

ST CATHERINE OF SIENA.

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IN Italy the fourteenth century is the last that can, even in the loosest phraseology, be called mediæval. At its outset, on his spiritual watch-tower of contemplation, stands Dante with the *Divina Commedia*, beholding time and eternity with the eyes of one who has lost the world and gained his own soul. At the middle of the century is Petrarch, the first modern man, painting his exquisite lyrical miniatures of every transient mood of the human heart. And with him is Boccaccio, the genial and cynical, picturing an age and a society in which the spiritual side of man's nature is regarded as non-existent. Following in the footsteps of Giotto and Duccio, the painters of the heroic epoch of Italian art are covering the walls of palaces and cloisters with vast frescoed allegories of the life and destinies of man, of the functions of Church and State, of the relations of mortality to immortality. Of this century in Italy, Caterina Benincasa is the highest mystical expression; she is at once the most fiery-hearted, single-minded patriot of her age, and the true successor of Dante in the history of Italian thought.

The conditions of the Church and of the Italian people had grown more desperate still since the days that Dante had pictured for all time in the *Divina Commedia*. Every Italian State was struggling madly with its neighbours and divided against itself. In the great republics of Florence and Siena, the rich burghers were gradually being forced to yield up their

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supremacy to the lower populace, and in each the way was being prepared for the subjugation of the Commonwealth, in the following century, to the rule of a single family. Elsewhere tyrants, great and small, were rising upon the ruins of free institutions. The sanguinary despotism of the Visconti of Milan was absorbing the North, the shameless lives and reckless government of the Angevin sovereigns of Naples were rapidly preparing the South for anarchy and foreign invasion. In their luxurious retreat at Avignon, the Popes left Central Italy to be the prey of cruel and grasping Provençal legates, or at the mercy of the bands of foreign mercenaries that moved over the country practically at their will; the great basilicas of Rome and holy places of Catholicity lay in ruins, while what was left of the Roman people, abating not a jot of their old pretensions, now rendered ludicrous by impotence, fought madly through the streets and squares of the well-nigh deserted capital of Christendom. The three Beasts of Dante's allegory had made their dens in the Papal Court. It is easy to discredit the testimony of Petrarch in his sonnets against Avignon, and, above all, in his terrible *Epistola sine Titulo*, as merely poetical rhetoric; but it is impossible to reject the appalling picture of the corruption of the ministers of the Church that is given us by St Catherine herself in certain amazing chapters of her *Dialogue*. The Saint's own words make it abundantly clear that the lives of the great prelates of the Curia and of the humblest parish priests alike were too often such that the fire from Heaven, with which Dante and Petrarch had threatened the Cardinals, seemed as though it needs must fall.

The fearful pestilence that swept over Italy in 1348, the year after Catherine's birth, far from sobering men's minds, had produced the opposite effect. High and low had trembled for a moment, thinking that the end of the world was at hand; but when it passed away, Italy had laughed for relief, found spiritual consolation in the Jubilee of Pope Clement VI., and then the fantastic dance of the seven deadly sins had begun again.

Here and there had arisen men and women who looked for

righteousness; such as Bernardo Tolomei, who founded the Olivetani; and laid down his life for the Sieneze during the plague; Giovanni Colombini, the head of the Gesuati, whose family was connected by marriage with that of Catherine herself; or the princess of Sweden, St Bridget, that flower of the North transplanted to the Eternal City. But these were isolated figures, whose influence did not extend beyond a very limited field. To Catherine of Siena, maiden daughter of the fiercest and most factious of Italian republics, were given gifts rarer than the impassioned hunger and thirst after righteousness: a divination of spirits and an intuition so swift and infallible that men deemed it miraculous, the magic of a personality so winning and irresistible that neither man nor woman could hold out against it, a simple untaught wisdom that confounded the arts and subtleties of the world, and, with these, a speech so golden, so full of a mystical eloquence, that her words, whether written or spoken, made all hearts burn within them when her message came. In ecstatic contemplation she passes into regions beyond sense and above reason, voyaging alone in unexplored and untrodden realms of the spirit; but, when the sounds of the earth again break in upon her trance, a homely common-sense and simple humour are hers, no less than the knowledge acquired in these communings with an unseen world.

