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Title: Matelda and the Cloister of Hellfde

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Release Date: April 9, 2011 [EBook #35811]

Language: English

Credits: Produced by Stephen Hutcheson, Dave Morgan and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team at <https://www.pgdp.net>

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MATELDA AND THE CLOISTER OF HELLFDE

EXTRACTS FROM THE BOOK OF
MATILDA OF MAGDEBURG

SELECTED AND TRANSLATED BY
FRANCES BEVAN

AUTHOR OF "THREE FRIENDS OF GOD,"
"TREES PLANTED BY THE RIVER,"
"HYMNS OF TER STEEGEN, SUSO, AND OTHERS," ETC.

London
JAMES NISBET & CO.
21 BERNERS STREET
1896

Printed by BALLANTYNE, HANSON & Co.
At the Ballantyne Press

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PREFACE

To most of us the Matelda of Dante has been scarcely more than a shape existing in the mind of a poet. It may be that she now stands before us not only as a woman of flesh and blood, but as one who has for us in these days a marvellous message. One of the great cloud of witnesses to the love and glory of the Lord Jesus Christ, speaks to us in a German Béguine, who is now recognised by many as the original of her who conducted Dante into "the terrestrial Paradise."

Whether or no we regard her as the guide of Dante, may she be to us a means whereby we "forget the things that are behind, and press forward to those that are before." May she yet be to some sorrowful souls the guide into the blessed Garden of God—the garden no longer guarded by a flaming sword, but opened to the sinner who "has washed his robes, and made them white in the Blood of the Lamb." May some to whom the future is dark and [vi] fearful, and who carry as a heavy burden the sin of past years, be led on across the river into the light, the sweetness, and the rest of the green pastures of Christ—the sin and sorrow left behind, remembered no more, for the Lord remembers them not. And in His Presence, where there is the fulness of joy, the sufferings of this present time can also be forgotten, for sorrow rejoiceth before Him.

Six persons have up to this time been regarded as the original of the Matelda of Dante. The Countess Matilda of Tuscany most commonly till modern times; Matilda, mother of Otto the Great; the nun of Hellfde, Matilda of Hackeborn; the "gentle lady" of the *Vita Nuova*, and of the *Convito*; Vanna, the lover of Guido Cavalcanti; and finally, the Béguine, also of Hellfde, known as Matilda of Magdeburg.

The claims of the Countess Matilda appear to rest on her name only, without further traits of resemblance; those of Matilda of Hackeborn have been disproved by the chronological researches of Preger; of the rest, only Matilda of Magdeburg shows any resemblance striking enough to lead to the conclusion that she was in the mind of [vii] Dante when he described the lady who sang the sweet songs of Paradise. Scartazzini, who regards the gentle lady of the *Vita Nuova* as the true Matelda, can assign no valid reason for doubting that Matilda the Béguine has a better claim. I think that few can doubt it who have carefully read the proofs furnished by the ancient records of the convent of Hellfde, and by the book of Matilda of Magdeburg. These proofs will be found summarised in a brochure published at Munich in 1873, "Dante's Matelda, *ein akademischer Vortrag von Wilhelm Preger*."

The extracts from her book, which I have endeavoured to translate, are chosen from the passages in her prose

and poetry which best exemplify the Divine teaching, rather than from those which identify her with the Matelda of Dante. That which is useless, except for purposes of historic research, has been passed over. The writing of Mechthild, especially when in rhyme and measure, is difficult to translate, and I am conscious that the rendering of her poems is extremely imperfect.

In one case extracts from more than one have been placed together; in others, only a part of a longer poem has been given. The object has been rather to pass on Mechthild's message than to give an adequate idea of the whole book, a great deal of which is defaced by the superstition of her times. [viii]

But the truth which is eternal is found richly in the midst of much that is false, and thus far, she being dead yet speaketh. That she learnt so fully much that we are now very slow to learn, is a fact the more remarkable when we consider, how lost and buried was the Gospel teaching of the Apostles in the ages that succeeded them. Their "successors" had been too often employed in "darkening counsel by words without knowledge." All the more do the love and wisdom of God shine forth in the teaching which those who turned to Him only, received from His lips. Mechthild was one who sat at His feet and heard His words, and it is well for us to hear that which she learnt of Him. A somewhat free translation has been necessary, in order to render in English the equivalent to German mediæval language; but I trust that the sense and meaning have been faithfully, however unworthily, rendered.

[1]

The Cloister of Hellfde

How, and by whom the cloister was founded and built, in which the two blessed maidens, Mechthild and Gertrude, served God.

When men had counted one thousand two hundred and nineteen years since the birth of Christ our dear Lord and Saviour, it came to pass, by the special grace of God, that the mighty and noble Count Burkhardt of Mansfeldt built a convent of nuns near to the castle of Mansfeldt. This convent was dedicated by Count Burkhardt to Mary the Blessed Virgin; and therein did he place pious nuns, taken from the convent of S. James, called Burckarshoff, of the Cistercian order, near Halberstatt.

The wife of the above-mentioned Count Burkhardt was a Countess of Schwarzbruck, Elisabeth by name. She was the mother of two daughters—one named Gertrude, the other Sophia. Gertrude married a young Count of Mansfeldt, the cousin of Count Burkhardt, and Sophia married a Burggraf of Querfurdt. [2]

Now Count Burkhardt, in the same year that he finished the building and furnishing of the aforesaid convent, departed joyfully from this present life; and after his departure the noble countess, Frau Elisabeth, his widow, found that the place chosen near the castle of Mansfeldt was not suitable for a spiritual life, and therefore, in the fifth year after the death of her lord, by the advice of persons of good understanding, she removed and rebuilt the convent at a place called Rodardsdorff. And when it had remained there twenty-four years it was again removed to Helpede or Hellfde, as the following history relates.

Now when the above-named countess, Frau Elisabeth, had removed the convent to Rodardsdorff, she betook herself thither, and there did she serve God, and ended her life well and blissfully.

The first abbess of this convent was Frau Kunigunde of Halberstatt, and a truly God-fearing and devout woman. And when she had lived seventeen years at Rodardsdorff, she there died a blessed death in the year 1251. And on the day following her departure there was chosen by the direction of the Holy Ghost, as the above-named abbess, Frau Kunigunde, had predicted, to be abbess in her room, the sister Gertrude, born of the noble family of Hackeborn, and a sister by birth of the blessed and marvellously endowed Mechthild, of whom the Book of spiritual graces gives the history. [3]

This Abbess Gertrude was chosen unanimously, as being of a wholly spiritual and devout manner of life. She was nineteen years old at the time of her election, and she filled her office for forty years and eleven days; and during her time the nuns of the cloister lived holy and God-fearing lives, and God bestowed upon them marvellous gifts. And when she had lived fifty-nine years, she was taken away from this world, joyfully and piously, and entered into the gladness and the glory of the everlasting kingdom in the year of our Lord 1291.

And when the cloister had now been standing twenty-four years at Rodardsdorff, and she had been abbess at that place seven years, then for the third time was the site of the convent changed, and it was renewed and rebuilt as follows:—

It was seen and observed by Count Hermann of Mansfeldt, a son of Frau Gertrude, the elder daughter, and Burggraf Burkhardt of Querfurdt, a son of Frau Sophia, the younger daughter of the mighty Count Burkhardt of Mansfeldt, the founder of the convent, that at Rodardsdorff there was a great want of water, so that it could not have been well for the convent longer to remain there. Therefore these two counts made an exchange of the convent with the two barons, the Lord Albert and the Lord Ludolf of Hackeborn, for the manor and village of Hellfde, adding on their part other estates. And at Hellfde was the cloister for the third time rebuilt. [4]

The nuns of the convent of Rodardsdorff were removed to the convent of Hellfde in the year 1258, on the Sunday of the Holy Trinity. To this inauguration of the convent did the aforesaid two Counts of Mansfeldt and Querfurdt invite many lords and gentlemen, such as Rupert, the archbishop of Magdeburg, Bishop Volradt, of Halberstatt, also many other lords and prelates, spiritual and temporal.

Count Hermann of Mansfeldt had no male issue, but only three daughters. Two of these, Sophia and Elisabeth, did he place in the convent of Hellfde, where they lived godly lives. One of them became an able writer, who wrote [5]

many good and useful books for the convent, and afterwards became the abbess thereof. The other was for a long time prioress, and was a skilful painter, who laboured industriously at the adorning of the books and of other things which pertained to the service of God. The third daughter was given in marriage by Count Hermann of Mansfeldt to a Baron von Rabbinswalt.

And because the aforesaid Count Hermann had no male heirs, he sold the castle and the county of Mansfeldt to the Burggraf Burkhardt of Querfurdt. And thus did Mansfeldt and the land come into the family of Querfurdt, as also other estates of Count Hermann in the land of Thuringia.

In the cloister of Hellfde there lived many most excellent persons, the children of counts and lords, and of nobles and common people. And for near ninety years the community lived after the manner of cloistered nuns, a life as it were angelic. And the Lord Jesus was so intimately known to the persons of this community that they communed with Him, as with their most dearly beloved Lord and Bridegroom, as one good friend would speak [6] with another. And the angels of heaven had a special joy and gladness in beholding this blessed company, of which much might be written, but which for brevity's sake we will not write, as much is told of these things in the Book of spiritual graces.

At last, in the year 1342, after the birth of Christ our dear Lord, there arose a great dispute between the Duke of Brunswick and the Count of Mansfeldt, whose name was Burkhardt. And this dispute arose because a Duke of Brunswick, Albert by name, was chosen by some to be Bishop of Halberstatt, and by others there was chosen the son of Count Burkhardt of Mansfeldt, whose name was also Albert. And the choice of this latter was confirmed by the Pope.

Therefore there arose war and fighting, so that the Dukes of Brunswick invaded the land of the Count of Mansfeldt with rage and violence, and spoiled and wasted and burned all before them. And by means of this visitation of God was the convent burned to the ground, and utterly ruined and destroyed. And as the chronicles relate, it was Duke Albert of Brunswick (the Bishop-elect) and a lord of Weringenrod, who with their own hands set fire to the convent. What it was that moved them to do this, is known to Him who knoweth all things. [7]

There were also several horsemen, and others with cross-bows and other murderous weapons, who ran to seize the abbess and some of her godly spiritual children, intending to do them grievous harm. Yet, as the enemies themselves bore witness, when they were a stone's throw from these maidens they lost, as it were, their strength and force, and could proceed no further. And although it was against the will and desire of Duke Henry of Brunswick (who was also Bishop of Hildesheim) and of Duke Otto of Brunswick, and of others who were with Duke Albert, and though these endeavoured with all possible good faith to prevent it, the cloister was nevertheless pillaged and burnt.

After this, in the year 1346, the convent was for the fourth time again rebuilt, in the outer part of the town of Eisleben. (From the German edition of the *Mechthilden Buch* 1503.)

GERTRUDE VON HACKEBORN.

It was during the forty years in which the convent was under the able direction of the Abbess Gertrude von Hackeborn, that it became distinguished for the high attainments of its inmates. Gertrude was of the family of the Barons of Hackeborne, whose castle and manor was situated a little to the east of the town of Eisleben. At the age of nineteen she was already marked out, by her spiritual and mental endowments, as a capable directress of the nuns placed beneath her care. It was she who persuaded her brothers Albert and Ludolf to give the manor of Hellfde for the new site of the convent, which had been for twenty-four years at Rodardsdorff. Many gifts were afterwards given to the convent by the Barons of Hackeborn, in consideration of the distinguished place held there by their two sisters, Gertrude and Matilda. [8]

For a long time Gertrude was supposed to be the author of the book known as the *Gertruden Buch*, out of which Ter Steegen made the extracts which he published in his "Lives of Holy Souls," assigning them to the Abbess Gertrude von Hackeborn. It seems now, however, clearly ascertained that the book so long attributed to the abbess was the work of a nun of the convent, also named Gertrude, to whom reference will be made later on. In this book, as also in the book called the *Mechthilden Buch*, which was dictated chiefly by Matilda of Hackeborn, and completed by the writers (also nuns of the convent) after her death, much is related of the Abbess Gertrude. She is described as a woman of remarkable character, uniting love, gentleness, and piety with practical wisdom, good sense, and mental culture. The chief feature which appears to have impressed the sisterhood, was "the sweetness of the love which dwelt in her innermost heart." [9]

Up to the last her love was active and practical. When in her latter days she was completely crippled, and in constant suffering, she insisted upon being carried to the sisters who were ill in bed, that she might speak to them a word of comfort. When at last her speech failed her, her beaming eyes, her loving countenance, and the gentle movement of her hand assured the sisters who stood around her that her affection for them remained untouched by her bodily infirmities. The sisters said it was not a melancholy, but a joyful, duty to watch by her bed of weakness and suffering.

But it was never the case during her long superintendence of the convent that this remarkable power of loving interfered with the strictest discipline, or with the wise and careful ordering of the convent life. She had no easy task when many daughters of the highest families of the North German nobles were committed to her care. They were accustomed to rule rather than to obey, and to live idle lives of pleasure and self-indulgence. But under the loving direction of the Abbess Gertrude order and industry flourished, and a desire to learn became very remarkable amongst these German ladies. Gertrude taught by her example, by the power of her word, by the decision and good sense which made themselves felt in all she said and did. [10]

Above all things, are we told, she required and insisted upon a thorough and careful knowledge of the Bible. She made it her constant care that the convent should have an increasing supply of the best books, which she either bought, or copied by means of some of the nuns. "It is certain," she said, "that if the zeal for study should decrease, and the knowledge of Holy Scripture diminish, all true spiritual life would come to an end."

There was soon an excellent school formed in the convent, which has left proofs of its remarkable character, [11] as in the case of the books of Gertrude and Matilda, which were written by nuns of the convent. The second part of the *Gertrude Book*, written by the Nun Gertrude herself, is said to be an example of fluency in Latin rarely found amongst the women of the Middle Ages.

The life at Hellfde was a very busy life, and had nothing of the usual littleness of convent rule. With great spiritual fervour, there was at the same time a spirit of liberty and cheerfulness that helped forward the constant, serious, diligent work of the house. Studying and copying, illuminating, working and singing, occupied the sisters, as well as the care of the poor and the sick; and above all, the study of the Word of God.

Besides the two sisters, the Abbess Gertrude and Matilda of Hackeborn, two other nuns were distinguished by remarkable gifts. One of these, called on account of her office the Lady Matilda, was the leader and teacher of the choir, and also the chief teacher in the school of the convent. She appears to be the same as Matilda von Wippra mentioned in the Querfurdt Chronicles. Much is related of her great gift as a teacher, and of the power which [12] accompanied her words. "Her words," so it is said in the *Gertrude Book*, "were sweeter than honey, and her spirit was more glowing than fire." To her mainly was the school of Hellfde indebted for its wide reputation.

When the Abbess Sophia von Querfurdt (the successor of Gertrude) resigned her office in the year 1298, it was the Lady Matilda who took the direction of the convent, which remained without an abbess for five years. Matilda, however, filled this post for one year only, as she died in 1299. She was remembered for "the burning desire which she had for the salvation of souls," and was deeply lamented by the sisters whom she had loved. They spoke often of her sweet voice, and her friendliness, and her holy conversation.

Last, but not least, was the Nun Gertrude, whose name is attached to the *Gertrude Book*, four of the five books of which were written in Latin by an unnamed sister, and one book, the second, was the work of Gertrude herself.

Her history is but little known. She was born on January 6, 1256, apparently in Thuringia, and of poor parents, and from her fifth year she had been an inmate of the convent. Very early she became remarkable for her [13] thirst for knowledge, and as a girl she devoted herself to severe study, having the singular predilection of an enthusiastic love of grammar. She soon left far behind her all the other nun-students, and till her twenty-fifth year was entirely absorbed in secular learning.

It was then that the great era in her life, described by her in the *Gertrude Book*, is to be dated. It was her conversion to God, [1] her passage from death to life. She knew for the first time the love of Him who had borne her sins; she knew herself justified by faith in Him. This happened in the year 1281. More will be related of this remarkable woman.

It may have been that amongst the means which led to her conversion was an event which happened sixteen years earlier, and which has yet to be related. But before entering upon this part of the history of Hellfde, a few words must be said regarding the dark side of the picture presented to us in the records of this and other convents of the thirteenth century.

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THE DARK SIDE OF HELLFDE.

That to Christian life in each of the past nineteen centuries there is a dark side, is an obvious fact. But as the dark side has been constantly regarded as the bright side by the Christians of each century, our task in discovering it must not consist merely of a study of old records. We have to compare the facts related, and the praise and blame attached to them, with something less variable than the human conscience and human opinion.

The "piety," attributed to the mediæval saints, even when, as in the case of the nuns of Hellfde, it actually existed, included a mass of heathenish superstition, of unwholesome excitement of the brain and nerves; of blank ignorance of the true meaning of a great part of the Word of God; and in most cases, of abject submission to a fallen and heretical Church.

The "best books" of which the Abbess Gertrude formed her convent library contained grains of truth in masses of error, and some true facts smothered beneath piles of legendary rubbish. To find the pearls at the bottom of the sea of superstition and senseless legend, is at times a despairing endeavour. Yet the pearls are there, and [15] must have been there; for the gates of the grave have never prevailed against the true Church of God. Some there always were taught by the Holy Spirit of God, and believing in the midst of their errors and wanderings the great eternal truths of the Gospel.

If we are to find true faith, if we are to find truth at all in the Middle Ages, we must find it amongst innumerable human inventions, and shining like a gem in the dark caverns of human folly. Can we say that in the nineteenth century it is otherwise? It were well to consider, and use for the search-light we so deeply need, the unchangeable Word of the living God.

Apart from the error taught by "the Church" in those past ages—saint-worship, purgatory, the merit of human works, and many more—a bewildering element of confusion presents itself in the atmosphere of visions and revelations in which the "pious" perpetually lived, or desired to live. For to live what has been called in our times "the higher Christian life," meant at that time to be a seer of visions, and a dreamer of dreams. The seeing of

visions was an attainment as much to be desired as to live in temperance, or godliness, or honesty.

[16]

Whilst in our days the wholesome fear of being sent to a lunatic asylum serves as a check upon the wild imagination of undisciplined woman kind, the strangest performances and utterances might in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries procure for the unfortunate woman a halo in the pictures which perpetuated her memory.

