wilt know and learn anything profitably, desire to be unknown and little esteemed. This is the highest and most profitable lesson: truly to know and despise ourselves." [1]

4. The author is no less earnest in counseling the student to be simple and pure. "By two wings a man is lifted up from things earthly; namely, by Simplicity and Purity. Simplicity ought to be in our intention; Purity in our affections. Simplicity doth tend towards God; Purity doth apprehend and taste Him. . . . If thy heart were sincere and upright, then would every creature be unto thee a living mirror, and a book of holy doctrine. There is no creature so small and abject, that it representeth not the goodness of God. If thou wert inwardly good and pure, then wouldst thou be able to see and understand all things well without impediment. A pure heart penetrateth heaven and hell." [2] Doctrine as beautiful as it is true. Only to the clean of heart is it given to see God in heaven. Only to the clean of heart is it also given to recognize the splendor of God's glory in the beautiful things that He has created. The poetry and chivalry of the Middle Ages vie with each other in extolling this pearl among the virtues. Percivale's purity of heart wins for him the rare privilege of beholding the Holy Grail. Lancelot

shows how modesty accompanied by pride has taken the place of the Christian virtue of humility in the modern world. *Idea of a University*, Discourse viii. § 9, pp. 254-258.

[1] Bk. i. chap. ii. 3, 4.

[2] Bk. ii. chap. iv. 2, 3.

fails in his quest because of his sin. Galahad's virgin heart makes him tenfold strong against his foes: —

> "My good blade carves the casques of men,
> My tough lance thrusteth sure,
> My strength is as the strength of ten,
> *Because my heart is pure.*" [1]

V.

1. The philosophy of "The Imitation" may be summed up in two words. It is a philosophy of Light and a philosophy of Life: the Light of Truth and the Life of Grace. Both the one and the other à Kempis seeks in their source and fountain-head. He does not separate them. It is only in the union of both that man attains his philosophic ideal. Vain words and dry speculations, scholastic wrangling and religious controversy, may furnish food for man's vanity, but they are unable to nourish his soul. And so, the devout author, with Clement of Alexandria, with Augustin and Aquinas, ascends to the Incarnate Word — the Divine Logos — as the source whence proceeds all truth both natural and revealed, for the criterion and the ideal of human knowledge. Here he finds unity and harmony. And if human opinions oppose one another, those alone can be true which are compatible with the revealed and certain dogmas of the Church. [2] Therefore, he begs the student to hush

[1] Tennyson, *Sir Galahad*.

[2] Human reason is feeble and may be deceived, but true faith cannot be deceived. All reason and natural search ought to fol-

the clash of systems, and seek above and beyond all system and all caviling the truth pure and simple as it emanates from the Godhead. In his day the clashing of scholastic opinion was loud and fierce, and the din of the Schools so filled the air that he stepped aside from his usual course of ignoring the issues and contests of the outside world and asked: "What matters it to us about genera and species?" Upon the solution of this problem hinged the endless disputations between Nominalism and Realism ever since Roscelin revived the issue nearly four centuries previously. The students adopted one or other theory according to their nationality. In the University of Prague the Bohemian students were Realists, whilst those of Germany were Nominalists. And when a crisis occurred in the affairs of that institution, thousands of the German Nominalists abandoned its halls and established a new university in Leipzig.[1]

2. Thomas à Kempis has in his book no place for these strifes. In a philosophic poem, which is only less sublime than that with which St. John opens his Gospel, because it is an echo thereof, the devout author lays down the doctrine of truth that runs through his book, even as it has been the actu-

low faith, not to go before it, nor to break in upon it. Bk. iv. chap. xviii. 4, 5.

