirit standing apart, gravely watching their approach.

Virgil went toward him to beg that he would tell them where to find the gate.

Instead of answering Virgil's request the spirit demanded to be told his name and the country from whence he came.

No sooner was he told than he moved quickly forward, and falling at the Roman poet's feet he threw his arms around Virgil's knees, crying, "I am Sordello, thy countryman."

Sordello had lived on earth some years before Virgil was born, and had himself been a poet. Thus it was that he greeted his brother poet with both joy and humility.

Night was falling and Sordello told Virgil that none might ascend the mountain in the darkness lest he should lose his way. He therefore offered to guide the two travellers to a region where they might rest pleasantly until the morning.

Well pleased to follow, Virgil and Dante were lead by Sordello to a beautiful valley. The grass was green, and the flowers more bright than gold or silver, while their fragrance was more rare than that of flowers that bloomed on earth. Seated among the flowers was a great multitude of spirits, singing softly a hymn to Mary, Mother of God.

Among the spirits were kings and nobles, and these Sordello pointed out to his companions. Even as he did so, one of the spirits rose from amidst the flowers, and stretched out his hands, as though imploring the other spirits to give heed to him. Then, folding his hands and

gazing towards the East, the spirit began to sing an evening hymn. And soon countless voices were blended with his own.

As the hymn ended the spirits all gazed upward, while their faces grew pale, fearful. Dante too gazed upward, and lo! a wondrous sight met his gaze.

Two angels, with bright, flaming swords, appeared in the sky. Their robes and their wings were green as the green leaves of spring. Gently they descended, one alighting on a little hill behind the troop of spirits, the other dropping on to a knoll on the other side of the valley. It seemed as though the angels had come to safeguard those in the valley from all ill.

So bright shone the golden hair of the heavenly messengers that Dante's eyes drooped before the splendour.

"The angels come," said Sordello, "to guard the valley from a serpent that even

now draws nigh."

Dante pressed closer to his Master, dreading lest already the coils of the reptile were drawing him from Virgil's side.

"Lo, our enemy is here!" cried Sordello, and he pointed to the lower side of the vale, which was guarded by no angel.

Spellbound, Dante watched as the serpent crept stealthily in and out among the beautiful flowers.

So intent was he on the movements of the creature that he did not hear the flutter of wings on the quiet air. But before Dante was aware of the angels' watchful care the serpent knew its evil plans were thwarted; for it had heard the swift movement of the angels' wings, and, having heard it turned and fled.

Then the angels winged their flight once more to the hills that overlooked the beautiful valley.

Dante was wearied now, and lying

down among the flowers he fell fast asleep. And while he slept a gentle lady, named Lucia, came down into the valley and said to Virgil, "Let me take him who sleeps that the way may be easy to him."

Then Lucia lifted Dante in her arms and carried him, easily as a babe, up to the very gate of Purgatory, while Virgil followed close in her steps.

Thus when the poet awoke, refreshed after his long sleep, the valley, with its radiant flowers, had vanished. He was alone with his Master before the gate for which they had been seeking on the Mount of Purgatory.

CHAPTER 11
The Gate of Purgatory

Leading up to the gate of Purgatory were three steps. On the top of the steps sat one who watched the poets as they drew near, then asked them wherefore they came without an angel guide.

"Lucia, the heavenly Dame, bade us come hither to the gate," said Virgil.

"May she prosper thy ascent," said the angel courteously, for he was pleased it was she who had guided them thither.

The first step was of pure white marble, polished until it was so bright that Dante could see himself in it as plain as in a mirror. The second step was of rough purple stone, split both lengthways and across; while the third was of red

