

ON A PORTRAIT SUPPOSED TO BE OF DANTE AT VERONA.

By JOHN GREEN WALLER.

THE portrait, of which an engraving is here given, and which I presume to be that of Dante, occurs amongst some decaying frescoes on the north wall of the Pelligrini Chapel, in the Church of S. Anastasia, in Verona. It has long been known to Italian antiquaries that, here were portraits of members of the Alighieri and Bevilacqua families, but it has not yet been mentioned that among them was that of the great poet of Italy.

The figure is kneeling, with hands joined in prayer, at the feet of a saint, apparently one of the Apostles, but without any distinguishing emblem; the right hand of the latter touches the head. The frescoes are much defaced, and a bracketed monument to the memory of Nicolo de Cavalis, 1390, apparently cuts into them. The style of the work is certainly Giottesque; but, at the time I saw it, I was not able to pronounce it to be by the hand of Giotto himself, as my memory of his style was not sufficiently fresh, and I had not then seen his works at Padua.

Contemporary portraits of Dante are few, as a matter of course—for portraiture, in Italian art, is said to have begun with Giotto, and many occur in his numerous works. The artist was the warm friend of the poet, whom he often introduced, in various ways, in his paintings. One formerly existed in the Church of S. Croce, at Florence; and that in the Chapel of the Palace of the Podesta, now called the Bargello, was discovered in 1840,—mainly through our countryman, Mr. Kirkup. This is now well known.¹ But there is also a head, pointed out as that of Dante, amongst a group of the Blessed Spirits in the Last Judgment, in the

¹ Engraved by the Arundel Society, but more correctly by Mr. Kirkup.



Portrait supposed to be of Dante.

Fresco, possibly by Giotto, in the Pelligrini Chapel in the Church of
S. Anastasia, Verona.

(From a drawing by Mr. John Green Waller.)

Chapel of S. Maria dell' Annunziata, at Padua. It is probable, that Giotto's portraits of the poet are the only ones that were contemporary, although there were others taken by some of the early Italian painters.

Taking into consideration all the circumstances of Dante's life, Verona was not an unlikely place to find some such memorial of his person. It was one of the first cities that gave him protection after his expulsion from Florence; and he has not failed, in the "*Divina Commedia*," to record a grateful recollection of the kind reception he received from the Podesta of the great family of Della Scala. The passage is remarkable, and has given rise to much disquisition, in order to correctly identify the individuals spoken of. It is not necessary here to enter into it, for the commentators have now proved, that the name of the first member of the family who received Dante must have been Bartolomeo,² whose character fully warrants the description; and the youth associated with him must have been Francesco, afterwards known as Can Grande, the most eminent of all the Della Scala family, and to whom Dante dedicated his "*Paradiso*." The passage is in Canto xvii. of the last division mentioned, and stands thus:—

"Lo primo tuo refugio, e'l primo ostello
Sara la cortesia del gran Lombardo
Che 'n su la Scala porta il santo uccello;
Ch' avrà in te sì benigno riguardo
Che del fare e del chieder tra voi due
Fia prima quel che tra gli altri è più tardo,
Con lui vedrai colui che impresso fue
Nascendo, sì da questa stella forte,
Che notabili fier l' opere sue.
Non se ne sono ancor le genti accorte
Ver la novella età; che pur nove anni
Son queste ruote intorno di lui torte."

Thus well Englished by Wright:—

"The first retreat—first refuge from despair,
Shall be the mighty Lombards' courtesy,
Whose arms the eagle on a ladder bear.
His looks on thee so kindly shall be cast,

² Foscolo has shown that dates of events in Dante's life will not admit of the "*Alberto*" of Boccaccio, nor of the "*Alboino*" of other writers. The tomb

shown at Verona as that of the latter, with the arms—a ladder surmounted by an eagle—is attributed entirely without evidence.

That asking and conceding shall change place ;
 And that, wont first to be, 'twixt you be last.
 With him shall one be found, who, at his birth,
 Was by this ardent star so fraught with grace
 His deeds of valour shall display his worth.
 Not yet his greatness by the world is seen,
 So tender is his age : for scarce nine years
 Around him whirling have their circles been."