It is well to look at the matter of visions and revelations in the light of Holy Scripture. That the servants of God have seen visions divinely shown to them, no one can doubt who believes the Bible; nor that they have from time to time received direct revelations from God. Also, we read as a promise made to Christian people, that "your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; and on My servants and on My hand-maidens I will pour out in those days of My Spirit, and they shall prophesy."

In the first place, therefore, we must admit that visions and revelations are, in the cases here mentioned, a reality, and a special gift of God, in consequence of the exaltation of Christ to the right hand of God, This is the explanation of these facts given by the Apostle Peter in the 33rd verse of the 2nd chapter of the Acts.

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But when we read the various accounts in the Acts of the fulfilment of this promise, or the accounts in the Old Testament of similar visions and revelations, we find one marked distinction between these accounts and those given in mediæval legends. In the Bible the point is, not the state of exaltation to which such and such a man or woman attained, but, leaving them out of the question altogether, we are simply told what it was God showed or revealed to His servants. The seeing of visions is never spoken of as being the highest state of Christian life in the New Testament, or of spiritual life in the Old Testament. On the contrary, God on some occasions gave revelations to the most unworthy, and simply used them to speak the words He put into their mouths, whether they would or no—a truth which he taught to Balaam by using an ass as an example.

But in mediæval times, a *state* in which the man, or more frequently the woman, became liable to visions, was the thing mainly to be desired. It was not as in the case of Amos, who was content to go on herding his cows and picking his figs till the Lord gave him his message. The mediæval saint was trained and wrought upon by fasting and watching, by the study of the wildest legends, and by a conviction that the seeing of visions betokened a state of special holiness. This preparation of the mind, and one may say mainly of the *body*, for an unnatural and unwholesome condition produced the desired effect. The attacks of catalepsy, of convulsions and other diseased symptoms, were hailed as supernatural signs, and the disorder of the brain as a work of the Spirit. And from one to another the infection spread, as the convulsions and delusions excited envy and admiration, and a straining of the mind after something of like sort.

[18]

The atmosphere, therefore, of the convent of Hellfde, and of many other convents of Germany and Belgium, was scarcely a wholesome one; and we must disentangle the spiritual teaching, which truly came from God, from the "revelations" which, if spiritual at all, and not wholly the result of disease, were the work of the evil one.

But whilst amongst facts well known to medical scientists, and amongst facts belonging to still unexplored and unknown regions of psychology, there may be quite enough to account for the stories, if really true, of the mass of mediæval visions, we must remember, also, that a great many of these stories were the inventions of those whose interest it was to compose them.

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The disastrous fact remained that, by means of these fables, or of real hallucinations, errors in belief and in practice were taught and encouraged. It would not occur to those brought up in a belief of superstitions, which had descended, under other names, from heathen times, to sift or examine the legends which were their daily food. It is for us to sift out from amongst the working of disordered brains, and the inventions of ignorant people, the true teaching which they received from the only Wise God, who cared for His loving, but ignorant, children of the Middle Ages, as He cares now for His more enlightened, but alas! more lukewarm, children of the nineteenth century.

There is one more remark to be made with regard to the accounts given by really holy people of their visions and dreams. Occasionally, it was merely a form of writing in symbol, as when John Bunyan describes having seen in his dream Christian escaping from the City of Destruction. There were two reasons for this in the case of the mediæval "Friends of God." It was, in the first place, dangerous to say in plain words that which would have brought down upon them the curse of the Church. They spoke, therefore, largely in symbol, whether by word or by forms and devices of architecture. This language was common to them, and it was well understood by those who had the key in their common faith.

[20]

In the second place, the want of adequate words to express spiritual truths must always be felt, and much can be said in symbol which could not be said at much greater length in plain speech. In how many words could that be taught us which we learn from the one expression, "The Lamb of God"?

And that many of those of whom the histories remain, were truly God's children, truly taught by the Holy Ghost, and in continual communion with Him as a real and solid fact, we cannot doubt. They lived a true life of intercourse with Him, clouded and bewildered by the errors of their times, by their unnatural bodily conditions, and by the fear of sinning against the authority which some of them believed to be from God—the fatal power of the Roman Church.

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In this dreamland of visions and revelations the nuns of Hellfde lived—or rather, into it they frequently wandered. They certainly at times trod the solid earth, and fulfilled their various duties in a practical manner. They also spent much time, more, no doubt, than many spend now, in "the good land, the land of brooks of water, of fountains and depths that spring out of valley and hills, and that drinketh water of the rain of heaven." It was a familiar land to those who abode in Him who is there.

And it is a relief to find that, in spite of their extreme love and reverence for the Abbess Gertrude, they had no

visions to report as seen by her. She probably had more to do with creatures of flesh and blood, with the strong wills and natures of the girls sent to her from the castles of the nobles, than with creatures of her own imagination; and she looked for revelations, and found them in the Word of God. "She undertook the most menial work," writes one of the compilers of the *Mechthild Book*, "and took a considerable part in the common [22] employments of the sisters. Sometimes she was the first and the only one at work till she called others to help her, or led them to do so by her example and her pleasant, friendly words. However busy she might be, she always found time to visit each one who was sick, and inquire if there was anything she needed. And with her own hands she waited upon them, either bringing them refreshments, or soothing and comforting them.

"She read the Holy Scriptures very diligently, and with great delight, as often as she could, and required of those under her care that they should do the same. In prayer she was very fervent and reverent, she seldom prayed without tears. She had a wonderful quietness of spirit; and at her hours of prayer her heart was so peaceful and free from care, that if she were called to speak to any one, or to other business, she went back afterwards and prayed as quietly as if she had not been disturbed. Amongst the children she was the gentlest and kindest, and with the older maidens the holiest and most sensible of friends, and with the elder women the most [23] affectionate and wise. She was never to be seen idle; either she had a piece of work on hand, or she was reading, or teaching, or praying."

It can, therefore, easily be imagined that the Abbess Gertrude suffered neither from catalepsy nor convulsions, but that she was a wholesome and cheerful woman. In her last days she had a paralytic seizure, which deprived her of the power of speech for some time before her death; but she appeared to be fully conscious, and interested as before in the sisters of the convent.

MATILDA.

We must now go back to the time when the Abbess Gertrude was in full strength and activity at the age of thirty-three. In that year, 1265, there arrived at the convent of Hellfde an infirm, worn-out Béguine, a namesake of two inmates of the convent—Matilda von Hackeborn and the Lady Matilda of the choir. The Béguine went by the name of Matilda of Magdeburg.

It would be interesting to know as much of her history as she related to the nuns of Hellfde. As it is, we have but an outline of it. We know thus much, that for Christ's sake she had "renounced worldly honour and worldly [24] riches." She had evidently been brought up, writes Preger, "under the influence of court life and of knightly company, and we see that she was accustomed to the manners of noble ladies, and to the language of the higher classes. There is a chivalric tone in her expressions which seems to link her words with the knightly poetry of her time, a poetry then at the height of its cultivation. And as in her words, so in her actions—there was a freedom and powerful independence which betoken high birth."

Yet of her family and of her birthplace nothing is known. The date of her birth we know, the year 1212. Apparently her home was not far from Magdeburg. We are told of her brother Baldwin, later a Dominican friar, that from a child he had been "brought up in all good manner of living and in virtuous habits." Matilda, therefore, had no doubt been carefully educated.

Others said of her, "that from her childhood she had led an innocent, unsullied life." Of herself she says, "that in her earliest childhood her sins were many and great. But that even then, whenever she had a trouble and was [25] sad, she prayed to God. I knelt down before my Beloved, and said, O Lord, now I am unhappy. Can it be for Thy glory that I should go away uncomforted! But I was the most simple and ignorant of any who ever desired to walk in the way of life. Of the malice of the devil, I knew nothing; of the misery of the world, I knew nothing whatsoever; and the false profession of people who are called spiritual was also unknown to me.

"But I must say this for the honour of God, that one day in my twelfth year, when I was all alone, I received the greeting of the Holy Ghost, unworthy sinner as I was, in such overflowing measure, that I never afterwards could endure the thought of committing a great and deadly sin. This blessed greeting was repeated day after day, and it filled me with love and sorrow. I had learnt from God alone what is Christian faith, and I made it my rule of life; thus my heart was kept pure, but of the mysteries of God I knew nothing as yet.

"Whilst during my youth I lived with my friends and relations, amongst whom I was the best beloved, the mysteries of God remained unknown to me. But during that time I long had the desire that, without any fault [26] of mine, I might be despised by the world, whilst meanwhile the sweetness and honour of the world seemed greater to me day by day."

This is all we can learn of the early years of Matilda in her unknown home; but we have in few touches a picture of a rare and simple nature, humbled by the sense of sin, but proud enough to desire to be despised; sweet enough also to be loved with unusual love, and to find it a delight.

In the year 1235, at the age of twenty-three, she tore herself from those who thus loved her and went to Magdeburg, where she only knew one person, a friend of her family. But she avoided this one friend, lest he should persuade her to give up her determination to live alone for God. She asked to be received in a convent, but she was refused. She was unknown and without any means, and she was looked upon with suspicion and contempt. She had her desire. She was alone and despised.

"But God," she says, "never forsook me. He filled me so continually with the sweetness of His love, He drew me into such intimacy with Himself, and He showed me such unspeakable wonders of His heart, that I could well [27] afford to lose the world and all that is in it."

What were the further wanderings of Matilda we do not know, but it was only a little while after her refusal at the convent that she became one of the persecuted order of the Béguines.

A WORD AS TO THE BÉGUINES.

There lived at Liège, at the end of the twelfth century, a priest named Lambert le Bègues. His name does not prove him to have been a stammerer; on the contrary, he was a preacher of great fervour, and attracted multitudes to his sermons. Le Bègues was probably the name of his family.

At that time the Bishop of Liège, whose name was Raoul, was a man of evil reputation. He had formerly been Archbishop of Mainz, but had been deposed from his office on account of simony. At Liège he sold by auction in the market-place the church preferments that fell to his share. The clergy of Liège, who had not been shining examples of holy living even before the arrival of Bishop Raoul, were now encouraged by his example to live in a disorderly manner, and the morals of the town of Liège were at a very low ebb when Lambert began his [28] preaching there.

It would seem that at that time, both in towns and country places, there were a number of wandering priests, who went about preaching and administering the Sacraments, without being under the orders of any special bishop. Probably they were more or less associated with the lay preachers of the "Brethren," called in a vague way the Waldensian Brethren, whose evangelising was carried on so extensively as to bring upon them much persecution in the whole of Western Europe.

It was in order to direct this zeal for evangelising into more Catholic channels that Francis of Assisi and Dominic founded the orders of predicant friars; just as in our days the "Church Army" in England has been formed to bring under Church authority the work of evangelisation, which had been set on foot by the Salvation Army.

Lambert was apparently one of the independent priests who preached on their own account, and was, therefore, free to speak unwelcome truths. He had been originally a chorister in S. Paul's Church at Liège. He was probably a man with means of his own; for not only did he preach earnestly and constantly against the worldliness of [29] the professing Church, but he provided a practical means of separating from the world.

In a large garden which he had by the river side beyond the city walls he built a number of small separate houses, which he filled with women of all classes who desired to live a secluded life and devote themselves to good works. In the middle of the garden he built a church, dedicated to S. Christopher, which was finished in the year 1184. Lambert then placed his community under the care of a priest.

These Béguine sisters took no vows; they were free to leave the community when they chose to do so. They retained possession of their money and property. They were under no convent rules; they simply promised obedience to their Superior as long as they remained in the Béguinage. But if they wished to return to ordinary life, or to marry, they had a right to do so, as married women living, of course, no longer in the community. They were not required to wear any special dress, but to be clothed in "modest apparel."

They lived either alone in one of the little houses, or two or more together, keeping house for themselves, and [30] having their rooms very simply furnished. They did their own baking and brewing; and if they had no means of their own, they had some employment by which to gain their living. This Béguine life was, therefore, regarded by the Church as less meritorious than convent life, notwithstanding the fact that the Béguines were employed in nursing the sick, attending to the poor, and in teaching young girls reading, writing, and needlework. They were free to go out with leave of the Superior and visit their friends, or the poor in the town outside of which the Béguinage was built. Some of them might even live in the town, wearing ordinary dresses, and keeping shops, or maintaining themselves by their labour.

These rules of Béguine life were multiplied in various ways as Béguine communities became rapidly very numerous in Belgium, Holland, and Germany.

But to return to Lambert, their founder. His sermons, which contained solemn warnings addressed to the higher clergy by reason of their evil ways, very soon brought upon him persecution and ill-usage. During one of his sermons in the great church of S. Lambert he was seized by order of the bishop, and imprisoned in the castle [31] of Revogne. He employed himself in his dungeon in translating the Acts of the Apostles from Latin into French.

Amongst other accusations which had been brought against him, it was said that he had prophesied the destruction of S. Lambert's Church. Whilst he was translating in his dungeon, it came to pass, on the 28th of April 1185, that the sexton of the church went up into the belfry to ring the bell. He had taken with him a pan of hot coals in order to warm his hands. A coal must have fallen through a crack in the floor into a space below, where wood and straw were stored up. In the following night the tower was seen to be in flames.

The fire spread quickly, burning not only the church, but the bishop's palace, which stood near, the houses of the canons, and the neighbouring churches of S. Peter, S. Trudo, S. Clement, and the Eleven Thousand Virgins. For three days the whole town was in the greatest danger.

The charge against Lambert was now changed into an accusation of sorcery. He was brought to his trial, but [32] the "four discreet and learned men" appointed by the bishop to judge his cause, could find no proof of any offence with which he was charged. The people of Liège, who were displeased at his imprisonment, began to clamour for his release; and he himself demanded to be set free, that he might go to Rome and appeal to the Pope.

His request was granted. The Pope acquitted him of all charges brought against him, and authorised his work by instituting him formally as the Patriarch of the Béguines.

He only survived this journey to Rome six months, and died at Liège towards the end of the year 1187. He was buried before the high altar in his church of S. Christopher. Some chroniclers relate these facts in a slightly different way, according to which Lambert was sent to Rome by the bishop with a list of charges brought against him. But the important point remains proved, that he was the founder of the widely-spread community of men and women known later as Beghards and Béguines.

For after his death, possibly before, communities of men were formed on the plan of the Béguine communities. These men maintained themselves by weaving or other handicrafts. They met together for meals and for [33] prayer, but did not have their possessions in common. They had no rule, but were accustomed to wear simple clothes—brown, white, black, or grey.

As time went on, the ranks of the Beghards or Béguines were largely recruited by the “Friends of God,” with whom they seem at all times to have been in constant intercourse; so that in the fourteenth century to be a Beghard or Béguine, meant much the same thing as to belong to the Waldensian Brethren. In consequence, their persecutions during the fourteenth century amounted at last to extermination, their houses being replenished from the ranks of “orthodox” Roman Catholics. The persons, therefore, from that time onwards bearing the name of Beghards or Béguines differed in nothing from members of Roman Catholic orders.

THE GREAT SORROW.

But to return to Matilda, who joined the Béguines at the time when they had already earned for themselves the reproach of Christ, and when, on the other hand, there were those amongst them who had wandered far from [34] the primitive simplicity of the first inhabitants of Lambert le Bègues garden-houses.

By these latter (though they, too, claimed to be the “Friends of God,”) Matilda was “bitterly despised.” And she who had lived during her youth in ignorance of “the false profession of people called spiritual” had to learn amongst “the religious” many a sorrowful lesson. Not amongst Béguines only, but on all sides the fact forced itself upon the heart of Matilda that the Church was fallen from her first estate.

“I, poor creature as I was, could yet be so presumptuous as to lift up the whole of corrupt Christendom upon the arms of my soul, and hold it up in lamentation before God.

“And our Lord said, ‘Leave it alone, it is too heavy for thee.’ And I made answer, ‘O my beloved Lord, I will lift it, and bear it to Thy feet, and cast it into Thine own arms, which bore it on the cross.’ And God in His pity let me have my will, that I might find rest in casting it upon Him.

“And this poor Christendom, brought into the presence of the Lord, seemed to me as a maiden of whom I felt bitterly ashamed.

“And the Lord said, ‘Yea, behold her, blind in her belief, and lame in her hands which do no good works, and [35] crippled in her feet with evil desires, and seldom and idly does she think of Me; and she is leprous with impurity and uncleanness.’”

And the foremost in the guilt of Christendom she found to be those who should have been the pastors and teachers, “the great he-goats, who are defiled with all uncleanness, and with frightful greed and avarice.”

To the Lord, “the High Pope in Heaven,” Matilda turned for guidance and consolation. “When I wake in the night,” she said, “I think, have I the strength to pray as I desire for unfaithful Christendom, which is a sorrow of heart to Him I love.” She prayed for the priests, that from goats they might become lambs, that they might forget the law of the Jews, and think of the blood of the Lamb who was slain, and mourn over the sufferings of the Lord.

“Alas for holy Christendom, for the crown is fallen from thy head, thy precious jewels are lost; for thou art a troubler and a persecutor of the holy faith. Thy gold is dimmed in the mire of evil pleasures, thy purity is burnt up in the consuming fire of greed, thy humility is sunk in the swamp of the flesh, and thy truth has been swept [36] away by the lying spirit of the world!

“Alas for the fallen crown, the holy priesthood! For thee there remains nothing but ruin and destruction, for with spiritual power thou makest war upon God, and upon His friends. Therefore God will humble thee before thou art aware, He will smite the heart of the pope at Rome with bitter grief.

“And in that grief and calamity the Lord will speak to him and accuse him, saying, ‘Thy shepherds have become murderers and wolves, before My eyes they slaughter the white lambs, and the sheep are weak and weary, for there is none to lead them to the wholesome pastures on the high mountain side; that is, to the love and the nurture of God. But if any know not the way to hell, let him look at the corrupted clergy, and see how straightly they go thither. Therefore must I take away the worn-out mantle and give a new mantle to My Bride, to holy Christendom.