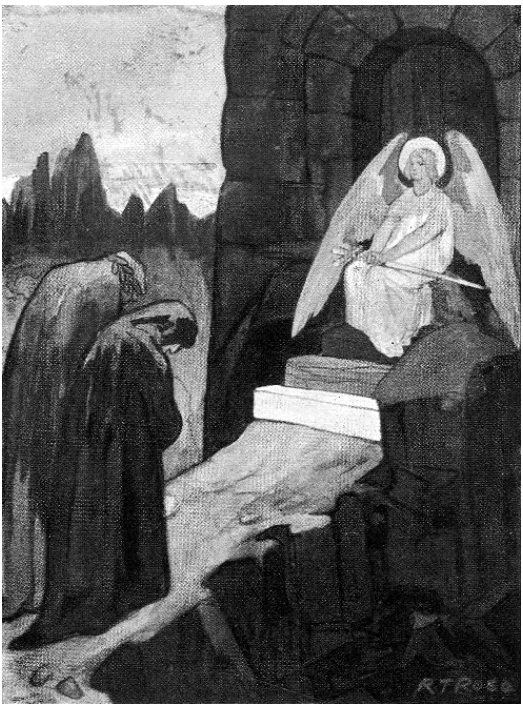
stone, that flashed and flamed in the light.

It was above these steps, on a great rock, that the Angel sat, his feet on the flaming stone. He wore a dull, ash-coloured robe, and in his hand he waved a sword blunted at the point.

With a cheerful countenance Virgil drew Dante up the three strange steps, then he bade him ask the angel, in all humility, to unbar the gate.

Throwing himself at the angel's feet Dante beat three times upon his breast, as he besought the angel, for mercy's sake, to open the portal, that he might enter in.

Then the angel bent toward the suppliant at his feet, and with his sword he drew upon his forehead seven times over the letter P. This he did because P is the first letter of Peccate, which is the Italian word for sin.



"May she prosper thy ascent,"
said the angel.

"See that these scars are washed away within the gate," said the angel. Then from beneath his ash-coloured robe he drew forth two keys, one of gold and one of silver, and with these he unlocked the gate.

"Enter!" cried the angel, "yet beware that thou look not behind thee, else shalt thou again be cast without."

Loud as a peal of thunder the gate rolled back upon its hinges, and Dante and his guide entered and stood upon the threshold of Purgatory.

Slowly the grating hinges ceased their grinding noise, while the air around the poets seemed to quiver with a song of joy.

"We praise Thee, O God!" The words of the great Te Deum grew clear, then died away and silence closed around the poets.

Remembering the angel's warning

Dante had not looked backward when the gates of Purgatory closed behind him. Now, as the song of praise died away, Virgil led his charge toward a narrow pass through which they climbed until they reached a plain which ran round the side of the mountain. This was the first of the seven circles of Purgatory.

The plain was bounded by a great rock of pure white marble, and on this marble beautiful figures had been carved. Dante looked at them in wonder. So life-like did the sculptured forms appear that he found himself listening for their voices.

But only Virgil's voice was heard, bidding Dante look at the crowd of spirits which was coming slowly toward them.

To Dante, as he gazed, the shapes he saw seemed no human creatures. Yet such they were, but on their shoulders they bore stones of such great weight

that they were bent to the ground beneath them. From the bent forms rose voices. The spirits were praying petition after petition from the Lord's Prayer.

It was for the pride which had been their greatest fault on earth that these spirits suffered thus. It was to teach them humility that they were bent in such lowly guise.

As the band of spirits drew nearer, Virgil asked them the shortest way to the next circle, adding that his follower found the ascent steep on account of his human body.

Then one of the band bade the two poets follow him and he would show them a path that a living man might easily ascend.

Fain would the spirits have looked upon the face of one who had come among them in his human body, and who would ere long return to earth, but the

weight upon their shoulders made it impossible for them to raise their heads.

One of them, however, Omberto by name, began to speak, and by stooping, Dante could just catch his words. He was telling the poet that on earth his pride had been so great that all men hated him, and at last so greatly did his haughtiness provoke his countrymen that they put him to death.

Now Dante had stooped so low that another spirit, twisting himself round, caught a glimpse of the poet's face.

At once he knew him and called him by his name, while Dante in delight exclaimed, "Thou art Oderigi!" For he had known Oderigi the artist on earth and admired his work.

But now, as the poet began to praise Oderigi's work, the artist, who had been too proud and boastful of his skill on earth, would not listen to Dante's

flattering words. Instead, he begged him to think of those whose work had far surpassed his own. "Yet," added Oderigi truthfully, "when I lived on earth I did not honour others' handiwork thus, for my heart was ever set on excelling all men. But here am I being set free from the taint of pride."