On the death of Bartolomeo, in 1304, Dante left Verona, and did not return until after his friend Faggiolano, the Podesta of Lucca, was driven out by a conspiracy, April 10, 1316, when he placed himself under the protection of Can Grande, before alluded to. Now it was in this year that, Vasari tells us, Giotto went to Padua, at the instance of the Signor of Della Scala, for whom he painted a most beautiful chapel ; and afterwards to Verona, where, "in the palace of Messer Cane, he painted some pictures, and particularly the portrait of that prince." It will therefore be seen by a comparison of dates, that both the painter and his friend the poet were at one and the same time guests of the great Lombard prince, Francesco della Scala, commonly called Can Grande, *i. e.* Great Dog, a singular title of honour, much affected by members of this family. The palace of the Podesta, now the hotel of "Le Due Torri," occupies the south side of the piazza in which the church of S. Anastasia stands. This noble church, one of the finest of its kind in Italy, was begun in 1260, and was not completed for nearly a century—indeed the west front was never finished. But according to custom, the east end of a church, consisting of the choir and its adjacent parts, was constructed first, so that divine service could be performed as soon as possible. This is the history of all the large mediæval churches, and the early date of some of the monuments in the Pelligrini Chapel show that this part was erected with the earlier portions of the church. Thus then, as far as dates are concerned, there is nothing to prevent this portrait from being contemporary, and possibly even by Giotto, or painted under his direction.

It must also be recollected that one of Dante's sons settled in Verona ; and the family of Alighieri have (as I understood from the Sacristan) still descendants in that city. So that there are many reasons for the possibility

of finding here an early personal memorial at least, even if not quite of a contemporary character. The evidence must, however, be in the portrait itself, which quite bears out the description of him given by Boccaccio, and is also in accord with the fresco now remaining in the Bargello at Florence. Like the latter, it is a profile ; so also is that at Padua, to which I have before alluded.

Boccaccio says :—" His face was long, an aquiline nose, eyes rather large than small, the jaws large, and the under lip rather advanced beyond that above. His colour brown ; hair and beard thick, black and crisp. His countenance always melancholy and thoughtful. By which circumstance it happened one day, at Verona—the fame of his works being already divulged throughout the city, and chiefly that part intitled 'Inferno,' and he being well known by many men and women, passing before a door where many ladies were seated, one of them softly—but not so much so but by him and those that were with him it was heard—said to the others : 'Do you see him that goes to hell and returns when he pleases, and here, above, tells us news of those that are below ?' To which one answered simply,—'Indeed you say truly : see you not how crisp his beard is, and his colour brown, with the heat and smoke that is down there ?' Which words hearing spoken behind him, and knowing that they came out of pure belief of the women, pleased him ; and, as if content that they should remain in that opinion, sighing a little, he passed on."

Now, the portrait in the Bargello was painted in 1290, when Dante was twenty-five years old, and about the time of the death of Beatrice Portinari, his early love. But this could not be taken—if by Giotto—before 1317, when he was fifty-two, and, although it has a great agreement with the other, it possesses just those differences which age gives. The delicate outlines of youth are no longer there ; but the same general character is preserved : and, as regards the accessories of costume, it accords with that he is said to have worn, and with that exhibited in the portrait at the Bargello.

Whether, however, the portrait is by Giotto, or by one of his scholars, there can be very little doubt but that it represents the great Tuscan poet, and that it was probably contemporary. It makes thus the third extant, all of which

were painted at different periods of his life ; that at Padua being probably of about the middle time, between the two others. I must here add, that my sketch was hasty, and does not do justice to the original work. It may suffice, however, to invite attention to so interesting a memorial of the poet, and relic of early art.

The portraits of Dante are many ; but with the exception of the above mentioned, by Giotto, they were painted after his death. Andrea Castagno painted his portrait in the house of the Carducci, afterwards that of the Pandolfini. Lorenzo, a Camaldolese monk, and the scholar of Taddeo Gaddi, painted the portrait of Dante, as well as that of Petrarch, in the Chapel of the Ardinghelli, within the Church of the Holy Trinity, about 1370. These were at Florence. Raffaele has introduced Dante into "The Dispute of the Sacrament." There is a portrait by Giovanni Bellini, in the Public Library at Verona. One, of the fifteenth century, exists in a MS. of the "Divina Commedia," by one Niccolo Claricini, an advocate of Cividale, in Friuli,—in the Clericini Library of which town it is still preserved. It is said to differ from other authorities. There are also others, but which do not call for particular record.