“If thou, son pope, shouldst bring that to pass, thy days might be lengthened. For that the popes before thee lived short lives, was because they did not fulfil My will.’ And it was as if I could see the pope at his prayers, and [37] God thus answering him.^[21] And in the night I saw the Lord in the dress of a pilgrim, and as if He had journeyed through the whole of Christendom. And I fell at His feet and said, ‘Beloved pilgrim, whence comest Thou?’ And He answered, ‘I come from Jerusalem’—by which name He meant the holy Church—‘and I have been driven forth from My dwelling. The heathen knew Me not, the Jews suffered Me not, and the Christians fought

against Me.'

"Then I prayed for Christendom; but the Lord answered with bitter sorrow that He had been dishonoured and put to grievous shame by Christian people, though for them He had done so great wonders, and had suffered so great anguish.

"And so it is with me, that longing and humility and love, these three blessed handmaidens, lead my soul up to God, and the soul beholds her Beloved and says, 'Lord, I mourn because Thou art thus warred against by those who are the dearest to Thee on the earth, by Christian people. I mourn because Thy friends are sorely hindered by Thine enemies.'

"And the Lord answered me, 'All that befalls My friends, sin only excepted, shall turn to them to joy, and for the glory of God. For the suffering calls with a mighty voice saying, that beyond all worship that can be offered Me is the patience that suffers, and if for a while I comfort not, it is far better than that comfort should come from another will than Mine.'" [38]

That there were some, the "Friends of God," who shone like stars in the dark night Matilda thus found, and rejoiced to find. "But that the eagle soars to heaven," she said, "no thanks is there to the owl."

It was no wonder that Matilda was "much and continually despised" by the priests of whom she gave so bold a testimony. The Lord, she said, suffered in like manner, for thus was He put to shame because in Him was the truth. It was probably for some such plain speaking that Matilda was refused as an inmate of the convents to which she applied for admittance.

MATILDA AND DANTE.

It was during the thirty years of Matilda's Béguine life that she began writing the book which has preserved her memory down to the days in which we live. [39]

Not only does the book itself present Matilda to us as one of the most remarkable people of her age, but in a book more widely known is found, in all probability, the echo of her words, and the picture of herself as she appeared to the imagination of Dante. It is not necessary here to go into the proofs of this identification of the Béguine Matilda with the "lady all alone who went along

Singing and culling flower after flower
With which her pathway was all painted
over;"

the "beauteous lady, who in rays of love did warm herself." For those who desire to trace the connection of Matilda's book with Dante's poem, the proofs will be found in the first volume of Preger's "History of German Mysticism," and in a lecture delivered by Preger in the year 1873 on the subject of Dante's Matilda.

The resemblances between Dante and Eckhart have been remarked upon in a recent work on Dante, where, however, no allusion is made to other German writers.

"Any one who has read the discourses of Meister Eckhart, ... will be struck by the frequent and close resemblances, not of thought only, but of expression and illustration, which exist between him and Dante. So frequent and so close are these, that the reader can hardly conceive the possibility of their being due to mere coincidence." [40]

But whence did Eckhart derive his expressions which reappear in Dante? "Matilda," says Preger, "expresses herself in a language higher than that of ordinary speech, and more fitted to the nature of heavenly things. And it may here be remarked, how frequently the elements of the speech of speculative mysticism, such as we may call the speech of Eckhart, are previously to be found in the writing of Matilda. But Matilda herself was not the creator of these expressions, for her poetical nature was inclined rather to expressions of thought in a manner less abstract, and appealing more vividly to the senses. But it would seem that before Matilda and Eckhart, certain characteristic theorems of speculative mysticism had become stereotyped in the German language. They form the stock of that capital of speech by which, especially through Eckhart's writings, the German language has been enriched. Matilda is, therefore, of importance in leading us to the discovery of how far Eckhart was indebted for his expressions to that more ancient store of language." [41]

It would occupy too much space to trace here the remarkable connection not only in general between the book of Matilda and that of Dante, but between certain passages which almost repeat themselves in the later book. Others, again, which are not similar, yet stand in relation to one another. The City of Woe, for example, seen by Dante, is found also in Matilda's book, but there it is "the City of Eternal Hate;" and thus in many instances.

Matilda's book is commonly known by the name, "The flowing forth of the light of the Godhead." She wrote it originally in Low German, but of this original no copy is at present known to exist. Soon after her death, which occurred in 1277, a Latin translation was made by a predicant friar at Cologne, known as Brother Henry. Of this two copies remain, one of the fourteenth the other of the sixteenth century. The loose leaves had been first collected by another Brother Henry, also a predicant friar.

Afterwards a translation was made from Low German into High German by a priest, Henry von Nordlingen, assisted by a friend. It was completed after two years' labour in 1344. This Henry von Nordlingen, a friend of Suso, gave the High German translation to Margaret of the Golden Ring. Margaret gave it to the Waldschwester in Einsiedeln. It was discovered in the convent library of Einsiedeln by Dr. Greith in the year [42]

1861. In the year 1869 it was published in two forms by Dr. Gall Morel—first, the High German copy as discovered at Einsiedeln; secondly, a translation into modernised German.

It is from the Latin translation that it could be known to Dante.^[3]

The original book is the oldest work of its sort hitherto known to have existed in the German tongue.

"It may justly be said," writes Preger, "that this book denotes a high degree in the measurement of the culture of German women, and of religious life in the Middle Ages. With freedom and clearness of thought, the writer combines tender and deep feeling; with a childlike and naïve perceptiveness, a true sublimity of conception. Matilda frequently touches the depths in which speculative mysticism is formed, and her influence is to be traced even in the work of the deep thinker who was her compatriot, namely, Meister Eckhart, in whose language we find the echo of Matilda's speech. This language, which she employs with freedom and ease, takes at times the form of didactic speech, but it often rises to musical rhythm, to lyric song, and to epic portraiture. By the variety and life, as well as by the plastic intuition of expression, this work is distinguished from the monotonous writings on similar subjects by older authors."^[4] [43]

Much more might yet be said of Matilda as a writer and a poet. But it is with Matilda, the persecuted "Friend of God," the witness for Christ in a time dark as she describes it, that we have to do in the present instance. [44]

THE BOOK AND ITS ORIGIN.

We have Matilda's own account of the origin of her book. She says that when she began to live a spiritual life, and "took leave of the world," she found that the fulness of her bodily life and strength was a danger to her spiritual life, and, therefore, after the manner of her times she regarded the body as an enemy against which she was called to wage continual war.

"I saw that the weapons furnished to my heart were the sufferings and the death of Christ, and yet I was in great and constant fear, and I thought to deal violent blows to my enemy with sighs and confession, and weeping, with fasting, watching, and prayer, and with blows and stripes. And by this means for two and twenty years I kept my body in subjection, and had no illness. [45]

"But after this illness came. And then came to me the mighty power, even the love of God, and filled me to overflowing with His wonders, so that I dared no longer keep silence, though to one so simple as I it was hard to speak. And I said to the Lord, 'O loving God, what canst Thou find in me? Thou knowest well I am a fool and a sinner, and a miserable creature in soul and body. It is to the wise that Thou shouldst commit Thy wonders, then mightest Thou be praised aright.'

"But the Lord was displeased at my words, and He rebuked me, saying, 'Tell me now, art thou not Mine?'

"Yes, Lord, that hast Thou granted me!'

"May I not, then, do with thee as I will?'

"Yes, my Beloved; and I am willing to be brought to nought if Thou willest it.'

"Then, poor creature as I was, I went to my confessor, and told him what the Lord had put into my heart, and asked his counsel. And he said I ought cheerfully to do that to which God had called me. And yet did I weep with shame, seeing before my eyes my great unworthiness, and that God should lead a despicable woman to write the things which come from the heart and mouth of God." [46]

Then Matilda, as is her wont, runs on into rhyme—

"The love of God has moved my pen,
My book is not from the mind of men."

And afterwards, she says, "I was warned by some that my book might give much offence, and that it would be burnt as evil teaching. And I turned to my Beloved, as was my wont, and said to Him that if it were so, He had Himself misled me, for it was He who commanded me to write it. Then did He reveal Himself to my sorrowful heart, as if He held the book in His right hand, and said, 'My beloved one, do not be sorrowful. The truth can be burnt by no man. He who would take it out of My Hand must be stronger than I.'

"And yet I still answered Him, 'O Lord, if I were a learned clerk to whom Thou hadst shown these wonders, then might I write so as to bring Thee eternal glory. But how can it be that Thou shouldst build a golden house, the house of Thy dwelling place, in a miry pool?'

"And He answered me, that when He gave the gifts of His grace, He sought for the lowest and the smallest and the most unnoticed treasure houses. 'It is not on the high mountains that men drink of the fountains, for the stream of My Holy Spirit flows downwards to the valleys below. There are many wise in the Scriptures, who are but fools and unlearned in other learning.'" [47]

Further on Matilda says that in the German tongue she found it hard to speak of that which God had shown her, and "of Latin I know nothing. For that which the eye can see, and the ear can hear, and the mouth can speak, is as unlike the truth which is revealed to the soul who loves, as a candle is to the glorious sun. Of the heavenly things which God has shown me I can speak but, as it were, a little word, not more than the honey which a little bee could carry away on his foot from an overflowing vessel.

“And now, Lord, I will commend these writings to Thy tender mercy; and with a heart that sighs, and with eyes that weep, and with a downcast spirit, I pray that they never may be read by a Pharisee, and I pray also that Thy children may so receive them into their hearts, as Thou, O Lord, hast of Thy truth given out of Thy store to me.”

Matilda’s book grew in an irregular manner from year to year. She wrote from time to time on loose sheets [48] that which she believed she had received from God. There is, therefore, no connection in these writings, nor is there any plan in her manner of writing. Sometimes she wrote in prose, or in prose running from time to time into metre and rhyme. Sometimes she wrote in verse, in irregular measure, and with or without irregular rhymes, each division with a heading.

The friar Henry of Halle collected the loose leaves, and before the death of Matilda he divided them into six books. A seventh book was added by Matilda after the death of Brother Henry. Five of these books appear to have been written before Matilda entered the convent of Hellfde, and some can be dated by allusions to contemporary events. [5]

Apart from all that is interesting in these books, as literature or as history, there remains for the Christian [49] reader who “is not a Pharisee” the far more interesting field of research into their value as spiritual teaching. The Pharisee will find much to blame and to despise in the ignorance and superstition of this Béguine of the Middle Ages.

And in sifting Matilda’s writings, as indeed the writings of any man or woman, the gold, if there be any, has to be separated from the dross. The dross which had been accumulating for twelve centuries formed a large amount of that which Matilda believed she had learnt from God. We can recognise the gold by the one test furnished to us by Him who despises not any, but teaches the most ignorant who come to Him. If we apply to the writings of [50] Matilda this infallible test, of conformity to the Word of God, we may be enriched by the gold without being encumbered by the dreary heaps of dross from which we have to sift it.

The book is supposed to be the expression of the intercourse of the soul with God. That it is really so *in part*, can be verified by any Christian reader who will compare it with the Bible and with the experience common to Christian believers. That this true Christian teaching should be mixed with the errors of her time is natural, and we know that the errors of each successive age leave their traces in the books that are the most enlightened, and that our own age is no exception.

The object in view in making the following extracts from Matilda’s book is not to present it as a literary or historical study. Were it so, it would be needful to give extracts from the false as well as from the true teaching, so as to give a correct idea of Matilda and her times. But writing simply with a desire that the truth taught to Matilda by the Spirit of God should be made available for those in these later days who are glad of spiritual food, the false and the imaginary will be passed over, and the remainder given as much as possible in Matilda’s [51] own words.

It must be remarked, however, that certain expressions which in mediæval German conveyed no impression of irreverence would sound painfully familiar in modern English. An equivalent has, therefore, to be found conveying to readers now the same sense which the original words would have conveyed to the readers of the thirteenth century.

It may also be remarked that the chief errors to be noted in Matilda’s book are a tendency to the worship (in a lower sense of the word) of the Virgin and the Saints, a belief in Purgatory, and a certain weight attached to the merit of human works.

Of the first of these, it may truly be said that Matilda’s references to the Virgin Mother stand in remarkable contrast to the writings of later times. If compared with “the Glories of Mary,” now in popular use, they serve as a landmark showing the downward course of error and superstition in the Church of Rome during the past six hundred years, though there were already those, such as Bonaventura, [6] who hastened the fall.

It must be observed, too, in reference to Matilda’s allusions to the Virgin Mary, that the chasm between the [52] mother of the Lord and all ordinary believers is very much reduced if compared with that which exists in modern Roman Catholic books of devotion, from the fact that the place assigned to every redeemed soul in Matilda’s writings is far higher than in most Catholic or Protestant teaching. Even amongst Protestants it is not uncommon to regard the redeemed as in a place below the angels, or on a level with them. But to Matilda the power and the value of the work of Christ were so fully recognised, that she regarded the Bride of the Lamb, or the individual who is made a member of the body of Christ, as in the highest place next to the Bridegroom, the Head of the Body.

As regards human merit, Matilda only appears occasionally to attach some weight to it in speaking of others; of herself, she says she has nothing to bring to God but her sin.

THE JOURNEY TO ETERNAL PEACE.

It will be best to describe Matilda’s spiritual life as far as possible from her own words. She gives us in parables the history of her soul. Sometimes it seems well to give these in full, at other times to give the sense whilst [53] omitting repetitions.

She tells us that for a long time she was without rest or peace, knowing not only the guilt, but the power of sin, and she looked hither and thither for that which would meet her need. And the mind, as it were, disputed with the soul, for the mind would have her to seek her peace in the things that could be seen. And thus it said—

"O soul, in the Magdalen's bitter tears
Do the streams of comfort flow."

But the soul made answer—

"Hold thy peace,
For my need thou dost not know.
The comfort I crave is joy divine,
I needs must drink the unmingled wine."

"Soul, if as a virgin pure thou art,
A river of love will fill thy heart."

"And if in troth it so might be,
The fountain of love is not in me."

"Rejoice in the blood the martyrs shed."

"In the path of the martyrs I daily tread,
But I have not found my rest."

"In the wisdom the Lord's apostles taught,
Is there peace, O soul, for thee."

"I have the Wisdom that is the best,
He abideth ever with me."

[54]

"The angels in heaven are bright and fair,
For solace, O soul, betake thee there."

"The joy of the angels is grief to me,
If the Lord of the angels I may not see."

"In fastings and labours manifold,
Did John in the wilderness toil of old,
And so may peace be thine."

"To labour and suffer my heart is fain,
But love is more than all toil and pain."

"O soul, the Virgin is kind and sweet,
And fair the Child on her breast,
And thou, adoring, before her feet
Shalt find thy rest."

"My Beloved is mine, and I am His,
I seek the joy where the Bridegroom is;
For a full-grown bride am I." ...

Then doth the mind warn the soul, saying—

"In His terrible glory no foot hath trod,
A devouring fire dread to see;
In the blinding light of the face of God
No soul can be.
For thou knowest that all high heaven is
bright
With a glory beyond the sun,
With the radiance of the saints in light,
And the fount of that light is One.
From the breath of the everlasting God,
From the mouth of the Man Divine,
From the counsel of God the Holy Ghost,
Doth that awful glory shine.
Soul, couldst thou abide for an hour alone
In the burning fire around His throne?"

"The fish drowns not in the mighty sea,
The bird sinks not in the air,
The gold in the furnace fire may be,
And is yet more radiant there.
For God to each of His creatures gave
The place to its nature known,
And shall it not be that my heart should
crave
For that which is mine own?
For my nature seeketh her dwelling-place,

[55]

That only and none other;
The child must joy in the Father's face,
The brethren in the Brother.
To the bridal chamber goeth the bride,
For love is her home and rest;
And shall not I in His light abide,
When I lean upon His breast?"

.
And she who is beloved with love untold,
Thus goes to Him who is divinely fair,
In His still chamber of unsullied gold,
And love all pure, all holy, greets her there
—

The love of His eternal Godhead high,
The love of His divine Humanity.
Then speaketh He and saith, "Beloved one,
What would'st thou? It is thine.
From self shalt thou go forth for evermore,
For thou art Mine.
O soul, no angel for an hour might dream
Of all the riches that I give to thee,
The glory and the beauty that beseem
The heritage of life that is in Me.
Yet satisfied thou shalt for ever long,
Thus sweeter shall be thine eternal
song."^[7]

"O Lord my God, so small, so poor am I,
And great, almighty, O my God, art Thou."

[56]

"Yet thou art joined to Christ eternally;
My love a changeless, everlasting NOW."

And thus the joyful soul is still
At rest in God's eternal will,
And she is His, and thus delighteth He
Her own to be.

THE PATH OF LOVE.

We have the same history, the same "pilgrim's progress," given to us in another form. Matilda calls it "The Path of Love."—It is her own story, the years of dreary penance, followed by the revelation of Christ to the soul.

"O thou that lovest, wouldst thou know
The path wherein thy feet should go?"

"Yea, teach it, Lord, to me."

"Through drear repentance leads the way,
And the shame of sin confessed—
And when thou hast trod on the world's
display,
And on the devil's behest,
And on the flesh in its haughty pride,
And on thy helpless will,
That holds the soul of the chosen bride
In bonds and slavery still,
And when the enemy conquered lies,
And weary art thou and athirst—
Then to Him whom thou lovest lift thine
eyes,
To Him who loved thee first."

[57]

Then shall He speak and say—

"I hear a voice that calleth amain,
A voice of love and tears;
I have wooed, and I have listened in vain
Through long, long years—
And it speaks to-day.
My heart is troubled, and I must haste
To the sad sweet voice across the waste."

.
 And in the morning, when the dew is sweet,
 She hears the gentle music of His feet—
 She hears Him speak and say, "I heard thy
 voice."
 The glorious One draws nigh;
 Amidst the dew when all the woods rejoice
 With gladsome melody.
 And she arrays herself in fair attire,
 In raiment of a bride;
 Her mantle is the holy judgment fire
 Wherein the gold is tried.
 Of meek humility her stole is spun,
 Her robe is white as snow,
 For unto Him, the High and Holy One,
 She fain would go.
 And thus she passeth through the forest dim,
 Where holy people dwell,
 And day and night, with dance and song and
 hymn,
 Their gladness tell;
 With solemn dance of praise that knows no
 end,
 Hands linked with other hands of ancient
 years;
 The mighty faith of Abraham His friend,
 The longing of His seers;
 The chaste humility of her who bore
 God's blessed Son;
 And all the victories that in days of yore
 His saints have won—
 These join in dance attuned to glorious song
 And move in cadence sweet,
 And multiplied as ages pass along
 Are those rejoicing feet.