Virgil now drew his charge away from Oderigi, bidding him look at the wonderful pictures drawn on the pavement at his feet.

These were beautiful as the sculpture on the wall of white marble. It may be that some day, when you are older, you will read for yourself about the strange pictures which Dante saw in his dream on the pavement of the first circle in Purgatory.

CHAPTER 12
The Trembling Mount

Now as Dante's head was bent over the pictures on the pavement, lo, an angel drew near. He was clad in a robe white as snow, and his face shone as the morning star.

Standing close to Dante he opened his arms and spread wide his wings, saying, "Come, for the steps are near, and now the ascent is without difficulty."

Then he led the poets on to a steep stair, and turning lightly, brushed Dante's forehead with his wings. As the poets climbed the steps, and approached the second circle, they heard a voice chanting, more sweet than any voice on earth, "Blessed are the poor in spirit."

"Master," said Dante, "hath some burden been lifted from my shoulders, for no longer do I feel it a toil to ascend these steps, yet they appear steep to my sight."

"When all the scars are taken away from thy brow, as already one hath been," said Virgil, "then thy feet shall know no weariness, but the upward path shall be to thee a joy."

Bewildered, Dante raised his hand, and passing it across his brow, he found that of the seven letters engraven there by the angel, but six were left. Pride, one of the seven deadly sins, had been wiped away ere the poet entered the second circle.

Dante closed his eyes, remembering with grateful heart the touch of the angel's pinions as they swept across his forehead.

The poets were now within the circle where envy was being purged away from

those who had been envious on earth.

For a mile they walked on alone, seeing no spirits, yet hearing all around them voices which sang of love and of unselfish deeds. Ere long Virgil bade Dante look more closely before him. There, huddled close together, clad in garments dark as the rock against which they leaned, Dante saw a pitiful sight. A band of spirits clothed in rough sackcloth, with threads of wire closing their eyelids, turned their faces wistfully toward him.

To Dante it seemed a cruel thing to gaze at those who themselves could see nothing, and he turned to Virgil to ask what he should do.

The Master understood his perplexity. "Speak to these suffering ones," he said, "yet tarry not long by their side."

At the sound of Dante's voice the crowd of sightless spirits listened eagerly.

Then one and another begged him to draw closer to them, while they told him of the envy which on earth had spoiled their lives.

Guido was the name of one of the spirits, and he talked to Dante of Florence, the city they both loved well. But the memory of the days he had dwelt within her walls made the spirit weep, and he begged the poet to leave him and go on his way.

"It likes me more to weep than speak, so much my heart is rent with thoughts of yore," he cried.

And Dante understood Guido's tears and went quietly away, and all the spirits heard his footsteps as he left them, though they could not see him go.

It was evening now, but brighter than the rays of the setting sun a radiant presence shone upon the weary travellers.

Dante was forced to shield his eyes

from the dazzling light, but Virgil cried with joy, "Behold, it is an angel come hither to lead us onward!"

"Here shalt thou enter on a path less steep than any ye have yet trodden," cried the angel voice. As his words ceased an unseen choir sang softly, "Blessed are the merciful," and once again Dante felt soft wings brush across his face. Only five letters were left upon the poet's forehead.

Entering into the third circle Virgil and Dante found themselves in a region dim with fog, which was bitter to the taste and made the eyes smart with pain.

Here those who had given way to anger on earth were being cleansed from their sin.

So thick was the fog, it mattered not to Dante whether his eyes were shut or open, he could not, in either case, see the path before him.

Virgil, seeing him stumble, came near and bade his son, as he would sometimes call him, lean upon his shoulder, that thus he might walk safely.

Soon, muffled by the thickness of the air, the voices of those who sang fell faint upon the poets' ears.

They were the voices of those who had erred through anger, singing together to the Lamb of God to grant them now His peace.

As their voices died away Dante and his guide struggled forward until they saw a glimmering of light.

Then, in a flash, the glimmer was changed into a splendour of brightness, a splendour unseen before by Dante or his guide.