[1] Cantù, *Hist. Univ.* t. xii. p. 293. Some say 40,000. See Lenfant, *Hist. de la Guerre des Hussites.* Utrecht, 1731, pp. 59, 60, and *Hist. du Concile de Constance*, t. i. pp. 30, 31. Of course, the immediate cause of the difficulty was the retrenchment of certain privileges of the German professors and students by Wenceslaus at the instigation of John Huss.

ating principle of his life: "Happy is he whom Truth by itself doth teach, not by figures and words that pass away, but as it is in itself. Our own opinion and our own sense do often deceive us, and they discern but little. What availeth it to cavil and dispute much about dark and hidden things, for ignorance of which we shall not be reproved at the day of judgment? It is a great folly to neglect the things that are profitable and necessary, and to choose to dwell upon that which is curious and hurtful. We have eyes and see not. And what have we to do with genera and species? He to whom the Eternal Word speaketh is delivered from many an opinion. From one Word are all things, and all things utter one Word; and this is the Beginning which also speaketh unto us.[1] No man without that Word understandeth or judgeth rightly. He to whom all things are one, he who reduceth all things to one, and seeth all things in one, may enjoy a quiet mind, and remain at peace in God. O God, who art Truth itself, make me one with Thee in everlasting love. It wearieth me often to read and hear many things: in Thee is all that I would have and can desire. Let all teachers hold their peace; let all creatures be silent in Thy light; speak Thou alone unto me."[2] Can you imagine a sublimer passage coming from a human hand?

3. This is not a system of philosophy. Like Pascal and St. Augustin, à Kempis soars above system, and in the mystical language so well known

[1] Principium, qui et loquor vobis. St. John viii. 25.

[2] Bk. i. chap. iii.

and understood in his day he reduces all philosophy to this principle of seeing things in the light emanating from the Word. "From one Word are all things, and all things utter one Word. . . . No man without that Word understandeth or judgeth rightly." In vain would you search heaven or earth for a more elevating, more correct, or more fruitful principle in philosophy. Was the author Realist? Was he Nominalist? He was avowedly neither. Not that he was not interested in philosophic discussions; for had he not taken a keen interest in them, he never would have penned those sublime pages. But his genius sought greater freedom than it could have found in any system. No sooner is one committed to a school, than one has to pare down, or exaggerate, or suppress altogether truths and facts to tally with the system taught by the school. Neither truth nor fact is the outcome of system or school; prior to either, both truth and fact existed. Systems and schools, in confessing themselves such, acknowledge by the very fact that they do not deal with truth whole and entire as truth, but with truth as seen from a given point of view. They may be good, they may even be necessary, as aids in acquiring truth; but they are not to be identified with it. They are, so to speak, the scaffoldings by which the edifice of truth may be constructed, and as such are to be laid aside as soon as the structure is completed. In this spirit was it that Thomas à Kempis thought and worked.

4. Was the author opposed to learning? The

many expressions in which he speaks so lightly of purely human knowledge or scholastic disputations would lead one to think that he was inclined to disparage all such. Nothing was farther from his intention. His whole life was devoted to the work of education. He had formed and sent forth, well equipped, many distinguished pupils and disciples.[1] He never lost his taste for books. To transcribe and spread abroad good books both in sacred and profane learning had been his delight. In one of his sermons he exclaims, "Blessed are the hands of such transcribers! Which of the writings of our ancestors would now be remembered, if there had been no pious hands to transcribe them?"[2] But as "The Imitation" treats of the finite and the temporal in their relations with the infinite and the eternal, naturally all things purely human, though not in themselves insignificant, suffer by comparison. In this sense does he define his position: "Learning, science — *scientia* — is not to be blamed, nor the mere knowledge of anything whatsoever, for that is good in itself and ordained of

[1] Ullmann says: "He encouraged susceptible youths to the zealous prosecution of their studies, and even to the acquisition of a classical education. Several of the most meritorious restorers of ancient literature went forth from his quiet cell, and he lived to see in his old age his scholars, Rudolph Lange, Count Maurice of Spiegelberg, Louis Dringenberg, Antony Liber, and, above all, Rudolph Agricola and Alexander Hegius, laboring with success for the revival of the sciences in Germany and the Netherlands. Accordingly Thomas was not without scientific culture himself or the power of inspiring a taste for it in others." *Reformatoren vor der Reformation.* Eng. tr. vol. ii. p. 135.