He saith—

[58]

"Beloved, do as they have done
 Who praise My name alway."

And she makes answer—

"Thou must lead me on,
 And I will dance as they;
 I move to music of Thy song
 Rejoicing over me,
 And so my halting steps are strong
 To follow after Thee;
 To pass within Thy love's eternal rest,
 And onwards to confess Thee undismayed;
 And onwards yet, till on my Saviour's breast
 My soul is stayed;
 And yet beyond that rest and joy of mine,
 To joy which heart of man hath never
 known,
 Where Christ rejoiceth in His Song Divine—
 That joy of perfect love, O Lord, is Thine,
 And Thine alone."

Then doth He speak and say—

[59]

"Beloved, thou hast praised Me in the dance
 And weary are thy feet—
 Behold in shadow of the trees of God
 The rest is sweet,
 Rest, rest with Me."

"O Lord, too great this love of Thine,
 Thine only can it be;
 For, lo! my love, Lord, is not mine,
 It comes from Thee."

Thus much do we know of the journey of this redeemed soul from self-occupation and self-discipline, whilst Christ listened for her voice in vain, to the knowledge of the peace and joy that is in Him. And we know something also of her earthly path, told us in a spiritual song, which she calls "How fair is the Bridegroom, and how the bride followeth Him."

[60]

"Behold, My bride, how fair My mouth, Mine eyes;
My heart is glowing fire, My hand is grace;
And see how swift My foot, and follow Me.
For thou with Me shalt scorned and martyred be,
Betrayed by envy, tempted in the wilds,
And seized by hate, and bound by calumny,
And they shall bind thine eyes lest thou shouldst see,
By hiding Mine eternal truth from thee.
And they shall scourge thee with the worlds despite,
And shrive thee with the ban of doom and dread,
For penance thy dishonoured head shall smite,
By mockery thou to Herod shalt be led,
By misery left forlorn—
And scourged by want, and by temptation crowned,
And spit upon by scorn.
The loathing of thy sin thy cross shall be;
Thy crucifixion, crossing of thy will;
The nails, obedience that shall fasten thee;
And love shall wound, and steadfastness shall slay,
Yet thou shalt love Me still.
The spear shall pierce thine heart, and Mine shall be
The life that lives and moves henceforth in thee.
Then as a conqueror loosened from the cross,
Laid in the grave of nothingness and loss,
Thou shalt awaken, and be borne above
Upon the breath of Mine almighty love."

Thus the revelation of the love of God, which was to the soul the opening of heaven, the entrance into the Father's house where was the feast of joy, the music, and the dancing, was to lead to a walk of faithfulness here below, which would bring upon the witness of God persecution and shame and reproach.

Was it, therefore, that when the Lord had spoken to the Pharisees of the love which welcomes the publican and the sinner, of the joy and gladness into which the returning son was brought, He spoke to the disciples the solemn warning lest the riches, not only temporal, but spiritual, entrusted to them as stewards should be wasted by [61] them? Is it not true that the revelation to the soul of that which is in the Father's house, the joy and the love, and the unspeakable riches of Christ, needs nothing less than Divine grace and power to keep us from misusing the treasure entrusted to us, and making it an occasion for feeding and exalting the fleshly mind?

Therefore Paul needed the thorn in the flesh, not to fit him for entering the third heaven, but after he had been there; so that the riches bestowed on him were not made an occasion for self-glorification, but he became a good steward of the manifold grace of God.

It is to be carefully remarked in the writings of Matilda, that she does not speak of this entrance into the gladness of heaven as an attainment. On the contrary, as we have seen, she speaks of the result of her repentance, of her conflict with the world, the flesh, and the devil, as being but weariness and thirst.

It is only when Christ comes into the parable that the heavenly experience begins.

"For," she says, "before the time when Jesus Christ opened heaven with the key of His cross, there was no [62] man so holy that he could, or that he might, ascend up into the Eternal heavens—not with labour or with the soaring of the imagination, not with longing or the stretching forth of imploring arms, not with the utmost yearning of his love. For Adam had fastened the bolt so firmly, that no man could open it. Shouldst Thou, then, O Eternal Father, keep fast the door of heaven with the bolt of Thy justice, so that sinners must remain without, I turn me to Jesus, Thy beloved Son, who holds in His hands the key of Thine almighty power.

"That key was forged in the land of the Jews, (and truly the Jews now would lock Thy people out of heaven and keep them in bondage), but when by Jesus the key was turned, the outcast sinner could enter into Thy love. But it is also the love of the Father who speaketh, and saith, 'My soul endureth not that any sinner should be turned away who cometh to Me; therefore do I follow after many a soul for long, long years, till I lay hold upon him, and hold him fast.'"

By the Jews who would lock the people of God out of heaven Matilda, it need not be said, had in her mind the Jews of Christendom, the professing Church being constantly called by her Jerusalem, and the formalist priests "those who follow the law of the Jews." [63]

But the name of Jerusalem was also employed by her as a name of honour, applied to the true Church of God, the true Bride of Christ.

For within the outward profession of Christianity, Matilda recognised the living Body of Christ. It is true that the two should have been one and the same, as the soul and the visible body are one person. But it was no longer so, and Matilda therefore saw the professing Church, Christendom, divided into two parts, the living and the dead, the true and the false, the children of God and the children of this world. To her the true and living Church was yet glorious and undivided, for it was united in one by the Spirit of God. Whether amongst professing Catholics or amongst the "Friends of God" who stood apart from Rome these living stones were found, there was yet but the one building, the dwelling-place of God.

If Matilda had no thoughts respecting the "Reunion of Christendom," she had a firm belief in the Unity of the Church of God. It could not be reunited, for it was the Body of Christ. The prayer of the Lord "that they all may be one," had been heard. "I know," He said, "that Thou hearest Me always." [64]

Through the ages when Christendom had been divided into countless sects, the true Members of Christ, whether they knew it or not, had been, and must be, one. It needed but to believe it, and to own it. But in order to recognise it as true, it was necessary that the eyes should be opened to see that the same profession of faith, or all varying professions of Christian faith, included the two classes, the living and the dead; the living, united together as the living members of the body; the dead, but separate particles of mouldering dust.

A "Reunion of Christendom," which would have as its object to form into one mass the living and the dead, can be but a denial of the great truth that "there *is* one Body and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling."

Matilda, in a parable, describes the true Church of God as a beautiful maiden standing upon a mighty stone, which was as a mountain of spices, and the name of which was Christ, her feet adorned with a jasper stone, which is Christian faith; and in her hand a cup, of which she drank alone "in unspeakable blessedness," for the angels in heaven might not drink of it—it was "the Blood of the Eternal Son." [65]

Matilda knew, and rejoiced to know, that she was one with all the saints of all the ages, and she tells us her experience of it also.

As Mary, she said, she knew how the sword had pierced through her own soul also, because so many who seem "religious" are lukewarm and undecided for Christ.

As John, "I know what it is to rest in the unspeakable love upon the bosom of Jesus Christ."

And as Paul, "Yes, Paul, I was caught up with thee, and I saw so marvellous a place, that thenceforth I could but long ever to be there. And I drank of the wine of which the heavenly Father is the cup-bearer, and Christ is the cup, and the Holy Ghost the pure, clear wine, and love is the plenishing. And love invited me and welcomed me to drink thereof, so that now I am well content to drink gall and vinegar here below."

And further, "Stephen, I kneel beside thee before the Jews who hated thee, amongst the sharp stones, which fall upon me, great ones and small ones, all my days. Those who seem to be good people stone me in the back, and run away, for they would not have me know it was they who did it. God, however, saw it." [66]

"Mary Magdalene, I live with thee in the wilderness, for all is sorrow to me except my God."

PRACTICE.

Of Matilda's daily life we know but little, having scarcely any incidents recorded in her book. Apparently, from various passages, we can learn that, like most Béguines, her time was chiefly occupied in tending the sick and poor.

She considered it needful to visit the sick in the Béguinage daily, "to comfort them with the lovely words of God, and to refresh them also in a gentle way with earthly things, for God is very rich. It is needful also to bestow much care on the cleanliness of the sick-room, and it is a good thing to be merry and to laugh with them, but in a godly manner. And it is well to serve them with ready hands, and to ask them kindly to tell what are their pains and complaints, and to show them that they have a friend who will stand by them and care for them." [67]

Household matters, too, were a part of Matilda's experience. "It is right to go every day into the kitchen, and to see that the needful provisions are good, so that our stinginess, or the cook's laziness, may not rob the Lord of the bodily strength of His servants. A hungry mouth will sing the Lord's praises ill, and a hungry man is little fit for study, and this is so much taken from the Lord's service."

Matilda also wrote letters, containing much wholesome advice. From a letter to a prior is the following:—

"We should listen to any complaints with sympathy, and be very faithful in giving counsel. If the brethren desire to build magnificently, you should hinder this, and say, 'Ah, dearest brethren, let us rather build for God a beautiful palace in our souls, with the stones of Holy Scripture and holy graces.'

"The first stone of such a palace, in which the eternal God may dwell, and where His beloved may dwell with Him, is deep humility. We do not desire to build in pride and vanity, as the lords and ladies of this world; but we do need to build as heavenly princes upon earth, knowing that at the last day we shall sit on thrones with the [68] despised Jesus.

"And make sure that during the day or the night you find a full spare hour to converse with our dear Lord and God, praying to Him without let or hindrance. For the heavenly gift which God loves to give to His elect, His beloved children, is of a fine and noble sort, and it flows freely to the soul that draws near to Him, and to whom He bends down in His infinite love.

"For His heart was so smitten with love to us that He gave up all things, and emptied Himself for more than thirty years, that He might at last embrace His beloved, and give free course to His love.

"Will you not think of this? Could you be so uncourteous to Him, as to refuse Him one hour a day in return for these thirty years?

"When I, the lowest of the least, go to my prayers, I adorn myself for this hour. I put on as my only ornament my unworthiness, I array myself in the miry slough that I am, and I am shod with the precious time that I have lost day by day, and I am girded with the pain which I have caused to others. And I am wrapped in the cloak of my sinfulness, of which I am full; and I put on my head the crown of my secret faults, wherewith I have [69] trespassed against the Lord. Then I take the glass of the truth and look in it to see myself therein, and alas! I see but sorrow and shame. I would rather put on this dress than any rich attire, although it were better to be clothed in hell, and crowned with devils, than to be sinful as I am.

"And in this dress do I go to seek Jesus, my blessed Lord, and I find Him in no other way so truly as in my sin.

"Therefore with joy do I go to Him, with love and fear, and the uncleanness of my sin vanishes before His holy eyes, and He looks on me with such love, that my heart overflows with love to Him. And all the guilt and grief are gone, and He teaches me His will, and makes me to taste His sweetness, and He overwhelms me with His tender love.

"Prayer has a marvellous power, it makes the bitter heart sweet, and the sorrowful heart glad, and the poor rich, and the foolish wise, and the fearful bold, and the sick strong, and the blind to see, and the cold to burn. It draws the great God down into the small heart, and lifts the hungry soul up to God, the living Fountain. It brings together the loving God and the loving soul in a blessed meeting-place, and they speak together of love." [70]

In another letter she says, "That which hinders spiritual people more, perhaps, than anything, is the little importance attached to small sins. I tell you in truth, when I neglect a pleasant laugh that would have hurt nobody, or when I allow bitterness in my heart even without showing it in word or action, or when I feel a little impatience in suffering pain, my soul becomes so dark, and my mind so dull, and my heart so cold, that I have to go and confess my sin with shame and tears. I feel like a dog who has been beaten till I breathe again freely in the love and mercy of God, and find myself again in the sweet garden of Paradise, out of which my sin had driven me."

GLEANINGS FROM MATILDA'S BOOK.

The seven books which compose "The flowing forth of the light of the Godhead" being composed of detached papers put together by Brother Henry, have, as has been remarked, no special connection one with another. It may be as well to give detached poems from the first five books, and thoughts in prose, or rather not in [71] rhyme, asking indulgence for the imperfect rendering of either into modern English. The titles given are from the original.

HOW GOD IS TO BE PRAISED FOR EIGHT THINGS.

O Dew, abundant from the depths of
Heaven;
O sweet white Flower, pure as mountain
snow;
O Precious Fruit of that celestial Flower;
O Ransom from the everlasting woe;
The holy Sacrifice for sins of men;
The Gift that the eternal Father gave;
O Dew of life, by Thee I live again,
By Thee who camest down to seek and save.
I see Thee small, in low and humble guise;
And me Thou seest, great in shame and sin:
Lord, I would be Thy daily sacrifice,
Though I am worthless, vile, and foul within.
Yet into that mean cup Thy grace will pour
The love that overflows for evermore.

HOW GOD DRAWETH THE SOUL TO HIMSELF.

Eagle of the highest Heaven, gentle Lamb,
Infolding Fire,
Kindle, glow in me.
Barren, thirsty, do I seek Thee,
Through the ages of desire,
One day as a thousand winters,
Waiting, Lord, for Thee.
Bitterer to the soul that loveth
Far from her Beloved to dwell,
Than the pit of doom to sinners—
An abyss there is profounder
Than the depths of hell.

.

The nightingale she can but sing,
For she is made of love's delight,
Of love bereft, what else were left
Than death and night?

[72]

Then spake the spirit to the soul—

“Arise, O Queen, and sing!
Behold, He comes, the Beloved One,
Behold the Bridegroom King!”

Then spake the soul in joyful fear—

“O blessed Herald, so might it be!
For I am faithless, guilty, vile,
In Him alone is there rest for me.
For me is no home beneath the skies,
No summer land, and no resting-place,
But the marvellous pity of His eyes,
And the sweetness of His Face;
And when all around the lights are dim,
The heart that sorroweth turns to Him.”

The Herald said—

“Thou must watch and wait,
And water the earth, and strew the flowers.”

But the soul made answer—

“The desolate
Must watch in prayer, and must wait in
shame,
In tears must water, and long for the day;
But if as I strew the flowers He came,
From myself and my tears I should pass
away.
For He strikes the chords of the heavenly
lyre,
And sorrow and sadness turn and flee,
And the earthly love, and the earth's desire,
In that music sweet depart from me.”

[73]

THE SOUL'S DESIRE SENT FORTH TO SEEK THE BELOVED ONE.

Thus spake the soul to her desire—

“Speed forth afar and see
Where may my Belovèd be,
And say to Him, ‘His love I crave.’”

Then fled the swift desire afar,
And rose beyond sun, moon, and star,
And called before the heavenly door,
“Lord, open unto me!”

Then spake the Host—

“What need hast thou,
That thou dost thus implore?”

“O Lord, I come with the prayer of one
Who weepeth upon the earth alone—
The fish on the sand must pine.”

“Go back! no door is unbarred to thee
Till thou bring the sorrowful soul to Me,
For the need is *Mine*.”

Then sped the messenger swiftly home, and said—

“The Master calleth Come!
Arise and shine!”

Then she as on summer winds doth rise
In joyful flight through the starry skies,
And there meet her angels twain;
For God hath sent two angels fleet,
The well-belovèd soul to meet.

And they ask—

“What seekest thou thus afar?
With the dark earth art thou clad.”

The soul said—

“Greet me better than so,
For to Him who loveth me well I go,
And I am no more sad.
Lo! dimmed as ye near the earth below,
Is the sweet light of your eyes;
And with light of God do I shine and glow
As aloft I rise.”
Then with an angel on either hand,
The soul sped through the skies,
And when she came to the angel land,
To the country of Paradise,
She was a stranger guest no more,
For to her was opened the heavenly door,
She saw the Beloved Face.
Forth flowed her heart in weeping blest,
She said, “My Lord, I have found my rest
In the glory of Thy grace.
I needs must praise Thee and adore,
For evermore, for evermore.
Whence came I here? I am lost in Thee;
I can think no more of the earth below,
Nor of the sorrow and weeping there.
I had thought to tell Thee my grief and woe,
But, Lord, I have seen Thee, and nought I
know,
But that Thou art fair.”

[74]

THE COMPLAINT OF THE LOVING SOUL, AND THE ANSWER OF GOD.

“O Lord, too long Thou dost guard and spare
This dungeon-house of clay,
Where I drink the water of sorrow and care,
And the ashes of emptiness are my fare,
From day to day.”

“Where is thy patience, O My Queen?
Let Thy sorrow be sore as it may,
I heal it as if it never had been,
When I speak, it has passed away.
My riches of glory for ever are thine,
Thy might has prevailed over Me,
For I love thee for ever with love divine;
If thou hast the token, the gold is Mine,
And I weigh full measure to thee.
For all things renounced, and for all things
wrought,
All sorrow, and all endeavour,
I give thee beyond all desire or thought,
For I give thee Myself for ever.”

[75]

HOW GOD COMES INTO THE SOUL.

He comes to me in silent hours,
As morning dew to summer flowers.

HOW THE SOUL RECEIVETH GOD, AND HOW GOD RECEIVETH THE SOUL.

O sweet enfolding in the Arms divine,
O blessed Vision, welcome passing sweet,
I bow beneath the joy that I am Thine,
A weight of gladness cast I at Thy feet.
O heights of God! within Thy clefts I hide,
The home where dove and nightingale abide.

“All hail, My dove! on earth below
Thou hast roamed afar and long,
Until should grow the strong swift wings,
That should bear Thee aloft from thy
wanderings
To the rest and song.”

[76]

THE SOUL'S FIVEFOLD PRAISE OF GOD.

O blessed God, who pourest forth Thy store;
O God, whose love flows on for evermore;
O God, whose longing burns eternally;
O God, in whom I dwell, whose dwelling is in
me;
O God, whose rest is in my love—
In Thee alone I live and move.

[77]

OF THE SOUL'S COMPLAINT, OF THE GARDEN, AND OF THE NEW SONG.