An angel had come once more to guide the travellers upward. As they followed him into the next circle voices sang softly, "Blessed are the peace-

makers," and at the same moment a wing waved faintly across Dante's brow. He knew the meaning of the touch and raised his hand to find a third letter had been taken away.

Evening overtook the poets as they entered the fourth circle, and they sat down to rest until the morning dawned.

In the circle into which they had now entered, those who had been lazy, slothful, on earth, were learning how to be active, diligent.

Thus Dante, who had fallen into a light sleep, was roused by a crowd of spirits, as they came rushing along in great haste.

"O tarry not, tarry not!" they cried, "let not the time be lost through lack of love."

Virgil, as they hastened by, besought them to show him the pathway which would lead them to the next circle.

"Come, follow us; we may not linger to speak with thee," the spirits cried in answer, so anxious were they to atone for the sloth and ease of their life on earth.

As they flitted past, the poets could catch now a word, and then another of the spirits' converse. They knew that they were calling to one another to speed onward. Warnings too they uttered, lest any one should be tempted to loiter as they had done in other days.

Amid the sounds of hurrying feet Dante grew drowsy, confused, and ere long he fell asleep.

When he awoke the sun was high in the heavens and Virgil's voice fell reproachfully upon Dante's ears, for three times he had tried in vain to rouse his follower from slumber.

"Rise, now," said the Master, "we must begone to find the steps which lead us into the next circle."

Dante rose at Virgil's words and walked onward, his head bent forward in deep thought. Then suddenly he heard a sound, more soft and mild than mortal voice, saying, "Come, enter here." Before them lay the steps for which they sought, and as they mounted upward an angel waved his wings, and Dante knew that the fourth letter had vanished from his brow.

"Blessed are they that mourn," sang the glad voice of an angel, "for they shall be comforted."

Thus Virgil and Dante entered the fifth circle.

In this circle were those who on earth had loved money too well. They were bent prostrate on the ground and, weeping, they cried aloud, "Our souls cleave unto the dust."

With some of these weeping spirits Dante talked as he moved onward.

But soon he was struck dumb with fear and wonder, and turned quickly to his Master, for the whole mountain began to tremble, while from all the different circles the spirits cried as with one voice, "Glory to God in the Highest."

Before that glorious burst of song the poets stood quite still, even as had the shepherds who long before had heard the same song on the hills of Bethlehem.

"Glory to God in the Highest!" Then as the song died into silence, the trembling of the mountain ceased, and all was as it had been. Only the poets moved on in thoughtfulness and dread, while Dante was filled with a great desire to know the meaning of the shaking of the mountain and of the glorious burst of praise.

And soon his desire was fulfilled, for ere long the travellers were greeted by a spirit. "God give you peace, my brethren," he said.

Virgil answered his greeting with courteous words. Then he begged the spirit to tell them wherefore the mount had trembled, and wherefore the spirits had rejoiced together in songs of praise.

"There are no storms in this realm," answered the spirit; "no showers of hail or snow, no cruel frosts. Wind, however strong, cannot shake the mountain, yet when one soul in Purgatory is purified, and knows it is free to pass on into Paradise, then the mountain trembles, while the spirits throughout the realm rejoice.

"For me was it that the spirits sung the song which you have heard, for me, who, after five hundred years and more, am purged from sin."

"And who art thou?" said Virgil to the glad-hearted spirit.

"On earth I was a Roman poet, and my name was Statius, as still it is," answered the spirit.

Now Statius had lived during the reign of the Emperor Titus, one hundred years after Virgil. And so "passing sweet" were the poems he had written, that he had been invited to the capital, even to Rome itself, where a wreath of myrtle had been placed upon his brow. In those days no greater honour could be paid to a poet than to confer on him such a garland.

But Statius was telling the poets of his life on earth. It was through studying the works of Virgil, he said, that he himself had been inspired to write. Ever he had bowed before the ancient poet's works as before a master.

Now the spirit did not know that one of his listeners was Virgil himself, for he could not recognise one whom he had never seen on earth.

"Might I but have lived when Virgil did," said Statius, "I would, for the sake

of such joy, have endured without complaint another year in Purgatory."