We see her first in her hidden life, smelling the fragrance of unearthly lilies, hearing the celestial music of Paradise, choosing Christ as her spouse, walking continually with Him in vision, conversing familiarly with Him, tending the poor, weaving crosses and garlands of flowers for her friends. Suffering intolerable pains in all her frame, compelled to live almost without sustenance of ordinary food and drink, she impresses all who approach her by her constant mirthfulness, her never-failing high spirits, her radiant happiness. Then, from the cell that she had made for herself in her father's house, she passes out into the streets of Siena; the swords and spears of contending factions are lowered before "the servant and slave of the servants of Jesus Christ," as she calls herself;

peace and harmony reign where she has passed by; the sick are healed, the dying comforted; priests and laymen alike are converted, and labour with her for the salvation of souls.

Men and women give up everything to become her followers and disciples. Youths of birth and learning, nobles and poets, leave their families to cleave to her and serve her as secretaries, binding themselves to her in worship and love of friendship; a spiritual tie of whole-hearted devotion, which she describes in her *Dialogue* as the means chosen by God to raise a soul as yet imperfect in love to the perfection of love. By thus conceiving a spiritual and absorbing love for some one creature, such a soul frees itself from all unworthy passions and advances in virtue, by this ordered love casting out all disordered affections. By the unselfishness and perfection of its love for such a friend, the soul can test the perfection or imperfection of its love for God.¹ It is like the love of Dante for Beatrice, but kindled at the foot of the Cross and consecrated at the steps of the Altar.

Gradually Catherine's influence extends beyond the walls of her native city, and her activity finds a wider field. The republics and sovereigns of Italy realise that a new spiritual power has arisen in the land; their embassies and messengers approach her, simultaneously with the requests of the humblest citizens for advice and counsel. She can urge the proud tyrant of Milan to contemplate the vanity of earthly lordship in comparison with the lordship of the city of the soul, while she exhorts the wife of a Florentine tailor to put on the clothing of the royal virtues. Her Italy is the Italy of Dante; her constant cry is the same that Petrarch had raised: *pace, pace, pace*. She throws herself heart and soul into the project of a crusade, not merely to deliver the Holy Places from the Infidel, but also as a means of liberating Italy from the hordes of mercenary soldiers that were fattening upon her fairest provinces. "I pray you sweetly in Christ Jesus," she writes to Sir John Hawkwood, "since God has

¹ *Dialogue*, cap. cxliv.

ordered, and our Holy Father too, that we should go against the Infidels, and you take such delight in making war and fighting, to wage war no more on Christians, for it offends God; but go against them. How cruel it is that we who are Christians, members bound together in the body of Holy Church, should persecute each other."¹ "Peace, peace, peace," she writes to the papal legate of Bologna, the great-hearted Cardinal d'Estaing; "dearest father, make the Holy Father consider the loss of souls more than that of cities; for God demands souls, not cities."² And to the other director of the papal policy in Italy, the Abbot of Marmoutier (himself a veritable wolf in sheep's clothing): "Christ specially hates three perverse vices: uncleanness, avarice, and the puffed-up pride which holds sway in the Spouse of Christ, that is, in the prelates who attend to nought else save pleasures, and states, and excessive wealth. They see the infernal demons carrying off the souls of their subjects, and they reckon not of it, because they have become wolves and sellers of the Divine Grace."³ An impassioned dream of a reformation of the Church down to its very foundations—*infino alle fondamenta*, to use her own phrase—overwhelms her, and leads her across the Alps, the ambassador of Christ as well as of Florence, the maiden image of the Italian people, to reconcile the Pope with Italy, to bring him back to Rome.

"Then in her sacred saving hands
She took the sorrows of the lands,
With maiden palms she lifted up
The sick time's blood-embittered cup,
And in her virgin garment furled
The faint limbs of a wounded world,
Clothed with calm love and clear desire,
She went forth in her soul's attire,
A missive fire.

"Across the might of men that strove
It shone, and over heads of kings;
And molten in red flames of love
Were swords and many monstrous things;

¹ Letter 140 (ed. Tommaseo).

² Letter 11.

³ Letter 109.