“When mine eyes are dim with weeping,
And my tongue with grief is dumb;
And it is as if Thou wert sleeping
When my heart calleth, ‘Come;’
When I hunger with bitter hunger,
O Lord, for Thee.
Where art Thou, then, Belovèd?
Speak, speak to me.”
“I am where I was in the ancient days,
I in Myself must be;
In all things I am, and in every place,
For there is no change in Me.
Where the sun is My Godhead, throned
above,^[8]
For thee, O Mine own, I wait;
I wait for thee in the garden of love,
Till thou comest irradiate
With the light that shines from My Face
divine,
And I pluck the flowers for thee;
They are thine, belovèd, for they are Mine,
And thou art one with Me.
In the tender grass by the waters still,
I have made thy resting-place;
Thy rest shall be sweet in My holy will,
And sure in My changeless grace.
And I bend for thee the holy Tree,
Where blossoms the mystic Rod;
The highest of all the trees that be
In the Paradise of God.
And thou of that Tree of life shalt eat,
Of the Life that is in Me;
Thou shalt feed on the fruit that is good for
meat,
And passing fair to see.
There overshadowed by mighty wings
Of the Holy Spirit's peace,

Beyond the sorrow of earthly things,
The toil and the tears shall cease.
And there beneath the eternal Tree,
I will teach thy lips to sing
The sweet new song that no man knows
In the land of his banishing.
They follow the Lamb where'er He goes,
To whom it is revealed;
The pure and the undefiled are those,
The ransomed and the sealed.
Thou shalt learn the speech and the music
rare,
And thou shalt sing as they,
Not only there in My garden fair,
But here, beloved, to-day."

"O Lord, a faint and a feeble voice
Is mine in this house of clay,
But Thy love hath made my lips rejoice,
And I can sing and say,
'I am pure, O Lord, for Thou art pure,
Thy love and mine are one;
And my robe is white, for Thine is white,
And brighter than the sun.
Thy mouth and mine can know no moan,
No note of man's sad mirth,
But the everlasting joy alone,
Unknown to songs of earth;
And for ever fed on that living Tree,
I will sing the song of Thy love with Thee.'"

[78]

GOD'S FIVEFOLD COMPARING OF THE SOUL.

Rose, most fair amidst the briars;
Harmless dove, so pure and white;
Honey-bee that never tires;
Sun of everlasting light;
Full fair moon in cloudless skies—
Joy and gladness to Mine eyes.

GOD'S SIXFOLD DELIGHT IN THE SOUL.

O soul, thou art the pillow for My Head,
My still sweet rest, My longing deep and
strong,
My Godhead's joy, My Manhood's solace
sweet,
My cooling fountain in love's furnace heat,
My music, and My song.

KNOWLEDGE AND ENJOYMENT.

To love, and not to know,
Is through a dark wild land to go;
To know, and not possess,
Is hell's dread bitterness;
Possess, yet not be where Thou art,
Hath rent my heart.

[79]

THE PRAYER FOR LOVE, AND THE ANSWER THEREOF.

"O Lord my Saviour, love me well,
And love me often and long—
Often, that pure my soul may be;
Well, that so I be fair to see;
Long, and for ever, for Thee apart
Shall be my heart."

"That often I love thee needs must be,
For I am Love from eternity;

And I love thee well, because I long
For thy love with a yearning deep and
strong;
And I love thee long, for no end can be
To My divine eternity."

LOVE UNTO DEATH; LOVE IMMEASURABLE; LOVE ETERNAL.

I rejoice that I cannot but love Him,
Because He first loved me;
I would that measureless, changeless,
My love might be;
A love unto death, and for ever;
For, soul, He died for thee.
Give thanks that for thee He delighted
To leave His glory on high;
For thee to be humbled, forsaken,
For thee to die.
Wilt thou render Him love for His loving?
Wilt thou die for Him who died?
And so, by thy living and dying,
Shall Christ be magnified.
And deep in the fiery stream that flows
From God's high throne,
In the burning tide that for ever glows
Of the marvellous love unknown;
For ever, O soul, thou shalt burn and glow,
And thou shalt sing and say,
"I need no call at His feet to fall,
For I cannot turn away.
I am the captive led along
With the joy of His triumphal song;
In the depths of love do I live and move,
I joy to live or to die;
For I am borne on the tide of love
To all eternity:
The foolishness of the fool is this,
The sorrow sweeter than joy to miss."

[80]

GOD ASKS THE SOUL WHAT SHE BRINGS, AND SHE ANSWERETH.

"What dost thou bring me, O my Queen?
Love maketh thy steps to fly."

"Lord, to Thee my jewel I bring,
Greater than mountains high;
Broader than all the earth's broad lands,
Heavier than the ocean sands,
And higher it is than the sky:
Deeper it is than the depths of the sea,
And fairer than the sun,
Unreckoned, as if the stars could be
All gathered into one."

"O thou, My Godhead's image fair,
Thou Eve, from Adam framed,
My flesh, My bone, My life to share,
My Spirit's diadem to wear,
How is thy jewel named?"

"Lord, it is called my heart's desire,
From the world's enchantments won;
I have borne it afar through flood and fire,
And will yield it up to none;
But the burden I can bear no more—
Where shall I lay it up in store?"

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"There is no treasure-house but this,
My heart divine, My Manhood's breast;
There shall My Spirit's sacred kiss
Fill thee with rest."

O Jesus Lord, most fair, most passing sweet,
In darkest hours revealed in love to me,
In those dark hours I fall before Thy Feet,
I sing to Thee.
I join the song of love, and I adore
With those who worship Thee for evermore.
Thou art the Sun of every eye,
The Gladness everywhere,
The Voice that speaks eternally,
The Strength to do and bear,
The sacred Lore of wisdom's store,
The Life of life to all,
The Order mystic, marvellous
In all things great and small.

Then doth God praise the soul, and the words of His praise sound sweetly, thus—

Thou art light to Mine eyes, and a harp to
Mine ears,
And the voice of My words, and My wisdom's
crown,
The love that cheers Mine eternal years,
My music, and My renown.
Wherever thy pilgrim steps may be,
Thou longest, belovèd, thou longest for Me.

The soul saith—

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Thy love hast Thou told from the days of old,
Thou hast written my name in Thy Book
divine;
Engraved on Thy Hands and Thy feet it
stands,
And on Thy side as a sign.
O glorious Man in the garden of God,
Thy sacred Manhood is mine.
I kneel on the golden floor of heaven
With my box of ointment sweet,
Grant unto me, Thy much forgiven,
To kiss and anoint Thy feet.

Where wilt thou find that ointment rare,
O My belovèd one?

Thou brakest my heart and didst find it
there,
Rest sweetly there alone.

There is no embalming so sweet to Me,
As to dwell, My well-beloved, in thee.

The soul saith—

Lord, take me home to Thy palace fair,
So will I ever anoint Thee there.

"I will. But My plighted troth saith, 'Wait;'
And My love saith, 'Work to-day;'
My meekness saith, 'Be of low estate;'
And My longing, 'Watch and pray;'
My shame and sorrow say, 'Bear My cross;'
My song saith, 'Win the crown;'
My guerdon saith, 'All else is loss;'
My patience saith, 'Be still,'
Till thou shalt lay the burden down,
Then, when I will.

Then, belovèd, the crown and palm,
And then the music and the psalm;
And the cup of joy My Hand shall fill
Till it overflow;
And with singing I strike the harp of gold
I have tuned below,
The harp I tune in desolate years
Of sorrow and tears,

Till a music sweet the chords repeat,
Which all the heavens shall fill;
For the holy courts of God made meet,
Then, when I will."

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A FIVEFOLD SONG OF THE SOUL TO GOD, AND HOW GOD IS A ROBE OF THE SOUL, AND THE SOUL A ROBE OF GOD.

Thou hast shone within this soul of mine,
As the sun on a shrine of gold;
When I rest my heart, O Lord, on Thine,
My bliss is manifold.
My soul is the gem on Thy diadem,
And my marriage robe Thou art;
If aught could sever my heart from Thine,
The sorrow beyond all sorrows were mine,
Alone and apart.
Could I not find Thy love below,
Then would my soul as a pilgrim go
To Thy holy land above;
There would I love Thee as I were fain,
With everlasting love.
Now have I sung my tuneless song,
But I hearken, Lord, for Thine;
Then shall a music, sweet and strong,
Pass into mine.

"I am the Light, and the lamp thou art;
The River, and thou the thirsty land;
To thee thy sighs have drawn My heart,
And ever beneath Thee is My hand.
And when thou weapest, it needs must be
Within Mine arms that encompass thee;
Thy heart from Mine can none divide,
For one are, the Bridegroom and the Bride:
It is sweet, beloved, for Me and thee,
To wait for the day that is to be."

[84]

O Lord, with hunger and thirst I wait,
With longing before Thy golden gate,
Till the day shall dawn,
When from Thy lips divine have passed
The sacred words that none may hear
But the soul who, loosed from the earth at
last,
Hath laid her ear
To the Mouth that speaks in the still sweet
morn
Apart and alone;
Then shall the secret of love be told,
The mystery known.

THE LORD GIVETH A TENFOLD HONOUR TO THE SOUL.

The mouth of the Lord hath spoken,
Hath spoken a mighty word;
My sinful heart it hath broken,
Yet sweeter I never heard.
"Thou, thou art, O soul, My deep desire,
And My love's eternal bliss;
Thou art the rest where leaneth My breast,
And My mouth's most holy kiss.
Thou art the treasure I sought and found,
Rejoicing over thee;
I dwell in thee, and with thee I am crowned,
And thou dost dwell in Me.
Thou art joined to Me, O Mine own, for ever,
And nearer thou canst not be;
Shall aught on earth or in heaven sever
Myself from Me?"

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BETWEEN GOD AND THE SOUL ONLY LOVE.

'Twixt God and thee but love shall be,
'Twixt earth and thee distrust and fear,
'Twixt sin and thee shall be hate and war,
And hope shall be 'twixt heaven and thee,
Till night is o'er.

HOW GOD MAKETH THE SOUL TO BE FREE AND WISE IN HIS LOVE.

My love, My dove, thy feet are red,
Thy wings are strong, thy mouth is sweet,
Thine eyes are fair, erect thy head,
Beside the waters dost thou tread,
Thy flight is far and fleet.

O Lord, the Blood that hath ransomed me
Hath dyed my feet;
With Thy faithfulness my wings are strong,
With Thy Spirit my mouth is sweet.
And my eyes are fair with the light of God,
And safe in Thy shelter I lift my head,
And beside the waters of life I tread,
I follow where Thou hast trod;
And my flight is swift, for Thy love hath need
Of me, Lord, even me.
When from the earthly prison freed
My soul shall be;
Then shall she rest through the ages blest,
O Lord, in Thee.

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THE ROAD WHEREIN THE SOUL LEADETH THE SENSES, AND WHERE THE SOUL IS FREE FROM CARE.

It is a wondrous and a lofty road
Wherein the faithful soul must tread;
And by the seeing there the blind are led,
The senses by the soul acquaint with God.
On that high path the soul is free,
She knows no care nor ill,
For all God wills desireth she,
And blessed is His will.

HOW THE BRIDE CASTS AWAY THE SOLACE OF CREATED THINGS, AND SEEKS ONLY THE COMFORT OF GOD.

Thus speaks the Bride, whose feet have
trod
The chamber of eternal rest,
The secret treasure-house of God,
Where God is manifest:
"Created things, arise and flee,
Ye are but sorrow and care to me."

This wide, wide world, so rich and fair,
Thou sure canst find thy solace there?

"Nay, 'neath the flowers the serpent glides,
Amidst the bravery envy hides."

And is not heaven enough for thee?

"Were God not there 'twere a tomb to me."

O Bride, the saints in glory shine,
Can they not fill that heart of thine?

"Nay, were the Lamb, their light, withdrawn,
The saints in gloom would weep and mourn."

Can the Son of God not comfort thee?

"Yea, Christ and none besides for me!
For mine is a soul of noble birth,

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That needeth more than heaven and earth;
 And the breath of God must draw me in
 To the Heart that was riven for my sin.
 For the Sun of the Godhead pours His rays
 Through the crystal depths of His manhood's
 grace;
 And the Spirit sent by Father and Son
 Hath filled my soul, and my heart hath won;
 And the longing and love are past and gone,
 For all that is less than God alone—
 God only, sweet to this heart of mine—
 O wondrous death that is life divine!"

OF LOVE, THE HANDMAIDEN OF THE SOUL, AND OF THE SOUL WHOM LOVE HATH SMITTEN.

Of old, beloved damsel,
 My handmaid thou wouldst be;
 But thy ways are strange and wondrous,
 Thou hast chased and captured me.
 Thou hast wounded me right sore,
 Thou hast smitten me amain,
 And I know that never more
 Can my heart be whole again.
 Can the hand that has wounded heal?
 Or slay, if no balm there be?
 Else had it been for my weal
 Thou wert all unknown to me.

"I chased thee, for so was my will;
 I captured thee, for my need;
 I bound thee, and bind thee still,
 For I would not have thee freed;
 I wounded thee sore, that for evermore
 Thou shouldst live by my life alone:
 When I smote thee, mine wert thou life and
 limb;
 I drave the Almighty God from His throne,
 Of the life of His manhood despoiled I Him.
 I brought Him back in glorious might
 To the Father in heaven's eternal light;
 And thou, poor worm, shouldst thou go free,
 As if my hand had not smitten thee?"

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BE THOU IN SUFFERING A LAMB, A DOVE, AND A BRIDE.

Thou art My Lamb in patience dumb,
 My Dove in sighing for Me,
 My Bride in waiting till I shall come
 In the day that is to be.

OF THE TWO GOLDEN CHALICES OF SORROW AND OF COMFORT.

I, slothful sinner that I am, knelt down at my hour of prayer, and it seemed to me as if God were unwilling to give me the least measure of His grace. Then would I fain have wept and mourned, because of my sinful desires; for it seemed to me that they were the hindrance to my spiritual gladness.

But no, said my soul, think rather of the faithfulness of God, and praise Him for His goodness. Glory be to God in the highest!

And as I praised, there shone a great light into my soul; and in the light, God showed Himself to me in great majesty, and in unspeakable glory. And it was as if He held up in His hands two golden chalices, and both were full of living wine. In the left hand was the red wine, the wine of sorrow, and in the right hand the most holy consolation. Then did the Lord say, "There are some who drink of this wine alone, although I pour out both in My divine love. Yet the golden wine is in itself the noblest, and most noble are those who drink of both, the red wine and the golden." [89]

THE WORKING OF BLESSED LOVE.

It were bitterer than death to me if ever I did that which is good, without God.

This is the nature of the great love which is of God. She does not flow forth in tears, but burns in the great fire of

heavenly glory. And thus she spreads to the farthest distances, and yet remains in herself steadfast and still. She rises up into the nearest converse with God, and remains in herself in the lowest measure. She grasps the most, and retains the least.

O blessed Love, who are they who know thee? They are those through whom the light of God glows and burns. They dwell not in themselves. The more they are tried, the stronger they grow. Why so? Because the longer [90] they are in conflict, yet abiding in love, the more glorious is God to their souls, and the more do they see themselves to be unworthy and vile.

Why so? Because the greater the love, the greater is holy fear; and the fuller the comfort, the stronger the dread of sin. The loving soul does not fear with terror, but she fears nobly. There are two things over which I cannot mourn enough—one is, that God is so forgotten in the world; the other, that His people are so imperfect. Therefore many fall, because the godly have fallen before them.

HOW GOD SPEAKS TO THE SOUL IN THREE PLACES.

In the first of these places does the devil also speak, which he cannot do in the other two.

The first place is the mind of man, and this stands open not to God only, but to the devil and to all creatures, who enter in as they will, and hold converse with the soul through the mind.

The second place in which God speaks, is in the soul itself. And into the soul none can enter but God only. When God speaks to the soul, it is without the aid of the senses. It is in a mighty, strong, and swift communication, in a speech the mind cannot comprehend, unless the mind is so humbled as to take the lowest place amongst [91] created things.

The third place where God speaks with the soul is in heaven, when God draws the soul up thither, and brings her into His secret place, where He shows her all His wonders.

OF FALSE LOVE.

All, who do not in all things cleave to the truth of God, must fall with bitter loss. For love, which has not humility for her mother, and holy fear for her father, will be a barren love.

MATILDA'S FAITH.

Thus far in the five first books of Matilda's writings can we trace the history of her soul before she found her last refuge in the convent of Hellfde.

Preger's remarks are valuable as showing how Matilda, in expressions which she borrowed from the common stock of the writings of the mystics, as well as in expressions of her own, might appear to have wandered into the regions of Pantheism. That she herself attached a meaning to these expressions, which those who were simply mystics, and not believers in Christ as their Saviour, could not understand, seems, however, clear. But the [92] expressions were open to the danger of being thus misunderstood. To those who were mystics, and nothing more, intercourse with God was a vague sentiment; and what they called the love of God, was merely a name given to their own human thoughts of God, the God of their imagination.

But Matilda insisted strongly upon the truth, that there is no way to God but through the Lord Jesus Christ, the Saviour of sinners. That otherwise all communication between the soul and God is cut off, "the bolt fastened by Adam" holding fast the door between God and men.

In speaking of some (no doubt the "Brethren of the Free Spirit"), she mentions as the greatest sin, and as the highest degree of unbelief, that "men should think to enter into the presence of the eternal God, passing by the holy Manhood of our Lord Jesus Christ. When such people imagine themselves to have entered into communication with the being of God, they enter instead into eternal condemnation. And yet by that means they intend to become holier than others. They set at nought and deride the words of God, which are written regarding the Manhood of our Lord."

Thus to an unbelieving mystic, the term "union with God" was familiar, and meant nothing better than the [93] dreams of a Buddhist. But to Matilda, though she did not, and no doubt could not, clearly define it, the truth was revealed, expressed in so few words in the fifth chapter of the Epistle to the Ephesians, where, with reference to Christ and the Church, it is written, "He that loveth his wife loveth *himself*. For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth it and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the Church: for we are members of His body, of His flesh, and of His bones. For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh. This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the Church." And again, in 1 Cor. xii. 12, "As the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also *is Christ*."

That this truth, taught so plainly in many passages of Scripture, notably by the Lord Himself in the one word which smote the heart of Paul, "Why persecutest thou *Me*?" was the truth Matilda believed, seems to be clear. But she was apt to use, when speaking of it, the stereotyped expression "union with God," not perceiving that this [94] is untrue, and incapable of being symbolised, as in Ephesians, by the figure of Adam and Eve. It is not Christ as God, but as the second Adam, who is there symbolised.