Now Dante listened with delight to his beloved Master's praise, and he longed to tell Statius that it was Virgil himself who now stood before him.

But at that moment he caught a glance from Virgil which seemed to say, "Be silent."

Dante, meeting thus his Master's eyes, smiled, to show that he understood his wish.

But Statius too had seen the smile which had flitted swift across Dante's face, and he turned to him, demanding what it meant.

Dante sighed, perplexed. What was he to do? His Master bade him be silent. Statius bade him speak.

He sighed, perplexed, and Virgil hearing his sigh said gently, "Thou shalt speak and tell Statius that which he

wishes to hear."

Then eagerly did Dante speak. "O ancient spirit," he cried, "behold, he of whom thou hast spoken stands before thee. He, my Master, my Guide, is none other than the Virgil whom thou hast longed to see."

In wonder, mixed with reverence and awe, Statius stooped to embrace the feet of him whom he had ever owned his Master.

CHAPTER 13
The Cleansing Fire

The three travellers, Virgil, Dante, and Statius, now went on together toward the sixth circle.

At the foot of the steps leading into it stood an angel, who removed yet another letter from Dante's brow. As he did so, those in the circle which the poets were leaving sang, "Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness."

In the sixth circle those who had been gluttonous on earth were being punished.

Gluttons, as you will remember, are those greedy people who are too fond of eating and drinking.

Ere the travellers had walked far they came to a beautiful tree standing in the very middle of the path. Fruit, ripe and fragrant, hung from its topmost branches, but the lower ones were barren. Streaming over a rock above the tree was a stream of crystal water, which fell upon the upper branches and kept them fresh and fruitful.

As the poets lingered beneath the tree a crowd of spirits drew near. These might neither eat of the fruit of the tree, nor drink of the crystal stream. So greatly had they suffered from the pangs of hunger and thirst that they were wasted to shadows.

Yet these penitent ones were willing to suffer until they were purified, and their mouths opened only to utter a wistful cry. "O Lord," they prayed, "open Thou our lips, and our mouth shall shew forth Thy praise."

Passing onward, the travellers came to another tree also laden with fruit. Beneath it stood many thousands of spirits, with hands stretched out to the fruit which yet they knew was beyond their reach.

As the poets lingered, a warning voice from an unseen presence bade them pass on.

They obeyed, walking along silent, thoughtful, saddened, it might be, by the sight of the famished multitude.

Suddenly a voice broke in upon their troubled thoughts. "Wherefore do ye three journey alone, so silent and so sad?"

Dante trembled, even as a timid animal which is fearful of all sounds; then, raising his eyes, he saw before him an angel who glowed more bright than any furnace.

"If ye desire to mount, here must ye

turn," said the angel.

Then Dante felt a soft wind blow upon him, a wind soft and fragrant as the breath of May, and he felt the gentle movement of a wing wiping from his brow another scar. And he knew that there was left but one of the letters which the angel had graven upon his brow. And an angel voice sang, "Blessed are they who have learnt to control themselves."

The poets then entered the seventh circle. It seemed to Dante, in spite of all the perils he had come through, that not yet had he seen so dangerous a pathway as that which now lay before him.

On one side of the path was a yawning precipice, on the other a furnace, heated to white flame.

Through this furnace the spirits must pass ere they might enter Paradise. Even as gold is purged from dross by fire, even so, in the flames, were the spirits purged

from any evil that still clung to them.

Looking towards the side where lay the precipice, Dante's footsteps wellnigh swerved; turning then in haste to the other side, he feared lest he should fall into the flames. Ever and anon as they trod the perilous path Virgil spoke to his follower words of warning and of cheer.

Amid the flames Dante saw two poets whom he had known on earth.

One, named Guinicelli, he greeted with joy, for ever he had been to him as a father, and Dante had delighted in his "sweet and pleasant rhymes of love." Even as Statius reverenced and loved Virgil, so did Dante reverence and love Guinicelli.

"Wherefore dost thou greet me thus lovingly?" asked the spirit, surprised at Dante's kindly looks and words.