And shields were lowered, and snapt were spears,
 And sweeter-tuned the clamorous years;
 And faith came back, and peace, that were
 Fled: for she bade, saying, 'Thou, God's heir,
 Hast thou no care?

"Lo, men lay waste thine heritage
 Still, and much heathen people rage
 Against thee, and devise vain things.
 What comfort in the face of kings,
 What counsel is there? Turn thine eyes
 And thine heart from them in like wise;
 Turn thee unto thine holy place
 To help us that of God for grace
 Require thy face.'"¹

It was but a few years before that Petrarch had based the same hopes upon Urban V., the one blameless figure among the Popes of the second half of that century. Urban had, indeed, begun what seemed to be a reformation of the Church and Curia; he had even returned for a while to Rome. But soon, broken in spirit and yielding to French pressure, he had abandoned the Eternal City once more. From his retreat among the Euganean Hills, the poet had written in vain his last appeal to the Pope, in the name of Italy, imploring him not to desert her: "You saw me lacerated with mortal wounds and ran pitifully to cure my hurts, saying with Peter: 'I am the Apostle of Christ; fear not, my daughter.' And you began to pour into them wine and oil. And lo, without having bound them up, and without having lent me any medical aid, you are departing from me and abandoning me. . . . If you will not lend ear to these prayers, you will see coming to meet you Him whom also Peter met when he fled, and even as to him, when he asked, *Lord, whither goest thou*, so to thee also shalt thou hear the answer made: *I go to Rome to be crucified again.*"

Where Petrarch had failed, Catherine in part succeeded. The difficulties seemed unsurmountable. Exasperated by the misgovernment and oppression of the papal legates and officials, almost the whole of Central Italy was in arms against the

¹ Swinburne, *Songs before Sunrise*.

temporal sovereignty of the Holy See, under the lily banner of Florence and the new standard of Liberty. Divine Providence, Catherine told the Pope, had permitted the loss of territory and worldly goods, "as though to show that it wished that Holy Church should return to her primal state of poverty, humility, and meekness, as she was in that holy time when they attended to nought save the honour of God and the salvation of souls, caring only for spiritual things and not for temporal. For, since she has sought after temporal things more than spiritual, her state has gone from bad to worse."¹ Gregory XI, Urban's successor, though well-meaning, was weak and irresolute, fickle, and at times unexpectedly hard and obstinate. It is evident that Catherine had no thought of his returning as a temporal sovereign. She dreamed of the Pope as a purely spiritual power, coming unarmed in poverty and humility, conquering all opposition by the power of love alone. At Avignon, the Florentines contemptuously disowned her as their ambassador; browbeaten by the prelates of the Curia, mocked by the mistress of one of the Cardinals, cruelly stabbed in the foot by the Pope's niece as she knelt in ecstasy before the altar, she nevertheless overcame the open and secret hostility of the Papal Court and the influence of the French King. The Pope was profoundly moved by her words, bowed before what he deemed an inspired message from another world, and started by sea from Marseilles, in spite of all opposition. When a great storm scattered his fleet, he hailed it as a certain omen of success, and reassured the Cardinals by reminding them of Æneas.

Catherine did not witness the Pope's triumphant entry into Rome. As always in these supreme moments of her life, her cup was mixed with bitterness. The horrors committed in Romagna by the papal mercenaries (whom she had implored him not to let come to Italy) darkened the glory of Gregory's home-coming in the eyes of the Italians. "Nero never did worse," wrote the Franciscan chronicler of Bologna; "it was enough to make people believe no more in Pope or Cardinals."

¹ Letter 206.

For a while the Pope seems to have thrown her over, much as the Florentines had done. But early in the following year, 1878, we find her in Florence itself, full of sorrow and apprehension for the Church and for Italy, but with no shadow of personal resentment, still unshaken and full of hope, striving with all her power to bring about a lasting peace between the Republic and the Holy See.