Many such incorrect expressions may, no doubt, be found now in modern Protestant books.^[91]

Preger further remarks, "If we would describe religious life, as shown in Matilda, by its distinctive features, we should remark, in the first place, that she is seeking after a consciousness, or is, in fact, conscious of being in immediate intercourse with God. Whilst the majority of her contemporaries knew of no relation with God, except through culture or learning, or the medium of saints, or the ordinances of the Church, and were satisfied to know no more, Matilda looked upon all these things merely as helps to personal and immediate communion with God. This alone could satisfy her.

"And further, she was aware that into this communion with God she could only be brought through God's free [95] grace. And only by free grace could she retain it. It is true she speaks of human merit, and alludes to the intercession of Mary, but in so doing was rather expressing the ruling thoughts of her age than her own innermost convictions. For it is only in speaking of others that she admits the merit of human works; she has another law for herself, finding, as she says, no peace in the good works of the saints, 'and as for me, unhappily I have no good works to find peace in.'

"That which is the important matter with regard to Matilda's faith is this—she grounds her peace not on imparted, but on imputed righteousness. 'It is a fathomless mystery,' she says, 'that God can look upon a sinner as a converted man.'

"But in spite of this evangelical tendency in her writings, we cannot but receive the impression that in the heights of her communion with God she at times loses the safe path. The reason of this is, that the subordinate place which she gives to all relations between God and men by Church ordinances is also given more or less to the knowledge of God by means of the written Word. It does not appear to be the ring in which her new life is set; [96] it would seem as though she endeavoured to soar above it, in order to assure herself more firmly of her state of grace by immediate communications from God to her soul.

"Therefore she seems in some passages to regard the written Word and the Divine Word spoken to her as distinct, and on the same level. Thus, as in mysticism generally, the safe path is lost, and the soul is cast forth upon the wide sea of subjective self-consciousness.

"We feel the presentiment of this danger, and the need of a safer path, in which the security of Divine teaching is ours. This can only be when the written Word is the seed of Divine knowledge, and the faculties of man the ground in which the seed takes root."

So far Preger. It may also be remarked, that whilst Matilda evidently grounded her salvation and enjoyment of God upon the atoning work of Christ, she does not allude to it very frequently. We must remember that amongst all the errors of mediæval Catholicism, the blood-shedding of Christ was still regarded as the means by which sin was expiated. It was still an article of faith, though disfigured, and often kept out of sight by all that man had added to the Scriptures.

Matilda, therefore, regarded it as an understood necessity in Christian faith, and as not demanding frequent [97] assertion or proof. Had she lived in our days it might have been otherwise.

That "Christ once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God," was a truth known and believed amongst the "Friends of God," Catholic or Waldensian. That "it is the Blood that maketh atonement for the soul," that "without shedding of Blood there is *no remission*," that on Christ, the Lamb who was slain, did "the Lord lay the iniquity of us all," they knew, and rejoiced to know. However overlaid in Roman Catholicism by the teaching of human merit, and of the mediation and intercession of the saints, this truth was preserved through God's great mercy in the corruption of the Church. It may be found yet as the anchor of the soul in the confession of faith of many an ignorant and unlearned Roman Catholic, who know little of the doctrines of their Church, but who do know from their service-books that "Christ died for our sins."

The three have ever borne witness on earth, the Spirit, the Water, and the Blood, and these three agree in one—a witness never silenced through the darkest ages of the Church.

It was during the last years of Matilda's life that she wrote for "the children of the world" a call to Christ. [98]

Wilt thou, sinner, be converted?
Christ, the Lord of glory, see
By His own denied, deserted,
Bleeding, bound, and scourged for thee.
Look again, O soul, behold Him
On the cross uplifted high;
See the precious life-blood flowing,
See the tears that dim His eye.
Love has pierced the heart that brake,
Loveless sinner, for thy sake:
Hearken till thy heart is broken
To His cry so sad and sweet;
Hearken to the hammer smiting
Nails that pierce His hands and feet.
See the side whence flows the fountain
Of His love and life divine,
Riven by a hand unthankful—
Lo! that hand is thine.

See the crown of thorns adorning
 God's belovèd holy Son,
 Then fall down in bitter mourning,
 Weep for that which *thou* hast done.
 Thank Him that His heart was willing
 So to die for love to thee;
 Thank Him for the joy that maketh
 This world's joy but gall to be.
 And till thou in heaven adore Him
 Fight for Him in knightly guise;
 Joy in shame and toil and sorrow,
 Glorious is the prize!

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THE ECHO OF THE BOOK.

Matilda had a friend, called Jutta von Sangershausen. A relation of hers, Anno von Sangershausen, was the Grand-Master of the Teutonic Order of Knights. Other members of the family had offered their services to the order in defence of their country from the invasions of the heathen Prussians.

Jutta's husband had died on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Her children entered various convents. Jutta then joined herself to the Béguines, and was employed for a time in nursing the sick, especially those afflicted with leprosy. In the year 1260 she determined to go forth as a missionary amongst the Prussians. She took up her abode in a forest near Culm, where she lived as a hermitess, making known the faith of Christ by word and example.

Matilda for a time resolved to go also as a missionary to the heathen. But she was now growing old, and worn-out by labours and persecutions. It was evident that she no longer had the needful strength. She was grieved to the heart that she could not thus make Christ known, and she laid the matter before the Lord.

He consoled her, and showed her that as He had sent Jutta to the heathen, so had He also given her His [100] message, which should be sent far and wide in the book which she was writing.

And so it proved, as her book was widely known and read for a considerable time after her death. Even now it may be that the words so lately brought to light in the convent of Einsiedeln may lead some weary souls to Christ. And still the reflection of the light which shone into the heart of Matilda shines forth more faintly in the poem known and read through so many ages, and in so many lands—the great poem of Dante.

It is now more than seventy years ago that a young man travelling in Italy employed himself at Venice in reading the *Divine Commedia*, for the sake of learning Italian. He had cared till then for the things of this world only, but he left Venice with the first beginning of a love which was to shape his long life, and make him the means of life to many.

It was from the poem of Dante, he said, that he had first learnt to know Christ as his Saviour. He may be known to many as the writer of the hymn so often sung—

"A pilgrim through this lonely world
 The blessed Saviour passed;
 A mourner all His life was He,
 A dying Lamb at last"— [101]

a distant echo of Matilda's voice sounding in many places still.

What was it that Dante learnt, or believed that he learnt, from the lady whose joyful singing sounded to him across the river of forgetfulness, whose eyes shone with a light greater than that of earthly love?

She explained to him her joy by the words of that psalm, the ninety-second, which forms a key-note to the poems of the Béguine Matilda, of her to whom the Lord had taught "the song and the music of heaven," whom He had made glad through *His* work, who triumphed in the work of His hands.

It was in the work "wrought in the land of the Jews," the great work that "loosed the bolt with which Adam had barred the heavenly door," that Matilda the Béguine rejoiced, showing forth the Lord's lovingkindness in the morning, and his faithfulness every night—the work which "the brutish man knoweth not, neither doth the fool understand it," for "the preaching of the Cross is to them that perish foolishness," "the foolishness of God [102] that is wiser than men."

In the work which brought her into the "sweet garden of Paradise," where she was no more a stranger, which had won for her the right to eat of the Tree of Life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God, and to pluck the flowers, which were hers, because they were Christ's.

It may truly be said that if there is anything distinctive in the writing of Matilda the Béguine, it is that she wrote from her own experience of the gladness of the heavenly place, revealed to her whilst yet in the body on the earth. She had learnt that there is an "earthly Paradise," earthly not because it is of the earth, but because it is a foretaste and earnest of the heavenly, given to those who are still pilgrims upon the earth.

To reach it the river had to be crossed, wherein the old things pass away, and all things become new; where the things that are behind are forgotten, and the things that are before become the possession, by faith, of the

redeemed soul. Her sins were amongst the forgotten things, for God remembered them no more, and the sorrow of the earth was forgotten, swallowed up in the tide of eternal joy, and

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“The longing and love were past and gone,
For all that is less than God alone.”

Thus, in the poem of Dante, does Matelda draw him through the water of the river at the moment when the remembrance of his sin had stung him at the heart, so that he fell overpowered and helpless and ashamed. It needed that the sin should be left behind amongst the former things that had passed away.

Those who have known the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, the Fountain opened for sin and for uncleanness, will gladly own that this is the true Christian experience of the saints of God—the land of Canaan beyond the river, reached and entered before the warfare and the trial of faith are over; the Father’s house become a familiar place before the murmuring of the self-righteous is for ever silenced.

Did Dante know it as the Béguine knew it? Was it in his case but a vague sense of a place of joy and beauty which the soul might find on this side of heaven? Did he know that the river was a river of death—the death which is the death of deaths, “in the land of the Jews” so long ago?

We cannot know. It needs the simple faith of those who have become fools that they may be wise. Then does the garden of the Lord become a blessed reality, no dreamland, but an eternal inheritance.

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The Béguine had seen by faith her name engraved on the pierced Hands and Feet of Christ. Should she not rejoice and sing? Should she not praise Him that He was wounded for her transgressions, that He was bruised for her iniquities, that the chastisement of her peace was upon Him, that by His stripes she was healed? And thus she knew that her “robe was white, for Christ’s was white, and brighter than the sun.”

How far this was the experience of Dante, his poem does not tell us. But he knew that there was an earthly Paradise, and it seems all but certain that in Matilda’s book he had found one who was rejoicing there with unspeakable joy.

The remarks of Preger in his lecture on Dante’s Matelda confirm the thought that this is the true key to his description of the beautiful lady, whose appearance formed the great era in his spiritual life. The song taken from the words of the fifty-first Psalm, “Wash me and I shall be whiter than snow,” the introduction into the knowledge of heavenly things, are but an echo of the songs of the Béguine.

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But the heavenly things of Dante are far more clouded with the evil teaching of his age than the heavenly experiences of Matilda of Magdeburg. The glory of the Catholic Church, rather than the glory of Christ, is the light that lightens his heavenly Paradise. It was the Lamb who was the light of Matilda’s heaven. In the bewildering medley of Catholic and heathen mythologies in Dante’s poem, it is only here and there that a gleam of the true light can make its way. But Matilda the Béguine rose above the clouds and mists of man’s imagination, and she saw Jesus.

Preger refers us to the ordinary explanation of Matelda and Beatrice; namely, that like Leah and Rachel in mediæval theology, they represent the life of action and the life of contemplation.

This theory as regards Matelda was, as Preger observes, founded on the idea that the Countess Matilda of Tuscany was the Matelda of Dante. That the warlike countess was a fair specimen of activity, we cannot doubt; but that it had any resemblance to Christian activity, is more than doubtful. Probably the identity of name was the only foundation of this idea.

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“It is true,” writes Preger, “that Dante saw these two women prefigured in a dream as Leah and Rachel, and that Leah said, referring to her sister, ‘Her seeing, and me doing, satisfies.’ But that therefore doing and seeing are the only characteristics of these women is a conclusion to which Dante did not advance, nor need we do so. They *both* looked in the mirror, but Leah first crowned herself with flowers; and it was after hearing the call, ‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God,’ that this dream presented itself to Dante.”

Matelda, who corresponds to Leah in the dream, conducts Dante into the earthly Paradise, and the place accords with the guide. She was not yet in heaven, the working-day was not yet over, but Matelda was rejoicing, not in *her* work, but in *the work of God*. She was glad that the flowers of His garden were her crown of beauty.

So wrote Matilda the Béguine—

“I pluck the flowers for thee;
They are thine, beloved, for they are Mine,
And thou art one with Me.”

It was a place in which the flowers of the earth had never grown, and it needed the washing which makes whiter than snow to fit the soul for that garden of God upon the earth. Therefore the song which came to Dante across the river was the ancient song of the soul that is washed from sin: “Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, whose sins are covered.” Virgil never crossed the river.

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However clouded may have been the faith of mediæval Christendom, the need of Christ was felt. The distinction between a Christian and a heathen was acknowledged as one which told upon the eternal destiny of men. By means of Christ the Saviour could the Christian man pass on, washed and sanctified, into the land beyond the river. A “land beyond,” was that Paradise to men of the world of sense and of earthly knowledge, but without the knowledge of God, and of Jesus Christ, whom He has sent. And singing the song of the forgiven, whilst she made

garlands of the flowers, Matelda appeared to Dante, separated from him at first by the river of forgetfulness. She drew near to him as one who dances. She spoke to him of the nature of the mysterious wind that moved the branches of the trees which grew in the land "given as the earnest of eternal peace"—the earnest whilst here on earth of heavenly things, of the flowers that grew from no earthly seed, and of the river that flows from no earthly source, and of the other river which divides the earthly Paradise from the heavenly, as the river Lethe divided it from all that was before. [108]

And we see that Matelda is to Dante the medium of supernatural revelations, just as afterwards, Beatrice.

Matelda, then, in the earthly Paradise appears as the representative of the insight into the heavenly joy whilst still on earth, Beatrice as the beholding of it when the earthly life is past. And this knowledge of the heavenly things was to be brought back by him who had seen them whilst still in the body, as the palm-leaves upon the staff of the pilgrim who had been within the boundary of the holy land.

And it was Matelda who drew Dante through the river into that land whilst still upon the earth—the land where he should hear the singing, and know the sweetness, and learn more in the Paradise here of the Paradise hereafter.

It was the earnest of the inheritance which was given to him through Matelda. [109]

And truly this is the message and mission of the Béguine, not as Matelda's, to Dante only, but to us also, who can receive the message without the bewildering counter teaching of the corrupted Church. It is true the message, more clearly given, is in the Bible we have known so long; and it was through the blessed teaching of that Bible that Matilda the Béguine learnt it. But it is well for us not only to read the glorious promises of God, but to meet with those to whom they have been fulfilled, the sharers of the like precious faith with us, who now believe in Jesus. Now, from the holy women of Hellfde have the clouds passed away which at times hid from them the brightness of the glory, but the words of love spoken to their hearts by the mouth of their Beloved remain to them as an everlasting possession.

And are not the same words still spoken day by day to those who have ears to hear? And in the midst of this sorrowful world, is there not still a blessed company who have entered the same Paradise, and learnt the same songs, taught by the lips of Christ?

It will not render us less fit for the common earthly life, that we have been there, in the garden where the Lord God walks, and His own are not afraid. In truth, it is only those who have been there who have the healing leaves for the sick and the suffering ones around them. It is only those who see the Son, and believe on Him, who are thus brought back to the garden of the Lord, to feed upon the fruit of the tree of life. And these are they who are again sent forth as His messengers into the world of man's exile. [110]

"As My Father hath sent Me into the world, even so have I also sent them into the world."

Thus the Lord spake of all who believe on His Name. The message sent long ago by Matilda the Béguine has been heard again after the silence of ages, and it is once more a call to the sinful, the sorrowful, and the fearful, who have been living in ignorance of the marvellous love which is unchanged, and which answers to the great need of our age, as to that of the thirteenth century. May God the Holy Ghost open the hearts of many to hear and to rejoice.

[111]

MATILDA'S LAST YEARS.

Matilda was fifty-three years old when, in the year 1265, she took refuge in the convent of Hellfde.

Gertrude von Hackeborn was not one who would refuse admission to a persecuted "Friend of God." Gertrude had now been abbess fourteen years, and was in the prime of her life and activity. Mechthild von Hackeborn, "the maiden so marvellously lovable," as they said in the convent, was then twenty-five. The little Gertrude, who was to be the brightest star amongst the sisters of Hellfde, was only nine.

But during the twelve remaining years of the life of Matilda of Magdeburg there was time enough for some good seed to be sown in the heart of Gertrude, which should one day spring up and bear much fruit.

Soon after Matilda's entrance into the convent she had a severe and painful illness. But she was tended with loving care, and found amongst her sisters of Hellfde a happy and peaceful home. She in her turn was regarded by them as an honoured teacher, and her influence made itself quickly felt.

It was at Hellfde that she wrote the two remaining books, "rich," says Preger, "in light and instruction." When she had finished the sixth book she thought that her task was done. She therefore concluded it with a word of farewell—"This book was begun in love, it shall also end in love; for there is nought so wise, nor so holy, nor so beautiful, nor so strong, nor so perfect as love." [112]

But afterwards Matilda felt herself led to write "more of that which God had shown her," although she had prayed that she might now lay down her pen and cease from her labours.^[10]

In the last years of her life she was obliged to write by dictation, her eyes and hands having failed her. The following extracts from the last two books will show an advance in the knowledge of Him she loved, and for whom she laboured to the last.

[113]

THE LABOUR OF THE LORD.

The Lord showed me in a parable that which He has ever done, and will ever do, to fulfil to me the meaning thereof.

I saw a poor man rise up from the ground where he was sitting. He was dressed like a workman, in common linen clothing, and he had a crowbar in his hand, which he thrust under a heavy burden that was as large as the earth.

I said to him, "Good man, what is it you are lifting?"

"I am going to lift and carry your sorrows," said he. "Try it thyself," he said; "with all thy might, lift and carry."

Then did I answer Him, for I knew Him, "Lord, I am so poor, I have no strength."

And He answered me, "So did I teach My disciples. I said, 'Blessed are the poor in spirit.'"

And my soul spake to Him, and I said, "O Lord, it is Thyself. Turn Thou Thy face to me that I may know Thee."

And He answered, "Learn to know Me inwardly."

I said, "O Lord, if I saw Thee amongst thousands, I could not but know Thee."

And then I said further, "This burden is too heavy for me."

[114]

And He answered me, "I will lay it so close to Myself, that thou mayest easily bear it. Follow Me, and see how I stood before My Father on the Cross, sustaining all."

Then did I ask Him to bless me; and He said, "I always bless thee. Thy sorrow shall turn to a good blessing for thee."

And I said no more but this, "O Lord, come Thou thus to the help of all who love to suffer for Thee."

THE PRAYER OF THE LONGING HEART.

There was one who for a long while, amidst the mercies of God, and also many sorrows, longed continually that God would release the soul and take her to Himself. And the Lord said to her, "Wait." Then did the suffering one answer, "Lord, I cannot cease from longing. Oh, how gladly would I be with Thee!" Then said the Lord—

"Before the worlds, O soul, I longed for thee;
And still I long, and thou dost long for Me;
And when two longings meet, for ever
stilled,
The cup of love is filled."

