

NOTES ON THE MEDIEVAL CONCEPTION OF
PURGATORY.

BY ROY TEMPLE HOUSE.

SOME thirty years ago the German scholar R. Schroeder studied Old French monuments for references to Purgatory, and found them so rare as to lead him to the conclusion that the doctrine had taken little hold on the medieval mind. A few years later the Italian Schiavo made a further investigation which seemed to confirm the findings of Schroeder. In 1890 Peter Pfeffer published a study of the Old French *Fabliaux*, from which he draws the following inference as to the popular reception of the doctrine: "Since our sources contain not the slightest hint of the existence of an intermediate state between Heaven and Hell, of a place of purification such as is commonly termed Purgatory; but since on the contrary the righteous go straight to Heaven; and since Hell is a place of punishment, it is true, but not of everlasting punishment; since St. Peter has the power to free the souls who are burning in Hell,—two inferences seem clear: first, that the doctrine of Purgatory did not take hold of the popular imagination; and second, that belief in eternal punishment was not general."

I have not found literary allusions to Purgatory so rare in the Middle Ages as these authorities seem to have done; and in any case, it is not by any means certain that the infrequency of the theme in literature argues general non-acceptance of the doctrine. Karl Vossler, in his discussion of the Divine Comedy, maintains that the dogma is unfitted for artistic treatment, and finds Dante's handling of the subject wooden and painfully orthodox, while his Hell and Heaven have verve and freedom. A medieval poet handled successfully only the simple and decided; it remained for the modern to work with half-tints and delicate gradations.

The Persians had conceived of a separation of good men from bad, following which all the latter, by means of a period of physical suffering, attained in time the requisite purity and were all gathered together into the bliss of Ahura Mazda. As early as the second century, A. D., Clemens and Origen had developed a similar dogma in the Christian Church. They were no doubt influenced by Plato, who had conceived of punishment as education and purification. Only the absolutely and hopelessly depraved, they maintained, are

eternally punished, and even the punishment of these is educative, serving as it does for an example to others. No one is free from sin, hence every one must suffer to some extent this purifying punishment, which begins immediately after death and lasts for a period dependent on the sinfulness of the individual. But such a doctrine clashes a little with the efficacy of Christ's expiatory death; so that St. Augustine deemed it wise to step in with the teaching of Predestination, which gave Hell back all its terrors.

The existence of Purgatory was, however, emphatically affirmed at Carthage (A. D. 397), Florence (1439), and Trent (1545-63), so that there is no question as to the official attitude of the Church in the matter, during practically all her history. The Albigenses, the Waldenses, and other heretical sects, devoted a great deal of energy to attacking this particular doctrine, evidently regarding it as one of the foundation-stones of the religion from which they dissented. In the course of the twelfth century the English monk Henry of Saltrey put into Latin the story of the Purgatory of St. Patrick, which he claims to have had from a certain Prior Gilbert, who in his turn had it from the knight Owein, whose personal experience it narrates. This story, retold in French by Marie de France, is, after Dante's epic, the most famous of all medieval literary treatments of the subject. Purgatory in this story is not a place apart, but is Hell itself. By going there in his lifetime and fighting the Devils who came to tempt him, the knight was able to cleanse himself of his sin before death.

Marie de France wrote in the latter part of the twelfth century. Early in the thirteenth century, the preacher Jacques de Vitry describes again this spot in Ireland where one may enter Hell,—which if done after confession and in a contrite and repentant spirit, results only in purification and sobering, but which for the frivolous means death, physical and spiritual. This place-identification of Purgatory and Hell was of course not universal. The common thought was of an intermediate location between Hell and Heaven, as the state was an intermediate state between the two. The last prayer of Richard Cœur-de-Lion (see Cornish, *Chivalry*, p. 134), was that he might be granted a place in Purgatory from his death till the Day of Judgment, if that were sufficient to wash away his sins.

Philippe de Navarre, writing in the middle of the thirteenth century, warns his nephew: "If the young man does little penance in this life, he must do penance great and long in Purgatory." About

the same period, the romantic wandering minstrel Rustebœuf, in his *Complainte d'Outre-Mer*, speaks of the blood of Christ,

“By which the fires are smothered
Both of Hell and of Purgatory;”

which lines it is interesting to compare with the teachings of St. Augustine. The anonymous author of *Curt de Paradis* describes the sufferings of all the souls

“Which were in Purgatory,
All crying: ‘Father of Glory,
Wilt thou not yet have pity on us?’”

The unknown author of another poem called *Passion de Nostre Seigneur* explains that a shade higher than Hell is

“another stage...
There is the fire of Purgatory;
Those who attain the glory of God
Do thus penance in this place.”

In the *Parzival* of Wolfram von Eschenbach (about 1200), the hero begs prayers for the soul of his deceased father; and by the end of the century we have the elaborate treatment of the dogma by Dante. It is unnecessary to multiply citations. I have a long list of them from the Old French, but the curious thing about them is that practically none of them come before the thirteenth century. The conclusion seems clear that the doctrine crept into literature late and very gradually. That it was much the same in the real life of the period is shown by the interesting fact that clerical purgatorial societies,—a sort of spiritual insurance organization, whose deceased members' souls were the beneficiaries of masses said for them by the survivors,—are found from an early date, but that similar laymen's societies do not appear till about the thirteenth century, although they became very popular when they had once taken root. The Purgatory idea was a plant of slow growth.

Moreover, it must be admitted that there are plenty of instances of what appears a different theology,—of souls going straight to Heaven at death, with neither a tedious wait for a distant Judgment Day, nor a painful wait in a place of salutary suffering. Pope Urban said in his speech at Clermont: “If any lose your lives on the journey by land or sea or in fighting against the heathen, their souls shall be remitted *in that hour*. This I grant through the power of God vested in me.” Matthew Paris, in his *English His-*

tory, notes under date of the year 1249, "there departed to the Lord several illustrious French crusaders. . . and flew like martyrs to the celestial kingdoms." And to turn again to literature, the early thirteenth-century French poem *L'Ordene de Chevalerie* says of the knight:

"If he has done the duty of his Order
He cannot be prevented
From going straight to Paradise."

But there is no difficulty in all of this. The author of *L'Ordene de Chevalerie* was a churchman, and no doubt believed in Purgatory as implicitly as all other clerks did. But his meaning,—the very emphasis of his assertion shows it,—is to exempt the knight from a necessity laid upon ordinary mortals without exception, just as Pope Urban exempted the crusader from the common lot. Knights and crusaders were the defenders of the Church, and this exemption was their reward. But we have no reason to believe that either theologians or poets were inclined to eliminate Purgatory from the experience of mankind in general.

SAVAGE LIFE AND CUSTOM.

BY EDWARD LAWRENCE.

IV. EDUCATION AND INITIATION.

THE period of life from the age of seven until maturity is perhaps the most important in the life of our savage. It is during this period that the foundation of his future is laid, and in which he receives that teaching which will have a significant influence upon his inner life and his behavior to the tribe of which he will soon become a recognized member.

Civilized people usually consider "education" to be almost an exclusive feature of civilization and as of comparatively late development in its history. How many, for instance, have heard of naked savages attending school; of being taught therein, spinning and weaving, singing and ethics, and the manufacture of weapons? How many know that little savage boys and girls are taught a code of morality which will compare with anything that Christian civilization has to offer; that little cannibal children are taught to shun theft, to fear adultery, to honor their fathers and their mothers, and to obey those set in authority over them?

Nevertheless, all savage tribes, however low they may be, in