"It is for the wondrous songs thou didst write that I show thee love," said

Dante. "Until the beauty of our Italian tongue doth fade, shall I love even the very ink with which thou didst write thy lays."

"Brother," answered Guinicelli, "here is one whose poems surpass all others," and he pointed to a spirit who stood in the flames close beside him.

"I am Arnault," said Guinicelli's friend, "and as I wade through this ford of fire I sing. But my songs are full of sorrow now for the folly of my life on earth. Yet even in the furnace I see the day for which I long draw nigh."

Then, ere they vanished in the cleansing flames, Guinicelli and Arnault begged Dante to say one prayer for them when he stood at length in the presence of Christ.

Now the sun began to set, and in the glory of its beams an angel of God appeared before the poets. He stood on the

edge of the flames, and joy streamed from his face as he sang in a voice of surpassing beauty, "Blessed are the pure in heart." With his wing also he removed the last letter from Dante's brow.

"Go no further," he said to the travellers, "go no further until ye have entered into the purifying flames. And as ye enter, listen to the songs ye hear therein."

Hearing the angel's words Dante stood still, as though he were dead. Then, his hands clasped together, he took a step forward and stood on the very brink of the furnace, but there his courage failed. He dared not enter into the flames.

"My son," said Virgil, "pain thou mayest suffer here, but death shall not come nigh thee. Yea, not even a hair of thy head shall perish. If thou dost doubt my words, stretch forth the hem of thy

robe and hold it over the flame and thou wilt see that it is not consumed. Oh, lay aside thy dread and come fearless into the cleansing fires."

Yet despite all that Virgil could urge, Dante still stood on the brink. Into the flames he dared not enter.

Then Virgil pleaded with his follower yet again. "Son," he began, "thou art divided from thy lady Beatrice but by this wall of fire—"

There was no need for the Master to say more, the name of Beatrice had been enough.

Dante raised his eyes trustfully to Virgil's face, while he, the Master, smiled as upon a little child, and gently shook his head, saying, "How long shall we linger now?"

Then together Virgil and Dante, followed by Statius, stepped into the flames. And as they passed through them the

Master spoke of Beatrice, that Dante's heart might be brave.

From the other side also a voice was heard singing, "Come, come, blessed of my Father," and, guided by the angel's words, the poets came forth from the testing flames on the other side. Before them lay steps that stretched upward to the heights.

But with all their haste to reach the top, darkness overtook them when they had climbed but a little way.

Worn out by all that they had gone through, and stayed by the darkness, the poets lay down to rest, each on a step of the stair.

Above the wearied travellers was the sky, and stars twinkled more bright than was their wont. Dante, gazing at their brightness, fell fast asleep, and his dreams were pleasant to him.

When he awoke Virgil had already

arisen and greeted him joyfully, for that very day his follower would see the lady of his love.

Together they climbed the steps, Dante as lightly as though he had wings. At the top-most step Virgil told his follower that he would no longer be his guide, though for yet a little while he would tarry near him.

"Take thy own will for guide," said the Master. "Sit down, wander hither or thither, even as thou wilt, in this land where the sun shines and the flowers bloom. Until Beatrice, with glad eyes, comes to thee, be thou wise, nor look to me for guidance."

Then, Virgil no longer leading but following, the poets went forward into a wood that lay on the borderland of Paradise.

The sunshine of a summer morn stole in and out among the green leaves of the

wood. A breeze, soft, fragrant, fanned the tops of the tall trees; birds flitted from branch to branch, warbling their most joyous lays. Amid this woodland joy the poets roamed until they came to a little stream, by the bank of which they flung themselves down to rest. Dante's eyes wandered to the other side of the stream. How the flowers blossomed, how the shrubs bloomed on the other side!

Ah, but more beautiful even than these was the lady who walked among them. Plucking now one, now another of the flowers which spread around her path, she moved onward, singing as she went.

No, she is not Beatrice as you think, though she is now not far away.

"Lady Beautiful," cried Dante, "I beseech thee come nearer to the edge of the stream that I may hear the words of thy song."

At the sound of the poet's voice the lady, whose name was Matilda, came to the brink of the stream, her arms full of the bright flowers she had plucked.