Florence was torn with the dissensions of the rival factions: the adherents of the *Parte Guelfa*, who desired peace with the Pope; the supporters of the *Otto della Guerra*, who were resolved at all costs to carry on the war. Between the two, the nominal chief magistrates of the Republic—the members of the *Signoria*—were helpless. And in the background, scarcely heard or heeded by either faction, were sounding the ominous rumblings of a coming storm; the artisans and unemployed of the lower orders, the *Ciampi*, were exchanging fierce and secret oaths, preparing the general rising that was to overwhelm the whole city a few months later. And here one of the intensest moments of her life came to Catherine. She appears from the outset to have fallen into the hands of the *Parte Guelfa*, of which the more unscrupulous members were simply making her a tool to serve their own private ends, and dragging her name into their campaign of excluding their personal enemies from office. The adherents of the rival faction loudly denounced her as a hypocrite. On June 22nd, a formidable tumult arose against the supremacy of the Guelf Party. A mixed mob, including recruits from the lowest populace, sacked and burned the houses of those of the party, including Catherine's chief friends and supporters, the Canigiani and Soderini, whom they regarded as responsible for its unpopular measures. Catherine's own life was threatened. For one brief, ineffable moment, she tasted in anticipation the longed-for joys of martyrdom, only to be bitterly disillusioned when the would-be murderer threw down his weapon. "I tell you that to-day I wish to begin anew, in order that my sins may not drag me back from the great bliss of giving my life

for Christ crucified." Thus does she announce what had happened in a letter to Fra Raimondo da Capua, her disciple and confessor, the worthy biographer of one of the noblest of women.

"My desire was not fulfilled of giving my life for the truth and for the sweet Spouse of Christ. But the Eternal Bridegroom played a great trick upon me. Needs must I weep, because so great has been the multitude of my iniquities that I did not merit that my blood should give life, nor illumine the blinded minds, nor pacify the son with the father, nor to build up a stone with my blood in the mystical body of Holy Church. Nay, it seemed that the hands were bound of him who wished to do it. And when I said: *I am she; take me and let this family be*; my words were knives that straightway pierced his heart. O my father, do you too feel wondrous joy, because never have I experienced in myself like mysteries with so great joy. Here was the sweetness of truth; here was the gladness of an upright and pure conscience; here was tasted the time of the first martyrs, as you know, foretold by the Eternal Truth. No tongue would suffice to tell the greatness of the bliss that my soul feels. For this I think myself so bound to my Creator that, if I were to give my body to burn, it seems not to me that I could make adequate return for so great a grace as I and my beloved sons and daughters have received. All this I tell you, not that you may receive bitterness, but that you may feel ineffable delight with sweetest gladness; and that you and I may begin to bewail my imperfection, since so great bliss was prevented by my sins. Now how blessed would my soul have been, if, for the most sweet Spouse and for love of the Blood and for the salvation of souls, I had given my blood!"¹

With the conclusion of the peace between Florence, with her confederate cities, and the Holy See, Catherine's second great political work was done. "O dearest children," she wrote from Florence, on July 18th, 1878, when the symbolic

¹ Letter 295.

branch of olive was brought to the city, "God has heard the cry and the voice of His servants, that for so long a time have cried out in His sight, and the wailing that for so long they have raised over their children dead. Now are they risen again; from death are they come to life, and from blindness to light. O dearest children, the lame walk and the deaf hear, the blind eye sees and the dumb speak, crying with loudest voice: *peace, peace, peace*; with great gladness, seeing those children returning to the obedience and favour of their father, and their minds pacified. And, even as persons who now begin to see, they say: Thanks be to Thee, Lord, who hast reconciled us with our Holy Father. Now is the Lamb called holy, the sweet Christ on earth, where before he was called heretic and Patarin. Now do they accept him as father, where hitherto they rejected him. I wonder not thereat, for the cloud has passed away and the serene weather come. Rejoice, rejoice, dearest children, with a sweetest weeping of gratitude before the supreme and eternal Father; not calling yourselves contented at this, but praying Him soon to lift up the banner of the most holy Cross. Rejoice, exult in Christ, sweet Jesus; let our hearts burst at the sight of the largesse of the infinite goodness of God. Now is made the peace, in spite of those who would fain have prevented it. Defeated is the infernal demon."¹

Even as Catherine had not shared in the triumphant return of Gregory XI. to Rome, so now she was not present in person when the peace between Florence and Urban VI. was formally proclaimed. She gathered her followers round her and announced her intention of instantly returning to Siena, now that her work was done. Such was the excitement in the city that it was not thought safe for her even to have an audience with the Signoria. She looked her last upon the beautiful city by the Arno, and went quietly home. The priors of the Republic announced the peace from the balcony of the Palazzo Vecchio, and all the city was illuminated. Two days later, the

¹ Letter 308.

whole populace was in arms, and the disastrous revolution of the Ciompi burst over Florence.