[2] Sermon on the text: *Christus scribit in terra.*

God; but," he adds, looking at things from his elevated point of view, and in all truth may he say it, "a good conscience and a virtuous life are always to be preferred before it." He condemns not the knowledge, but the pride, the vanity, the worldliness that are sometimes found in its train. "Because many endeavor rather to get knowledge than to live well, they are often deceived, and reap either none or but little fruit." In like manner, the author places true greatness, not in great intellectual attainments, but rather in great love and humility: "He is truly great that hath great love. He is truly great that is little in himself and that maketh no account of any height of honor."[1]

VI.

1. Here we find ourselves at the second word in which the philosophy of "The Imitation" is summed up. It is not only the Light of Truth; it is also the Life of Grace. This life consists in the practice of the Christian virtues; the practice of the Christian virtues leads up to union with Christ; and union with Christ is consummated in the Holy Eucharist. Such is the author's philosophy of life, and in its development does his genius especially glow. He is mystical, eloquent, sublime. He soars into the highest regions of truth in which meet both poetry and philosophy. Following in the footsteps of Christ, heeding his words, living in intimate union with Him, loving

[1] Bk. i. chap. iii.

Him with a love that counts no sacrifice too great, trampling under foot all things displeasing to Him, bearing one's burden cheerfully for his sake — such is the life of the soul as revealed in this wonderful book. Therein is stress laid on the all-important truth that this spiritual life should primarily be built upon doctrine. Conscience must be instructed and trained to form correct decisions: "My words are spirit and life, and not to be weighed by the understanding of man. . . . Write thou my words in thy heart, and meditate diligently on them, for in time of temptation they will be very needful for thee."[1] . . . Then Love steps in and fructifies the soul and makes it bear good actions, actions acceptable and pleasing to God. It is the vital principle energizing the world of Grace. Here à Kempis bursts forth into a canticle of love that finds in every soul a responsive chord: "Love is a great thing, yea, a great and thorough good. . . . Nothing is sweeter than Love, nothing more courageous, nothing higher, nothing wider, nothing more pleasant, nothing fuller nor better in heaven and earth; because Love is born of God, and can rest but in God above all created things." One must read the whole poem to understand and taste its great worth.[2] Be it further noted how this canticle of love is followed by a more practical commentary, in the form of a dialogue between Christ and the soul, all written with the most consummate art: —

[1] Bk. iii. chap. iii. 1, 4; iv. 3.
[2] Bk. iii. chap. v.

"CHRIST. My son, thou art not yet a courageous and wise lover.

"SOUL. Wherefore sayest Thou this, O Lord?

"CHRIST. Because for a slight opposition thou givest over thy undertakings, and too eagerly seekest consolation. A courageous lover standeth firm in temptation, and giveth no credit to the crafty persuasions of the enemy. As I please him in prosperity, so in adversity am I not unpleasing to him. A wise lover regards not so much the gift of him who loves him, as the love of the giver." [1]

2. Here I would call attention to a recently expressed misapprehension of this love. We are told: "This 'love' of 'The Imitation' is no longer the naïve, childlike, warmly vital love of the optimistic warrior who in this world cheerfully serves God, like a St. Christopher, because God is the strongest. This new sort of love is a mystical adoration. It produces acts, but they are done in a dream-like sort of somnambulistic ecstasy; they are the acts of one hypnotized, so to speak, by a long look heavenwards. Strength this love has, but it is the strength of gazing; movement it has, but it is an anæsthetic, unconscious sort of movement." [2] Not so have we read "The Imitation." We find in it mysticism, rhapsody, ecstasy; but we nowhere find quietism, dreaminess, hypnotic influence. The love of which à Kempis speaks is eminently practical. The author, in his earnest search for philosophic truth, when taking an esti-

[1] Bk. iii. chap. vi.

[2] Josiah Royce, *The Spirit of Modern Philosophy*, p. 53.

mate of that love, was reckoning upon a natural and purely human basis, whereas à Kempis was dealing with supernatural elements. Hence the misapprehension. It is very difficult for the non-Catholic mind to understand how the love of God may envelop and absorb a soul and yet leave that soul thoroughly practical in every-day affairs. Theresa of Jesus and Ignatius Loyola were both mystics, highly favored with visions and revelations from God, but they were also active and energetic. The activity that grows out of love for God is one of zeal, energy, devotedness, thoroughness. À Kempis was himself a busy, practical man, and he never could have separated the idea of Christian perfection from the duties and responsibilities of life. He never could have inculcated a love that would paralyze action. He was no apostle of quietism.