[115]

PRAYERS.

Give me, O Lord, and take from me all that Thou willest, and leave me but the desire to pass away to Thee in Thy love, and to Thy love. O well is me, and I thank Thee, King of Heaven and Son of God, that whilst I was in the world Thou didst choose me, and call me out of the world. For this will I thank Thee eternally. Thy holy sorrow, all that Thou hast suffered for me, is mine. Therefore all that I suffer I offer up to Thee, though how little is my suffering like to Thine! Keep me always in Thy love, that for ever I may praise Thee, Jesus, my most beloved; and I pray Thee to loosen the cords, and let me be for ever with Thee.

O Thou beloved Lord Jesus Christ, Thou Eternal God, one with the Eternal Father, think upon me. I thank Thee, Lord, for the grace of Thine Atonement, wherewith Thou hast touched the depths of my heart, and pierced me through with the power of Thy love. But when Thou dost touch my heart with Thine awful, Thy holy tenderness, which flows through soul and body, I fear lest I, who am so unworthy of Thee, should be overwhelmed with the blessedness of Thy love.

Therefore I turn at times to pray for others more than for myself, and withdraw myself, as it were, from the fulness of the joy, through love to Thee and Christian faithfulness. For I fear the rising up within my heart of the pride which cast down the most glorious of the angels of heaven, and the voice of the serpent who deceived Eve with the promise of vainglory.

[116]

I pray, O my God, that in continual love I may receive and enjoy the gifts Thou givest. I ask for the fulness of Thy love, that shame and pain and bitterness may be sweet to me, and that I may desire Thy will and not mine, and that the fire of my love may burn in me to all eternity.

OF THE GOOD WORKS OF MEN, HOW THEY SHINE BY THE WORK OF THE LORD.

How it is that the works of godly men shall shine and glow in the glory of heaven, understand from these words.

Wherein we were innocent of aught, in this our innocence, the pure holiness of God shines and glows.

In so far that we laboured in good works, the holy working of God shines forth.

In so far as we clave to God with trustful hearts, the tenderness and faithfulness of God shines brightly. [117]

In so far as we receive our sorrows thankfully, do the sufferings of Christ shine forth.

In so far as we wrought diligently in holy graces, does the holy grace of God shine and glow in manifold brightness to all eternity.

And as here we loved, and as here we shed forth the light of a holy life, in this does the love of God burn and shine, more and more unto the perfect eternal day.

For all that shone forth from us was the light of the eternal Godhead. The good works we did were given to us through the holy Manhood of the Son of God, and we wrought them by the power of the Holy Ghost. Thus all our works, our love, our sufferings, flow back thither whence they came, from the Three in One, to His eternal praise.

THE SOUL THAT LOVETH SPEAKETH TO HER LORD.

If the world were mine and all its store,
And were it of crystal gold;
Could I reign on its throne for evermore,
From the ancient days of old,
An empress noble and fair as day,
O gladly might it be,
That I might cast it all away,
Christ, only Christ for me.
For Christ my Lord my spirit longs,
For Christ, my Saviour dear;
The joy and sweetness of my songs,
The whilst I wander here.
O Lord, my spirit fain would flee
From the lonely wilderness to Thee.

[118]

SEVEN THINGS KNOWN TO THE LONGING OF LOVE.

I bring unto Thy grace a sevenfold praise,
Thy wondrous love I bless—
I praise, remembering my sinful days,
My worthlessness.
I praise that I am waiting, Lord, for Thee,
When, all my wanderings past,
Thyself wilt bear me, and wilt welcome me
To home at last.
I praise Thee that for Thee I long and pine,
For Thee I ever yearn;
I praise Thee that such fitful love as mine
Thou dost not spurn;
I praise Thee for the hour when first I saw
The glory of Thy Face,
Here dimly, but in fulness evermore,
In that high place;
I praise Thee for a mystery unnamed,
Unuttered here below,
Unspeakable in words the lips have framed,
Yet passing sweet to know.
It is the still, the everlasting tide,
The stream of Love Divine,
That from the heart of God for evermore
Flows into mine.
To that deep joy that bindeth heart to heart
In one eternal love,
A still small stream that flows unseen below,
An endless sea above,
To that high love, that fathomless delight,
No thought of man may reach;
And yet behind it is a sevenfold bliss,
Most holy of God's holy mysteries,
Untold in speech.
Faith only hath beheld that secret place,
Faith only knows how great, how high,
how fair
The Temple where the Lord unveils His Face
To His beloved there.

O how unfading is the pure delight,
How full the joy of that exhaustless tide
Which flows for ever in its glorious might,
So still, so wide;
And deep we drink with sweet, eternal
thirst,
With lips for ever eager as at first,
Yet ever satisfied.

[119]

OF A SIN THAT IS WORSE THAN ALL OTHER SINS.

I have heard men speak of a sin, and I thank God that I have not known it, for it seems to me, and it is, more sinful than all other sins, for it is the height of unbelief. I grieve over it with body and soul, and with all my five senses, from the depth of my heart, and I thank the living Son of God that into my heart it never came.

This sin did not have its source in Christian people, but the vile enemy of God has by means of it deceived [120] the simple. For, led by him, they would fain be so holy as to enter into the depths of the eternal Godhead, and to sound the secret abyss of the eternal sacred Manhood of the Lord. If thus they became blinded with pride, they bring themselves under the eternal curse. They would attain to a holiness which is reached by mocking at the written Word of God, which speaks to us of the Manhood of our Lord.

Thou poorest of the poor! didst thou indeed know and confess truly the eternal God, then wouldst thou also confess of necessity the eternal Manhood that dwelleth in the Godhead, and thou wouldst of necessity confess the Holy Ghost, who enlightens the heart of the Christian, who is the source of all his blessedness and joy, and who teaches the mind of man far better than all other teachers, and leads us to confess in humility that which He has taught us to know of the perfection of God.

HOW LOVE WAS SEEN WITH HER HANDMAIDENS—A PARABLE.

In the night I spoke thus to our Lord, "Lord, I live in a land that is called Misery; it is this evil world, for all that is in it cannot comfort me, nor give me joy unmixed with sorrow. In this land I have a house, which is called [121] Painful. It is the house in which my soul lives, namely, my body. This house is old, and small, and dark. In this house I have a bed, which is called Unrest, for all things are a grief to me which have not to do with God. Near this bed I have a chair, called Discomfort, wherein I hear of sins committed by others in which I had no part. Before this chair I have a table, that is called Distress, for I am grieved to find so few spiritual people. On this table lies a clean tablecloth, which is called Poverty, that has much good in it, and if it were rightly used it would be dear to those who use it. On this table my food is placed for me; it is called the Bitterness of sin, and Willing suffering. The drink is called 'Scanty Praise,' because, alas! I have far too few good works to be remembered."

All this I saw as it were dimly in my soul. And then was the true Love of God revealed to me. She stood before me as a noble and royal maiden, of stately presence, fair, and with the roses of her youth, and around her stood many maidens, who were the graces of the Spirit, and they were come to be my handmaidens if I desired to have [122] them as mine, for they were willing to serve me. They wore crowns brighter than shining gold, and their clothing was of green sendal.

And as I beheld her my dark house was lighted up, so that I could see all that was therein, and all that happened there. And I knew the damsel well, for she had often been my dear companion, and her face was familiar to me. But as I have written of her oftentimes in this book, I will not speak of her further.

Then said I to her, "O beloved damsel, that art a thousandfold higher than I am, yet thou dost serve me with honour and reverence, as if I were greater than an empress."

And she said, "When I saw that it was thy desire to renounce earthly things I desired to be thy constant handmaiden, for I was seeking those who from the love of God turned away from the things on earth."

And I said, "Beloved damsel, so long hast thou served me, I would gladly give thee for thy service all that I have or might have on the earth."

She answered, "I have gathered up thy gift, and will restore it to thee at last with glory and honour."

Then said I, "Lady, I know not what more to give but myself."

[123]

"And that," she said, "I have long desired, and now at last thou hast given me my desire...."

The parable proceeds to relate the service of each handmaiden bestowed by Love upon the soul, first True Repentance—then the maiden called Humility—Gentleness—Obedience, Tenderness (who was to give her help in tending the sick, and in making coarse food and hard labour sweet to her who served). Then came the "beloved damsel" Purity, then Patience, Holiness, Hope, and the "glorious and holy maiden called Faith." Then Watchfulness, Moderation, Contentment, "the dear maiden who made the hard bed soft, and the coarse food pleasant." Then the mistress of the maidens, Wisdom, and a "maiden unwillingly praised," called Bashfulness. And lastly came Fear and Constancy.

And these all being ready to serve, the soul gave thanks, "O thou dear Love of God, I thank Thee that Thou hast brought to me so many helpers on my way to heaven." And the soul saw how all the saints and angels bowed

down in the wonderful glory of God, because all they were, and all they did, was a gift of grace from God to them. "The saints kneel down and bow themselves before God in blessed love, and in joyful longing. They thank God that His grace was ready and waiting to bring them through this earthly need, and to bear their sorrows." [124]

FOUR THINGS THAT BELONG TO FAITH.

That we believe in Christ as God, loving God from the heart, truly confessing Jesus Christ, and faithfully following His teaching even unto death. I think that in these four things we find eternal life.

But our faith must be a Christian faith, not the faith of Jews, or of unbelieving Christians, who also profess to believe in one God, but who believe not in the holy works which He has wrought. His work they despise, as we grieve to know. But for us, our belief is that God sent His only-begotten Son into the world, and that it was His Will to do so. We believe in the work and death of our Lord Jesus Christ, whereby He has redeemed our souls. We believe in the Holy Ghost, who has perfected our blessedness in the Father and in the Son, and who brings forth in us all the works that are pleasing to God.

[125]

FROM A FRIEND TO A FRIEND.

Great and overflowing is the love of God, that never standeth still, but floweth on for ever and without ceasing, with no labour or effort, but freely and fully, so that our little vessel is full and over-full. If we do not stop the channel by our self-will it will never slacken in its flowing, but the gift of God will ever make our cup to run over.

Lord, Thou art full of grace, and therewith Thou fillest us. But Thou art great, and we are small, how then can we receive that which Thou givest? Lord, whilst Thou givest to us, it is for us to give to others. Truly our vessel that Thou hast filled is a small one, but a small one can be emptied and filled anew, till it has filled a large one.

The great vessel is full sufficiency of grace, but we, alas! are so small, that one little word from God, one little verse of the Holy Scriptures, so fills us, that we can contain no more. Let us then empty forth the little vessel into the great vessel, that is, God. How are we to do this? We should pour forth that which we have received in holy longing and desire for the salvation of sinners. Then will the little vessel be filled again. Let us empty it forth anew on the imperfections of the people of God, that they may fight more valiantly, and may become perfected in grace. Let us pour it forth in holy pity for the need of the Christian Church, that is sunk so deeply in sin. [126]

God has first loved us, first laboured for us, first suffered for us, let us therefore be followers of Him, and restore to Him in the way that I have described that which He gave. Our Lord suffered for us unto death, but a very small suffering of ours seems great to us. But the thoughts of God and those of the loving soul meet together, as the air and the sunlight are mingled by the mighty power of God in sweet union, so that the sun overcomes the frost and the darkness, one knows not how. It comes all and alone from the sun. So comes our blessedness from the joy of God. God grant us, and preserve to us, this blessedness! Amen.

SOMETHING OF PARADISE.

It was shown to me, and in my mind I saw, what manner of place is Paradise. Of its breadth and length I could see no end. First came I to a place that was between this world and the beginning of Paradise.

There saw I trees with much shade and fair green grass, but weeds were there none. Some trees bore fruit, but most of them only beautiful and sweet smelling leaves. Swift streams of water divided the ground, and warm south winds moved onward towards the north. In the waters were mingled earthly sweetness and heavenly delight. The air was sweet and soft beyond all words. Yet were no birds or beasts in that place; for God had prepared it for men only, that they might be there in stillness and in peace.... I saw a twofold Paradise. It is of the earthly one that I have spoken. The heavenly Paradise is in the heights above, and shields the earthly from all harm. But of the heavenly Paradise Matilda only says that it is for a time, and that it is the place wherein the souls who have had no purgatory await the Kingdom of the Lord, "they move in sweet delight, as the air moves in the sunshine," and will one day have their crowns of glory, and will reign with Christ. [127]

THE END OF THE JOURNEY.

It was evident to Matilda that her end was near. Her age was what would be called old age in the Middle Ages, when life was so much shorter than in our time. "I asked the Lord," she said, "how I should conduct myself in these last days of my life. He answered me, 'Thou shouldst do in thy last days as in thy first days. Love and longing, repentance and fear, these four things were the beginning of thy course, and must therefore be the end also.'" [128]

"Then said I, 'Beloved Lord, where, then, are the two things that are the foundation and crown of heavenly blessedness, where are faith and full assurance?'"

"Then said our Lord, 'Thy faith becometh knowledge, and thy longing is turned into full assurance.' This I understood from the speaking of the Lord to me, and I know it also in my heart."

"I am a wonder to myself, and am indeed a wonder. For when I think of death, my soul rejoices so mightily in the thought of going forth from earthly life, that my body is lulled, as it were, in an inexpressible supernatural quietness, soft and sweet, and my mind is awakened to see the unspeakable wonders that attend the going forth of the soul. Meanwhile I would desire most to die at the time which God has before appointed. Yet at the same time I would willingly live till the last great day. And my heart longs oftentimes to live in the days of the martyrs, that I might shed my sinful blood in true Christian faith for Jesus my Beloved. [129]

"That I dare to say I love God, is a gift of His pure grace. For it is when my sins and sufferings are before my eyes that my soul begins to burn in the fire of the true love of God, and the sweetness is so surpassing, that even my body shares in the Divine blessedness. I write this as it were by compulsion, for I would rather hold my peace, because I live in fear and dread of secret tendency to vainglory. Yet I am more afraid, when God has been so gracious to me, that I, poor and empty as I am, have kept silence too often and too long.

"From my childhood onwards I was troubled with fear, dread, and constant sorrow of heart in thinking of my end. Now in my last days God has given me peace. And I have said to Him, 'Lord, it likes me well to think of the light and blessedness of thy heavenly glory, of which I am so unworthy, but I still have a great fear as to how my soul shall pass from my body.' And the Lord answered, 'It shall be thus—I draw My breath, and the soul will follow on to Me, as the needle to the magnet stone.'" [130]

And again she prayed that at that last moment the Lord would come to her, as "the dearest Friend," as the "Confessor," as the Father.

"O Lord, I pray, when dawneth the last day
These weary eyes shall see,
Come as a father to his darling child,
And take me home to Thee."

In these prayers and longings we find no thought of purgatory. Yet as an article of her creed Matilda believed in it. Nor did any thought of superior holiness make her overlook it in her own case. But the true spiritual instinct of the new nature was stronger than the force of education and of the authority of the Church. How true is it that in spiritual matters the head is no match for the heart.

So in the case of saint-worship—Matilda had never renounced it, yet we see her heart turn instinctively to God, as the needle to the pole.

The waiting time was one of suffering, but cheered by the love and tenderness of the sisters, who delighted to wait upon her.

"Thus does a beggar woman speak in her prayers to God—Lord, I thank Thee that since in Thy love Thou hast taken from me all earthly riches, Thou now feedest and clothest me by the means of others; for everything which I can now call my own, and all that gives joy to my heart, must now come to me from strangers. [131]

"Lord, I thank Thee that since Thou hast taken away the power of sight from mine eyes, Thou hast appointed other eyes to serve me. Lord, I thank Thee that since Thou hast taken the strength from my hands, Thou servest me with other hands. Lord, I thank Thee that since Thou hast taken away the strength of my heart, Thou servest me now by the hearts of strangers. Lord, I pray Thee reward them here on earth with Thy divine love, and grant to them to serve Thee faithfully till they reach a blessed end."

THE LAST POEM.

Thus speaks the suffering body to the patient soul.

With the wings of longing when wilt thou fly
To the hills of the glorious land on high,
To Christ thine eternal love?
Thank Him for me, though vile I be,
That His grace for me hath a share;
That He took our sorrows and felt our need,
That we are His love and care.
Ask Him, that safe in his tender Hand
In sweet rest I may lie,
When we part at the bounds of the pilgrim
land,
Thou, soul and I.

Then doth the Soul make answer.

I thank thee that thou on the pilgrim road
Hast been my comrade true;
Often wert thou a weary load,
Yet didst thou bear me through.
When the Day shall come that is to dawn
Shall all thy sorrows be past and gone;
Therefore let us give thanks and praise,

[132]

For His love who guarded us all our days,
And for hope of the joy that is to be,
For thee and me.

How did Matilda die? We know no more. Her death is mentioned in the *Mechthild Book*, Matilda von Hackeborn being one of those present at her death. But, alas! as it often happens in the search for mediæval facts, we are met instead by a relation of visions and dreams. Matilda von Hackeborn tells us no more than how she beheld in a vision the departure of the soul of her namesake.^[11]

The difficulty is to realise that in these imaginary histories we are reading the writings of some who, like [133] Matilda of Hackeborn, had, in spite of their visions, real intercourse with God.

That Matilda of Magdeburg had this true intercourse, based upon the written Word of God, that she was one of those of whom the Lord Jesus said, "I will love him, and will manifest Myself to him," there can be no doubt in any Christian mind. It was the time of the conflict of light with darkness, of the prejudices of early education with the experiences of communion with the living God. The heart received much that contradicted the nominal belief, and this inconsistency was not remarked by the recipient of the truth, because the mind was not called upon to act in the matter. It was left in inert subjection to the teaching of the Church.

When nearly three hundred years later the mind asserted its rights, and the Reformers gave at length Scriptural proofs of that which the "Friends of God" had experienced, all might have been well. But, alas! the weight [134] was shifted to the other side, and that which had been a matter of the heart became after a while a matter of the reason, to be discussed and assented to by those who had no heart in the question. We have to suffer for this in our days. Let us learn not to be contented with proofs in black and white, valuable as they are. We need that communion of heart with God by the power of the Holy Ghost, which needs no proof, and which is the only remedy for our lukewarmness, our worldliness, and our joylessness.

THE NUN GERTRUDE.