Among the Strozzi manuscripts in the National Library at Florence, I recently discovered a copy of the (hitherto unknown) letter which Catherine addressed on this occasion to the Florentine Signoria—the Gonfaloniere and Priors of the Republic. It is her farewell to Florence. "You have the desire," she says, "of reforming your city; but I tell you that this desire will never be fulfilled unless you strive to throw to the ground the hatred and rancour of your hearts and your love of yourselves, that is, unless you think not of yourselves alone, but of the universal welfare of all the city." She suggests certain obvious reforms in the choice of magistrates, urges them to see that the conditions of the peace are properly carried out, and delicately hints that the exiles should be recalled. Then she speaks about herself:—

"Let the sorrow that I feel at seeing your city (which I regard as mine) in such great trouble be my excuse. I did not expect to have to write to you; but I thought, by word of mouth and face to face, to say these things to you, for the honour of God and your own utility. For my intention was to visit you and to rejoice with you at the holy peace, for which peace I have laboured so long in all that I have been able, according to my possibility and my small power; if I had had more power, I would have used more. After rejoicing with you, and thanking the Divine Goodness and you, I would have departed and gone away to Siena. Now it seems that the demon has sowed so much, unjustly, in their hearts against me that I have not wished that sin should be added to sin; for thereby would the ruin be only increased. I have gone away, with the divine grace; and I pray the supreme eternal Goodness to pacify and unite and bind your hearts together, one with the other, so in love of charity that neither demon nor creature can ever separate you. Whatever can be done by me for your welfare will I gladly do, even unto death, in spite of demons visible and invisible, who would impede

every holy desire. I go away consoled, in as much as that is accomplished in me which I set before my heart when I entered this city, never to depart, though I should have to die for it, until I saw you, the children, reconciled with your father, seeing such peril and loss in souls and bodies; I go away grieving and with sorrow, since I leave the city in such great bitterness. But may eternal God, who has consoled me with the one, console me with the other, so that I may see and hear that you are pacified in a good and firm and perfect state, that you may be able to render glory and praise to His name, and not stand under arms with such great affliction. I hope that the sweet clemency of God will turn the eye of His mercy, and fulfil the desire of His servants."¹

It was in the brief interval between her leaving Florence and her going to Rome, a few months of comparative peace which she enjoyed at Siena between the reconciliation of the Tuscan republics with the Pope and the dissolution of the Catholic world by the great Schism, that Catherine composed her great book: the *Dialogue, or Treatise on Divine Providence*, also known as the *Book of Divine Doctrine*. "She returned home," writes Fra Raimondo, "and set herself with the utmost diligence to the composition of a certain book which, inspired by the supreme Spirit, she dictated in her own vernacular. She had besought her secretaries (who were wont to write the letters that she despatched in all directions) diligently to observe everything when, according to her custom, she was rapt out of her corporeal senses, and then carefully to write down whatever she dictated. This they did attentively, and compiled a book full of high and most salutary doctrines which had been revealed to her by the Lord." In her letters she simply refers to it as *il libro*, "the book in which I found some recreation"; and, although her friends and disciples thus describe her as dictating it to her secretaries while "rapt in

¹ I hope to publish in an Appendix to my forthcoming Life of St Catherine the original text of a number of her unpublished letters, together with the true version of others at present known only in a mutilated form.

singular excess and abstraction of mind," it is not clear that she herself would have made any claims of supernatural authority for it, or have regarded it as anything more than the pious meditations of a spirit "athirst with very great desire for the honour of God and the salvation of souls," one who (in her own characteristic phrase) "had dwelt in the cell of knowledge of self, in order better to know the goodness of God."