3. The loving soul is instructed in the diverse ways of guarding and preserving grace and virtue, of overcoming temptations, of fleeing and contemning the world, of trying to be meek and lowly and forbearing, and of seeking intimate union with the Beloved. The inclinations of nature, the windings and subterfuges of passion, the dangers from within one's self and the troubles and annoyances that come from without, are all treated with a terseness, clearness, simplicity, and unction that are not met with outside of the sacred Scriptures from which they are reflected. But the devout soul is especially to seek strength and comfort and consolation in union with Christ in the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist. This heavenly

gift contains food for the hungering, healing for the sick; it is the fountain at which the weary and parched soul may slake her thirst; it is the fruition of all life, the goal of all struggle, the crowning of all effort. Hear how beautifully the pious author expresses the soul's great need for this saving food: "Whilst I am detained in the prison of this body, I acknowledge myself to stand in need of two things, to wit, food and light. Unto me, then, thus weak and helpless, Thou hast given Thy Sacred Body for the nourishment both of my soul and body; and Thy Word Thou hast set as a light unto my feet. Without these two I should not be able to live, for the word of God is the light of my soul, and Thy Sacrament the bread of life. . . . Thanks be unto Thee, O Thou Creator and Redeemer of mankind, who to manifest Thy love to the whole world hast prepared a great supper, wherein Thou hast set before us to be eaten, not the typical lamb, but Thy most Sacred Body and Blood, rejoicing all the faithful with this holy banquet, and replenishing them to the full with the cup of salvation in which are all the delights of paradise; and the holy angels do feast with us, but yet with a more happy sweetness."[1]

4. Thus it is that heaven and earth centre in the Eucharist. All the yearnings of the devout soul for union with the Godhead find their consummation in the worthy reception of our Lord in this Sacrament of his love. Every act of virtue is an act of preparation for its reception in the future

[1] Bk. iv. chap. xi. 4, 5.

and of thanksgiving for past Communions. And so the Holy Eucharist becomes the central object of all spiritual life. All this is developed with great ingenuity in the fourth book of "The Imitation." There are several editions with this book omitted. Those making the omission little think that they are losing sight of the principle and the motives underlying the other books. But so it is. They are constructing an arch without a keystone. They are giving us the play of "Hamlet" with the part of Hamlet omitted. They are indeed still distributing good and wholesome thoughts; but at the same time they are destroying the unity of the book and mistaking its philosophy. It is no longer Thomas à Kempis; it is Thomas à Kempis diluted and seasoned to suit individual palates.

5. Draper, equally mistaken as to the importance of the fourth book as a clue to the others, imputed to the pious author motives which the author would have repudiated, and assigned his book a purpose for which it was never intended. "Its quick celebrity," this writer tells us, "is a proof how profoundly ecclesiastical influence had been affected, for its essential intention was to enable the pious to cultivate their devotional feelings without the intervention of the clergy. . . . The celebrity of this book was rather dependent on a profound distrust everywhere felt in the clergy both as regards morals and intellect."[1] The assertion is gratui-

[1] *Intellectual Development of Europe*, p. 470. Mr. Lecky calls this work "extremely remarkable." *History of European Morals*, vol. i. p. 105. The writer has found it remarkable in its systematic efforts at misreading history and misinterpreting events.