Dante longed to cross over to her side, yet this he could not do though the stream was narrow, for he had yet to be plunged in these waters, which were called Lethe, or the Waters of Forgetfulness. Whoso bathed in this stream forgot all the deeds he had aforetime done, and whoso bathed in the stream of Eunce, which flowed close by, recalled all the good and kind deeds he had done. Dante, as you will see, was plunged into the waters both of Lethe and Eunce.

Now as Dante stood on one side of the stream, and Matilda on the other, he could hear the words of her song.

"Thou, Lord, hast made me glad through Thy work. I will triumph in the work of Thy hands," she sang, as she

looked with glowing eyes at the flowers in her arms.

Together, with but the stream between, Dante and the Lady Beautiful walked onward. Then, all at once, Matilda stopped. "My brother," she cried, "behold and hearken!"

And the poet saw a sudden light illumine the wood, and he heard a sound of sweetest song tremble on the air.

In the midst of the light Dante saw seven golden candlesticks in which the candles shone more bright than shines the moon in a cloudless sky.

"Hosanna! Hosanna!" the song floated clear on the summer air.

Full of wonder Dante turned to Virgil, only to find him as bewildered as himself.

Then Matilda called to them to look beyond the golden candlesticks; and doing as she bade them, they saw a great

company, robed in white, and in their midst a triumphal car.

Slowly the procession drew near, until at length it halted where Matilda stood. Over the ground, where the white-robed company had passed, lay trailing clouds of glory.

Raising their voices, the white-robed angels sang each one, "Come, come from Lebanon, O my sister."

Then, as though they saw her to whom they called, their joyous cry rang out, "Blessed, blessed art thou who comest," and as they sang they scattered fadeless lilies over their heads and over and around the triumphal car.

Slowly, amid the shower of flowers which fell into the car, rose a lady. She wore a veil as white as snow, and her head was crowned with an olive wreath. Her mantle was green, and from beneath it shone a robe the colour of flame.

Dante was in the presence of his lady Beatrice.

As a child turns to its mother, even so Dante turned in his awe and wonder to his beloved Master, but Virgil was no longer by his side. Then for all his joy Dante wept when he saw that he had lost his "most sweet father and guide."

"Dante," said Beatrice, "weep not because Virgil hath left thee. Ere long thou shalt have more bitter cause for tears."

And indeed, as she reminded him that after her death his life on earth had not been so pure, so true, as it should have been, Dante, knowing her rebuke was just, wept tears of shame and sorrow.

Ah, how he had longed to stand in his Lady's presence! And now, ah, how unworthy he felt to be near her! In his sorrow his strength failed, and he fell prostrate at his Lady's feet.

He awoke from his swoon to find

himself being drawn through the waters of Lethe by the lady Matilda. As he reached the other side all memory of his past deeds vanished from Dante's mind, while angel voices all around him sang, "Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow."

Once again was he brought into the presence of Beatrice. And now she no longer wore a veil, and Dante could gaze into her clear eyes and see the love and compassion shining within them. And as she smiled upon him Dante's heart grew glad.

Then by Beatrice's command Matilda led the poet to the river Eunce, and when he had plunged into its waters he came forth, unashamed, remembering only the good deeds he had done on earth.

Thus cleansed and purified by water and by flame Dante was ready to follow



They stood before the very
throne of God.

Beatrice into Paradise. Nor did they linger until they stood before the very throne of God.

Of all that Dante heard and saw in Paradise I may not tell you in this little book. But some day you will read for yourself, in Dante's great poem, of the wonder and the glory of that land as he saw it in his dream.

Even the great poet's words faltered as he tried to tell of his vision of Paradise.

Feeling his power fail, he cried out to the great God, in whose presence he had stood, to make his poem of some little use to those who should read it in the days to come. Listen to his own words:

> "O Thou Light Supreme,
> Grant me that those
> Great mysteries and wonders I
> have seen
> Return a little to my mind, and
> make

My lips so potent that some
wandering gleam,
Some spark from thy great
glory, I may wake
And leave to light the future."

As you read Dante's Divine Comedy for yourself, you will know that God heard the poet's cry and answered it.