The book is a treatise on the whole spiritual life of man, in the form of a prolonged dialogue, or series of dialogues, between the Eternal Father and the impassioned human soul, who is here clearly Catherine herself. It reads somewhat less ecstatically than her letters—with the more mystical of which its contents are very closely related—and is in parts drawn out to a considerable length, and moves somewhat slowly. The effect is that of a mysterious voice from the cloud, talking on in a great silence, and the result is monotonous, because the listener's attention becomes overstrained. Here and there, it is almost a relief when the divine voice ceases, and Catherine herself takes up the word. At other times, however, we feel that we have almost passed behind the veil that shields the Holy of Holies, and that we are in very truth hearing Catherine's rendering into finite words of unspeakable things which she has learned by intuition in that half hour during which there is silence in Heaven.

And withal, the mysticism of St Catherine, like the whole of her life, is practical and altruistic. "No virtue can be perfect or bear fruit," she says, "unless it be exercised by means of one's neighbour."¹ The importance of the *Dialogue* in the history of Italian literature has never been fully realised. In a language which is singularly poor in mystical works, it stands with the *Divina Commedia* as one of the two supreme attempts to express the eternal in the symbolism of a day, to paint the union of the soul with the suprasensible while still imprisoned in the flesh. The whole of Catherine's life is the realisation of

¹ *Dialogue*, cap. xi.

the end of Dante's work: "to remove those living in this life from the state of misery, and lead them to the state of felicity"; and the mysticism of Catherine's book is the same as that of Dante's poem, as he declares to Can Grande that the whole *Commedia* "was undertaken not for speculation, but for practical results. For albeit in some parts or passages it is handled in the way of speculation, this is not for the sake of speculation, but for the sake of practical results."¹

The same applies to Catherine's letters, of which we possess (between published and unpublished) about four hundred. It is easier to speak of their literary and historical importance than of their spiritual fragrance, as of lilies of the valley plucked in some shaded world-forsaken garden, imbued with an unearthly, mystical beauty, as grown under suns that rose from a suprasensible orient. Their language is the purest Tuscan of the golden age of the Italian vernacular; their eloquence is spontaneous and unsought; at times, in the letters as in the *Dialogue*, the richness of her ideas is such that the rapidity and ardour of her thought outleaps the bounds of speech, metaphor follows close upon metaphor, one image has hardly been formed when another takes its place, until logic and grammar are swept away in the flood and torrent of impassioned words.

At the end of one of her longest and most mystical letters to Fra Raimondo, Catherine says that she has written it and another with her own hand, the power of writing having suddenly come to her by a kind of spiritual intuition: "in order that, descending from the height, I might have somewhat wherewith to relieve my heart, that it might not burst, since God does not wish to draw me yet from this darksome life."² According to another of her disciples and biographers, Fra Tommaso di Antonio, many others of the letters still preserved to us were originally written by her own hand, including the two wonderful epistles to Fra Raimondo at the end of her life, in which she takes leave of him and of the

¹ *Epist.* x. 16 (Wicksteed's translation).

² Letter 272.

world. But at the present day, with perhaps six exceptions, we possess only copies; and these exceptions (though at least one is, I believe, shown as the Saint's autograph) were written at her dictation by one of her secretaries. Not a single word written by Catherine's own hand has been preserved.

Francesco Malavolti has left us a delightful picture of Catherine's method of composition. We see her dictating simultaneously three letters to three young scribes: Neri di Landoccio, the poet; Stefano Maconi, the best loved of all her spiritual family; and Francesco Malavolti himself, the impulsive and inconstant, who at times was drawn out of her circle, back to the amorous dance of the world. She dictates now to one, now to another; at times with her face covered by her hands or veil, as though absorbed in thought, at others with clasped hands and head raised up to Heaven; at intervals she seems rapt in ecstasy. Then, suddenly, all three stop writing and look puzzled. They have all taken down the same sentence, but for which of them was it meant? Catherine at once comes to herself, laughs, and assures them that it will be all right. "Dearest sons, do not trouble, for you have done this by the work of the Holy Spirit; when the letters are finished, we shall see how these words fit in with our intention, and then arrange what had best be done." And, of course, Francesco tells us that, though the three letters were to different people and on totally different subjects, the words in dispute were found to prove essential to all the three.