tous. There was nothing in the life or character of the author to warrant the statement. It is contradicted by the work itself. No man speaks more reverently of the functions of the Altar, or holds in greater esteem the dignity of the priesthood than does this same Thomas à Kempis, himself a worthy priest. "Great is the dignity of priests, to whom that is given which is not granted to angels; for priests alone rightly ordained in the Church have power to celebrate and consecrate the Body of Christ."[1] . . . And he thus concludes his beautiful eulogy on the priest at the altar: "When a priest celebrates, he honors God, he rejoices the angels, he edifies the Church, he helps the living, he obtains rest for the dead, and makes himself partaker of all good things."[2] Thus it is that Thomas places the priest between God and the people as their mediator through the sacrifice of the Mass. Surely he could establish no stronger bond of union between clergy and laity. Where, then, is the distrust of which this writer speaks? You may search the book from cover to cover and you will seek in vain for a single word tending by any manner of means, directly or indirectly, to promote or widen the estrangement of the clergy from the laity. Another writer, a Protestant, regarded Thomas à Kempis in this same relation, but his conclusion was the very reverse. He read, as every truth-loving historian must read, that its author "recognizes the existing hierarchy and ecclesiastical constitution in their whole extent, together with the priesthood in its function of mediating between God and man, and . . . on every occasion insists upon ecclesiastical obedience as one of the greatest virtues."[1] This is the whole spirit and intention of à Kempis. The secret of the celebrity of "The Imitation" goes deeper than the popularity of the hour. Let us consider it for a moment.

[1] Bk. iv. chap. v. 5. [2] *Ibid.* v. 6.

VII.

1. How, it may be asked, was the author able to compass, within the covers of this slender volume, so much wisdom, such a vast spiritual experience, such beautiful poetry and such profound philosophy. And he has done all this with a grasp and terseness of expression to which no translation has ever been able to do justice. It is because Thomas à Kempis is more than a pious monk, picking up the experiences of the saints and Fathers who preceded him; he is one of the world-authors; and "The Imitation" is so clearly stamped with the impress of his genius, that wherever men can read they recognize it as a book that comes home to their business and bosoms for all time. Go where we will, we shall perceive its silent influence working for good, and upon natures that seem least prepared to be affected by it. Thus we read how a Moorish prince shows a missionary visiting him a Turkish version of the book, and tells him that he

[1] Ullmann, *Reform. vor der Ref.* Eng. tr. vol. ii. p. 156.

prizes it above all others in his possession.[1] That prince may not have been a good Mohammedan in so prizing this little book;[2] but if he read it with sincerity and thoughtfulness he was all the better man for it. The transition from the cold and fixed fatalism, the barren piety and fierce tribe-spirit of the Korân to the life and warmth and soothing words of "The Imitation," must indeed have been to him a new revelation that helped to burst the bands and cerements of many a Mohammedan prejudice.

2. Again, the book has always been a consoler in tribulation. Louis XVI., when a prisoner, found great comfort in its pages, and read them day and night. La Harpe, in his love and admiration for what in his day was considered elegant literature, thought the book beneath his notice, even as the Humanists before him had regarded St. Paul. But La Harpe comes to grief, and imprisoned in the Luxembourg meets with it, and, opening it at random, reads: "Behold, here I am; behold, I come to thee because thou hast called Me. Thy tears, and the desire of thy soul, thy humiliation and contrition of heart, have inclined and brought Me to thee."[3] These touching words seemed to come directly out of the mouth of the Consoler

[1] Avertissement d'une ancienne traduction publiée en 1663, prefixed to the edition of Abbé Jauffret, p. x.

[2] A book hath been sent down unto thee: and therefore let there be no doubt in thy breast concerning it. . . . Follow that which hath been sent down unto thee from thy Lord; and follow no guide besides him. *Korân*, chap. vii. 1.

[3] Bk. iii. chap. xxi. 5.

himself. It was like an apparition. He says: "I fell on my face and wept freely." Ever after "The Imitation" was one of La Harpe's most cherished books.

3. Once more: a woman of superior genius grandly weaves into one of her most powerful novels the great influence which this book wields for good. The heroine is represented with her young soul stifling in the atmosphere of sordid aim and routine existence, her desires unsatisfied, her yearnings finding no outlet; groping in thickest darkness, impulsive, thoughtless, imprudent, and withal well-meaning. Trouble and misfortune have come upon her, and she has not yet learned the lesson of Christian patience and long-suffering. Her restive soul beats against the cage of circumstances with hopeless flutter. An accident puts her in possession of a copy of "The Imitation." She reads the book. It thrills her with awe, "as if she had been wakened in the night by a strain of solemn music telling of beings whose soul had been astir while hers was in stupor." It is to her the revelation of a new world of thought and spirituality. She realizes that life, even in her confined sphere of action and routine existence, may be ennobled and made worth living. Was this woman transcribing a chapter from her own life? In reading these magnificent pages we feel that what George Eliot so graphically recorded of Maggie Tulliver, she had found engraven on the heart of Marian Evans.[1]

[1] George Eliot is the *nom de plume* of Marian Evans, successively Mrs. George Lewes and Mrs. Cross.