This episode belongs to an earlier part of Catherine's public career, before her departure from Florence. In the last years of her life, practically her only secretary was Barduccio Canigiani, a young Florentine, son of the Guelf politician, Piero Canigiani (who had been ruined and put under ban by the government of the Republic); he joined her spiritual family at Florence, and accompanied her back to Siena, and thence to Rome, until the end. These letters are written to men and women in every condition of life. Many are absolutely mystical, ecstatic outpourings of her heart, the

translation into ordinary speech of things overhead in supra-sensible regions; others are a nearer approach to familiar domestic correspondence, in which the daily needs of life become ennobled, and even the little fun of her friends and followers is not neglected. Others, again, assail the corruption of the times, confront the most arduous problems of Church and State, with a fervour and a fearlessness that Savonarola himself was not to surpass. Their biographical and historical value has been to a considerable extent impaired by copyists and editors omitting or suppressing passages which appeared to them to be of merely temporary interest, or not tending immediately to edification. A certain number have been deliberately expurgated, in cases where the writer's burning words seemed likely to startle the susceptibilities of the faithful. Even in the best modern editions (those of Gigli and Tommaseo), the text is still sadly corrupt and mutilated. The printed version of several of her shorter letters is little more than the devout exhortation with which she usually opened her epistles, the real substance of what she had to say being in these cases left unpublished. The text of the *Dialogue* is also most unsatisfactory; but in this case, though there have been omissions made (apparently through editorial carelessness) in almost every edition, there has been no attempt at expurgation, even in the most outspoken of its chapters.

The simple but profound philosophy underlying all Catherine's writings is the same that, put into practice, armed her to pass unsubdued and unshaken through the great game of the world.

Love is the one supreme and all-important, all-embracing, all-enduring, limitless and boundless thing. In a famous passage of the *Purgatorio*, Dante had shown how Creator and every creature is moved by love; how in rational beings love is the seed of every virtue and of every vice, because love's natural tendency to good is the material upon which Free Will works for bliss or bane.¹ But Catherine goes a step further than this.

¹ Cantos xvii. and xviii.

Not only God, but man in a sense is love. "Think," she once wrote, "that the first raiment that we had was love; for we are created to the image and likeness of God only by love, and therefore man cannot be without love, for he is made of nought else than very love; for all that he has, according to the soul and according to the body, he has by love. The father and mother have given being to their child, that is of the substance of their flesh (but by means of the grace of God), only by love."¹ And in another place: "The soul cannot live without love, but must always love something, because it was created through love. Affection moves the understanding, as it were saying: I want to love, for the food wherewith I am fed is love. Then the understanding, feeling itself awakened by affection, rises as though it said: If thou wouldst love, I will give thee what thou canst love."²

And since the supreme act of Divine Love is seen in the Sacrifice of Calvary, and again in the mystical outpouring of Pentecost, Love's symbols for her are Blood and Fire—but, above all, Blood, and sometimes finding startling expression. She calls her letters written in blood. Those to whom they are addressed are bidden drink blood, clothe themselves in blood, be transformed and set on fire with blood; they are inebriated with blood, their understanding and their memory are filled with blood, they are drowned beneath the tide of blood. And she carries this into actual life; the blood that splashes the streets and palaces of the Italian cities in the fierce faction-fights, the blood that is poured out upon the scaffold at the Sieneese place of execution, fires her imagination and seems shed by Love itself. The sight and smell of blood have no horror for her. When the young Perugian noble, unjustly doomed to death, leaned his head upon her breast in the prison, "I felt an exultation and an odour of his blood, and of mine too, which I desired to shed for the sweet bridegroom, Jesus." When she stood by him at the block, heard him whisper *Jesus*

¹ Unpublished letter to Bartolommeo da San Severino. Cf. letter 196.

² *Dialogue*, cap. II.

and Catherine, and received his severed head into her hands, blood and fire become inextricably mingled in the imagery with which she describes her mystical vision of his soul's reception by Christ. "Then did my soul repose in peace and in quiet," she writes, "in so great an odour of blood that I could not bear to free myself from the blood which had come upon me from him."¹

Ordina quest' amore, o tu che m' ami, sang Jacopone da Todi: "Set this love in order, O thou that lovest me." Following out this Franciscan line, Dante had based his *Purgatorio* (which symbolises the whole life of man) upon the need of ordering love rightly. And it is the same with Catherine. "The soul," she says, "that loves disordinately becomes insupportable to herself." And this love disordered grows up into the monster of self-love, which plays the same part in Catherine's doctrine as the *Lupa*, the she-wolf of Avarice, did in the *Divina Commedia*. "Self-love," she writes, "which takes away charity and love of our neighbour, is the source and foundation of every evil. All scandals, and hatred, and cruelty, and everything that is untoward, proceed from this perverse root of self-love; it has poisoned the entire world, and brought disease into the mystical body of Holy Church and the universal body of the Christian religion."² Self-love has turned the "natural lords" of Italy to tyrants, and reduced the republics to anarchy; it has transformed Gregory's prelates to ravening wolves, and Urban's cardinals to incarnate demons.

Man, therefore, must draw out the two-edged sword of hate, and slay this worm of sensuality with the hand of Free Will. Whether he be in the cloister or in the world, he must enter the cell of self-knowledge and abide therein. This is the cell, the mystical habitation, that he can bear with him wherever he goes. Within it he will know God and man; he will know God's love, possess His truth, and freely let himself be guided by His will. The cell of self-

¹ Letter 273.

² *Dialogue*, cap. vii.

knowledge is the stable in which the traveller through time to eternity must be born again.

And he must utterly cast off servile fear. "Servile fear takes away all power from the soul. We must utterly lay aside this fear. I think not that man has any cause to fear, for God has made him strong against every adversary."¹ "No operation of the soul that fears with servile fear is perfect. In whatever state she be, in small things and in great, she falls short, and does not bring to perfection what she has begun. O how perilous is this fear! It cuts off the arms of holy desire; it blinds man, for it does not let him know or see the truth. This fear proceeds from the blindness of self-love; for, as soon as the rational creature loves itself with sensitive self-love, it straightway fears. And this is the cause wherefore it fears; it has set its love and hope upon a weak thing, that has no firmness in itself nor any stability, but passes like the wind."²

In the spiritual strength of this doctrine, armed with her double sword of love and hate, Catherine went to Rome to fight her last battle for the unity of Christendom and against wickedness in high places. As she prayed in St Peter's, it seemed to her that the *Navicella*, the ship of the Church, was laid upon her shoulders, and that the weight of it was crushing her to death. The great Schism was convulsing men's minds and overturning their spiritual allegiance, while Urban VI. at Rome and Clement VII. at Avignon hurled anathemas at each other, hired mercenary soldiers, stirred up the ambition of king against king in the name of the Prince of Peace. Modern Catholic historians confess that it is impossible to decide which (if either) of these arrogant and ruthless men was lawful Pope; but Catherine had no doubt or scruple, and battled for Urban even to the death. Her letters at this epoch acquire a new and more passionate eloquence, but all is etherealised, purified as by fire from the grim and sordid realities of the conflict. If she did not live to see the triumph

¹ Letter to Bartolommeo da San Severino.

² Letter 242.

of the cause she had espoused, she was at least spared the sight of the worst degradation of the struggle for what was professedly, on both sides, a sacred and holy thing. She did not live to see that grim, mysterious Urban, her "most sweet Christ on earth," as she called him, in whom she so passionately believed, abandon his promised work of reform and begin to tread the paths on which the Borgias were to follow. The prolonged and mysterious agony—which she endured for three months, from Sexagesima Sunday until the Sunday before the Ascension, April 29th, 1880, when she passed away—was to her a last supreme exultation and delight. "O God eternal," she cried, "receive the sacrifice of my life in this mystical body of Holy Church. I have nothing to give, save what Thou hast given me. Take this heart, then, and press it out over the face of Thy Spouse."¹ And she believed that, by this new form of martyrdom, she was being offered up as a sacrifice for the unity and reformation of the Church.

But these are things of which one hardly knows how to speak. The mystical crucifixion of St Francis; the sounding of the blast of the trumpet of Divine Justice through Dante; the immolation of St Catherine with a new, unheard-of spiritual martyrdom; the harsher, less musical cry, the fiery sacrifice of Savonarola a century later—these are but some of the many peaks of the sacred mountain up which Love leads the human soul to union with the divine, in the quest of absolute Truth and absolute Beauty.

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¹ Letter 371.