This is all the more remarkable, as she did not recognize the divine source of inspiration whence à Kempis drew so copiously. But she too had had her soul-hungerings, and had found many a pressing question answered by "this voice out of the far-off Middle Ages" much more efficiently than in feeding on the husks of Positivism and Agnosticism. And with her experience of the magic book well might she pay it this eloquent tribute: "I suppose that is the reason why the small, old-fashioned book, for which you need only pay sixpence at a book-stall, works miracles to this day, turning bitter waters into sweetness, while expensive sermons and treatises, newly issued, leave all things as they were before. It was written down by a hand that waited for the heart's prompting; it is the chronicle of a solitary hidden anguish, struggle, trust, and triumph, not written on velvet cushions to teach endurance to those who are treading with bleeding feet on the stones. And so it remains to all time a lasting record of human needs and human consolations; the voice of a brother who, ages ago, felt, and suffered, and renounced, in the cloister, perhaps, with serge gown and tonsured head, with much chanting and long fasts, and with a fashion of speech different from ours, but under the same silent far-off heavens, and with the same passionate desires, the same strivings, the same failures, the same weariness."[1] Not with the same failures, for this good monk sought only God and God was with him; not with the

[1] *The Mill on the Floss*, bk. iv. chap. iii. p. 272.

same weariness, for possessing God in his heart, he was filled with joy, and in all gladness of soul he took up his burden and bore it cheerfully.

VIII.

1. Here is the secret of the magic influence wielded by "The Imitation." Pick it up when or where we may, open it at any page we will, we always find something to suit our frame of mind. The author's genius has such complete control of the subject, and handles it with so firm a grasp, that in every sentence we find condensed the experience of ages. It is humanity finding in this simple man an adequate mouthpiece for the utterance of its spiritual wants and soul-yearnings. And his expression is so full and adequate because he regarded things in the white light of God's truth, and saw their nature and their worth clearly and distinctly, as divested of the hues and tints flung around them by passion and illusion. He probed the human heart to its lowest depths and its inmost folds; he searched intentions and motives and found self lurking in the purest; he explored the windings of human folly and human misery and discovered them to proceed from self-love and self-gratification. But this author does not simply lay bare the sores and wounds of poor bleeding human nature. He also prescribes the remedy. And none need go away unhelped. For the footsore who are weary with treading the sharp stones and piercing thorns on the highways and by-ways of life;

for the heart aching with pain and disappointment and crushed with a weight of tribulations; for the intellect parched with thirsting after the fountain of true knowledge; for the soul living in aridity and dryness of spirit; for the sinner immersed in the mire of sin and iniquity, and the saint, earnestly toiling up the hill of perfection — for all he prescribes a balm that heals, and to all does he show the road that leads to the Life and the Light. Turn we now from a work inspired in the calm of monastic life to a work indited amid the storms of passion and tribulation, and withal bearing a deep spiritual meaning. Let us consider Dante's great poem.

CHAPTER IX.

SPIRITUAL SENSE OF THE DIVINA COMMEDIA.

I.

A STUDY of the "Divina Commedia," in any of its aspects, must needs be a study of the age in which it was produced, of the man out of the fullness of whose soul it issued in notes strong and clear, and of the various influences that made their impress upon both the man and the poem. Of all the supreme efforts of creative genius, the "Divina Commedia" is that that can least be taken out of the times and circumstances that gave it birth. Its contemporary history and its contemporary spirit constitute its clearest and best commentary. In the light of this commentary we shall attempt to read its chief meaning and significance. Few poems admit of so many instructive interpretations; few so profitably repay earnest study. It is a primary law of criticism, that if we can pluck from the heart of any poem its central conception and vivifying principle, we shall not only grasp its meaning in the main, but we shall also throw light upon many a dark corner within its structure. And in working along the line of the Spiritual Sense of the "Divina Commedia" we shall be most likely to grasp that conception and verify that principle.