It is of interest to trace in the convent of Hellfde the results of the work and the teaching of the Abbess Gertrude and of the Béguine Matilda. It was not in vain that the abbess had given to the Scriptures such a place of honour, and had so diligently studied them, and insisted upon their study. Nor was it in vain that Matilda of Magdeburg had spoken and written of the free grace of God, and of the love of Christ that passeth knowledge.

This teaching was the beginning of a stream of life and light, which became deeper and wider as it flowed [135] along. And we find in the next book written in the convent a clearer and fuller confession of the truth. This book, written in part by the Nun Gertrude, in part by an unnamed sister, consists of five separate books, together called *Insinuationes divinæ pietatis*. Of four of these books little can be said, except that they consist chiefly of the visions and revelations of the authoress, and accounts of visions seen by the Nun Gertrude. It is in the second of the five books, the only one written by Gertrude herself, that we find that which repays the trouble of sifting the true from the false, and the gems of marvellous lustre from the dust-heaps in which they lie buried.

A translation of some of the most remarkable passages in this second book has already been given, as mentioned above, in the book, "Trees Planted by the River." But a few more short extracts will perhaps add to the proof of Gertrude's clear and simple trust in Christ, as revealed in the Gospel.

"When I consider," she writes, "the character of my life from the beginning and onwards I have to confess in [136] truth it is a history of nothing but grace, grace without the smallest deserving on the part of one so unworthy as I am. For Thou didst of Thy free grace bestow upon me clearer light in the knowledge of Thyself, and Thou didst lead me on by the alluring sweetness of Thy love and kindness. I was more attracted by Thy love, than I could have been driven by the punishment which, on the part of Thy holy justice, was due to me."

"The great power and sound strength of Gertrude's mind," writes Preger, "could not allow her to satisfy herself with the visions in which she had a share. She sought a firmer foothold for her new life, a source which should lastingly and invariably satisfy her inmost being. And with the whole energy of the mind, which had formerly been absorbed in secular learning, she gave herself to the study of the Holy Scriptures, and of such commentaries as she could find to explain them, amongst others those of Augustine and Bernard.

"How deeply she felt the value of the treasures laid up for her in the Scriptures, we learn from the joyful inspiration which filled her soul when reading them. 'She could not,' writes the unnamed nun, 'drink in [137] enough each day of the wonderful sweetness she found in meditating on the Word of God, and in searching for the hidden light which she found in it. It was sweeter to her than honey, and more lovely than the sound of the organ, and consequently it seemed as though her heart was filled with an almost unceasing joy.'

"She copied out from the Scriptures and from commentators whole books of extracts, which she wrote for the convent sisters; and was often employed from early in the morning till late at night in endeavouring to write explanations of difficult passages, so as to render them more intelligible to her sisters. For it was a part of her nature to lead on others in the same path, and to work for those around her, so as to exercise a wholesome influence, forming them and helping them.

"She also provided other convents which had few books with extracts from the Bible. Thus the Scriptures were the Alpha and Omega of her thoughts. All her reflections, warnings, and consolations had a Bible passage as their source. It was astonishing, her friend said, how invariably the right word from the Scriptures was ready to hand in each case; and whether she reproved or counselled, she made use of the witness of Holy Scripture [138] as that which no one might dare to gainsay.

“This universal tendency of her mind to draw others into the enjoyment of that which she possessed, and to work for this end, explains how instantly and willingly she would tear herself away from silent contemplation, to use any occasion that presented itself for active work for others. To return to contemplation again was then easy for her.’

“We perceive from this remark the breadth, and at the same time the strength, of her mind, as well as the harmony of her inner and outer life. This is not contradicted by the fact that her friend mentions as her chief fault a certain impatience and vehemence, for which she often blamed herself. It arose from her strong impulse to work for others.”

Preger further remarks: “It was in the ninth year after her conversion, 1289 and 1290, that she wrote that remarkable book which forms the second of the five books of the *Insinuationes*. It consists of confessions in forcible language, from the heights of the strongest feeling and the clearest perception. At the same time, [139] the great gifts with which she was endowed shine the more brightly from their accompaniment of the most touching humility. This book, together with her ‘Practices of Piety,’ a book of prayers, belong to the most beautiful products of mystical literature.

“In her case, a progress from legal bondage to ever-increasing liberty of spirit is clearly marked. When once her new spiritual life had had its beginning in evangelical faith, it followed from the strength and wholesome soundness of her mind, that the unfolding of this spiritual freedom should proceed in spite of the opposition of religious tradition, and should prove victorious. It is of the greatest interest to trace this progress as far as we have the means of doing so.”

This onward path from asceticism, self-chastisement, and bitter sorrow over the fallen Church, to calm and happy communion with Christ, was remarked by others, and the passage from bondage to liberty was a cause of joyful thanksgiving to herself.

“At all times,” writes her anonymous friend, “she rejoiced in such assured confidence, that neither calamity, nor loss, nor any other hindrance, nay, not even her sins or shortcomings, could overcloud it; for she had always [140] the full and firm assurance of the rich grace and mercy of God. If she felt herself stained by daily sins, it was her custom to take refuge at the feet of Christ, to be washed in His Blood from all spot and stain.”

It will be remarked that Gertrude had not yet fully apprehended the great truth that the worshipper once purged has no more conscience of sin, that “by one offering Christ hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified,” and that for this reason there is no repetition of sacrifice. For “without *shedding* of Blood is no remission,” and the Blood of expiation once shed, can be shed no more for ever.

But it may be that Gertrude, like many now, confused the recalling of that blood-shedding which put away sin, a recalling which gives comfort when we feel that we have sinned afresh, with the actual cleansing, once and for ever, in the precious Blood of Christ—the actual cleansing never to be repeated, but the comfort and peace founded upon it a constant experience, which the heart may rejoice in on every fresh occasion of the confession of sin.

“When she felt,” continues her friend, “the marvellous power of the grace of God, she did not betake herself [141] to penances, but, committing herself freely to the drawing of that grace, she yielded herself as an instrument for loving service, free to receive all that God gave, and to be used by Him for His work.”

It is further remarked that she looked upon God’s gift of grace in His Son as so immeasurable and marvellous, that all human endeavour and doings vanished to a point when compared with it, and were not worth mentioning.

And with regard to her own assurance of faith, she saw that also was a gift of God’s free grace bestowed on her in spite of her undeservings. It would seem as if this strong faith and sense of God’s unutterable love, had led her entirely beyond the land of bondage in which her fellow-Christians were living. She was as a child at liberty in the Father’s home.

On one occasion when taking a walk, she fell down a steep place, and getting up unhurt, she said, “O my beloved Jesus, how well it had been for me had that fall brought me quickly home to Thee!” And when the sisters [142] who were with her said in wonderment, “Would you not be afraid to die without the sacrament?” she answered, “I would desire the sacrament if I were dying, but far, far more do I desire the will of my God and His appointment for me. That is the best preparation for death; for however I die, my hope is in the mercy that will never fail me. Without that I should be lost, whether I died suddenly, or with a sure knowledge beforehand that the time was come.”

For she no longer regarded herself as apart from Christ, but as in Him, and as one in whom He dwelt, and therefore looked upon herself as belonging to Him, and, consequently, instead of mortifying her body, she looked upon taking food or rest as something done for the Lord.

“Not,” says Preger, “that in regard to others she had fully cast aside the prevailing belief in the merit of works, but in her own case she saw but her own sin and God’s free grace. And with regard to the works of others, she considered no value attached to them if they were done with a view to reward. Those good works, she said, which people do from habit, have a black mark set against them; those done for Christ’s sake, and by His power, a [143] red mark. But the red mark has a black mark across it, if there is any thought of gaining merit by those works. They have a golden mark when they are done simply for His honour, with no other aim in view.”

It should be remarked also that Gertrude entertained strong misgivings with regard to the common practices of exciting devotion by appeals to the senses. The erection of mangers at Christmas, and the representations in pictures and images of the sufferings and the death of Christ, appeared to her useless and dangerous. She feared

that true personal intercourse with God in the Spirit and in truth, would be hindered by these means.

Nor did she share the devotion of her contemporaries to relics of any sort. "The Lord has shown me," she said, "that the most worthy relics which remain of Him are His Words."

"In such a soul," writes Preger, "in which Christ was so entirely the central point, it was natural that Mary should recede into the background. It is true that the spirit of the age was not wanting in the influence brought to bear upon her, and the cult of Mary does not disappear, therefore, from the pages of her book. But she tells us [144] that she was filled with bitter grief when, on one of the festivals of the Virgin, she heard a sermon which contained nothing but the praises of Mary, and of the value of the Incarnation of the Lord not a word. After this sermon, as she passed by the altar of the Virgin, she could not feel in her heart the sweet devotion to her which she had sometimes known. She was roused into a sort of displeasure with Mary herself, because she seemed to her to stand in the way of her Beloved."

It is a painful example of the arguing of an enlightened conscience with a conscience shackled and enslaved by superstition. She imagined the Lord would have her salute His Mother, and her heart answered "Never." And at last she resolved the difficulty by the belief that in doing that which she was unwilling to do, rather than that which would have satisfied her heart, she was pleasing the Lord Himself.

It is useful for us to follow these conflicts of a heart devoted to Christ, with the awful power of generally accepted evil teaching. The spirit of the age is not at any time the Spirit of God. How much power does the spirit of [145] unbelief, of lukewarmness, of corrupted Christianity, exercise upon us?

It matters little that the errors are of a different order. If Mary stood in the way of Christ in the days of Gertrude, is there nothing that amongst "enlightened Protestants" stands now between the soul and the Saviour? Is there nothing believed and taught amongst us which blinds the eyes of lost and helpless sinners to their need of a Saviour? nothing which blinds the guilty to their need of the Atoning Blood? nothing which turns the eyes from Christ, the Coming One, to look for a millennium, not of His Presence, but rather a time when grapes grow on thorns, and figs on thistles?

To return to Gertrude, groping her way from the dim twilight around her to the glorious Gospel day. She was once told that there was to be an indulgence of many years proclaimed to those who were willing to sacrifice their riches to buy it. For a moment Gertrude wished she had "many pounds of gold and silver." But the Lord spoke to her heart and said, "Hearken! By virtue of My authority receive thou perfect and full forgiveness of all thy [146] sins and shortcomings." And she saw at that moment that her soul in the eyes of God was whiter than snow.

When, some days later, this confidence still filled her with joy, she began to fear lest she had deceived herself. "For," she thought, "if the Lord really gave me that white raiment, surely I must have stained it many times since then by my many faults." But the Lord comforted her, saying, "Is it not true that I always retain in My hand a greater power than I bestow upon My creatures? Hast thou not seen how the sun by the power of its heat draws out the spots and stains from the white linen that it bleaches, and makes it whiter than it was before? How much more can I, the Creator of the sun, keep in stainless whiteness the soul upon whom I have had mercy, pouring forth upon it the warmth of my burning love?"

Here, again, we see that Gertrude arrived at the right sense of perfect forgiveness, though it was rather the Love of Christ than His bloodshedding which gave her this assurance. She no doubt had an unclouded belief in the expiation made by His blood, as we see from other passages in her book. But in resting her assurance on His [147] love, if that were (as happily it was not) the whole ground of her confidence, she would have failed in the possession of unchanging peace. She would have rejoiced at the moments when she realised His great love, and have feared and trembled when the sense of it was overclouded by sin and infirmity. The Christian taught of God looks back to see how Christ once bore his sins in His own body on the cross, and looks up to see Christ in glory as the proof that those sins are for ever put away. He rests upon these unchangeable facts—all *the more*, therefore, realising the marvellous love of the Divine Saviour who died for him, and rose again for his justification.

Gertrude did seek and find this solid foundation. "The longing for certainty," writes Preger, "characterises her inner life. Her powerful mind could only be satisfied in the firm grasping of evident truth. This led her to feel the necessity of immediate intercourse with God." And when she had the assurance of knowing the will of God, she acted, therefore, with an extraordinary decision and promptness. The sisters were astonished at the suddenness of her determinations, and the speed with which she carried them out. They suspected at first that she was [148] self-willed, but they came afterwards to the conclusion that she was carrying out the will of God.

In the last years of her life her longing to depart and to be with Christ became so intense, that she fought against it as a mark of an impatient spirit. "But," says Preger, "to what clearness and assurance of Divine truth she had been led, we see from the joyful confidence with which she looked forward to death and judgment." In the last chapters of her book of prayers, before mentioned, we find a passage with which it is well to conclude the history of her spiritual life.

"O Truth, Thou hast for Thine inseparable companions Justice and Equity. In number, measure, and weight Thy judgment stands firm. That which Thou weighest, Thou weighest in a perfect balance. Woe is me, a thousandfold woe, if I fall into Thine hands and there should be found no substitute to take my place.

"O Love Divine, Thou wilt provide the substitute. Thou wilt answer for me. Thou wilt undertake my cause, that I may live because of Thee.

"I know what I will do. I will take the cup of salvation. The Cup, which is Jesus, I will place in the empty [149] scale. Thus—thus all my deficiency will be made up, all my sin covered, all my ruin restored, and all my imperfection will become more than perfect.

"Lord, at this hour (six o'clock) Thy Son Jesus was brought to judgment. Thou didst lay upon Him the sin of the whole world, upon Him who was sinless, but who was called to render account for my sin and my guilt. Yea, O my God, I receive Him from Thine hand as my companion in the judgment; I receive Him, the Most Innocent, the Most Beloved, Him who was condemned and slain for love to me, and now Thy gift, O my loving God, to me.

"O blessed Truth, to come before Thee without my Jesus would be my fear and terror, but to come with Him is joy and gladness. O Truth, now mayest Thou sit down on the judgment-seat and bring against me what Thou wilt. I fear nothing. I know—I know that Thy glorious face will have no terror for me, for He is with me, who is all my hope and all my assurance. I would ask, how canst Thou now condemn me when I have my Jesus as mine, [150] that dearest, that truest Saviour, who has borne all my sin and misery that He might win for me eternal pardon.

"My beloved Jesus, blessed Pledge of my redemption, Thou wilt appear before the judgment-seat for me. By Thy side do I stand there. Thou the Judge, and Thou the Substitute also. Then wilt Thou recount what Thou didst become for love of me, how tenderly Thou hast loved me, how dearly Thou hast bought me, that I through Thee might be righteous before God.

"Thou hast betrothed me to Thyself; how could I be lost? Thou hast borne my sins. Thou hast died, that to all eternity I might never die. All that is Thine Thou hast freely given me, that I through Thy deserving might be rich. Even so, in the hour of death, I shall be judged according to that innocence, according to that purity, which Thou hast freely given me, when Thou didst pay the whole debt for me by giving Thyself. Thou wert judged and condemned for my sake, that I, poor and helpless as I am, might be more than rich in all the wealth that is Thine, and mine through Thee."

[151]

THE VOICE THAT FOR EVER SPEAKS.

Thus to the ear that listens for the One beloved Voice, come from those old times the familiar tones, the household words of the family of God. These souls, so misled, so darkened by the mists of evil teaching, yet by the power of the Holy Ghost saw the Son and believed on Him, and had everlasting life. His sheep followed Him, for they knew His voice, and their souls were filled with love and praise.

Did they not often mistake for His voice the imaginations of their own hearts? Yes, often they did so, and perhaps we do it less often, because less often do we listen for His voice. He speaks and we are deaf, and we go on our way expecting no word from His lips, and therefore there is nothing which we suppose to be that Voice, and our delusions are altogether of another nature.

Our delusion in these days is that there is no immediate, daily, hourly communication between the soul and God. We do not mistake by regarding false coin as true; our mistake is that the true coin has ceased to exist since the days when John and Paul spoke to the Lord and He answered them, and the Holy Spirit spoke, and they [152] listened.

Yet still as of old there are those whose eyes have been anointed with eye-salve and they see Him, and their ears unstopped and they hear Him, and they can bear witness to the truth that the Comforter abides with us for ever, and takes still of the things of Jesus and shows them unto us; and these can recognise in the old histories of the saints of God the same voice and the same teaching, and can trace it back to the written Word, to which it answers as the stamp to the seal.

It is well for us also to bear in mind the delusions, and, to us, inconceivable errors which were mistaken in past ages for the voice of God. That the chief work of Satan has been from the beginning to counterfeit the work of God, we know from revelation. Nor have we to be on our guard against Satanic power alone. The tremendous force of early education, of the general opinion of the world around us, do not act less powerfully upon us than upon those in former days.

It is true that the course of this age is "according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now [153] worketh in the children of disobedience." The course of each age since Adam sinned has been thus shaped. But mere natural tendency to receive what we call truths, without taking the trouble to think, and to form opinions, as well as courses of action, by habit simply and only, can lead us far enough astray without any other misleading force.

The convent of Hellfde is a remarkable proof of the power of Satan, and of the distortion of our nature, acting upon those who were true-hearted believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, true children of God, and truly taught by Him in the midst of many delusions. Had they applied the test of Holy Scripture to all which they believed to be the voice of God, a very small part of it would have stood the test, in the case of the sister, for example, who wrote four of the five parts of the *Gertrude Book*. The remarkable difference of the second book written by Gertrude herself from the four others, remains as a proof of the fact that the "entrance of the Lord's Word giveth light and understanding to the simple."

But in the case of communications regarded as the voice of God, and *not* standing in opposition to His Word, [154] must not a further distinction be made? Even then the mind may possibly be exercised in simply recalling passages of Scripture, and may be influenced by them as in the case of ordinary writings. Is there nothing more than this which is meant by the statements of the Lord Jesus Christ when speaking of the intercourse between the soul and Himself?

"Why do ye not understand My speech? even because ye cannot hear My word." There is, then, a hearing of which the unbelieving man is incapable. "He that is of God heareth God's words. Ye therefore hear them not, because ye

are not of God.” Thus there are those who “hear indeed and understand not, and see indeed but perceive not.” On the other hand, there are the sheep of Christ, “who follow Him, for they know His voice.” “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me.”

How, then, was it that the true sheep of Christ in the convent of Hellfde followed at times the voice of strangers, and mistook it for His own?^[12] Should we therefore conclude that *all* they received as His was but the working of their own minds, or a snare of the evil one? [155]

If so, the Lord Himself is no longer the Truth. He has solemnly declared to us, that for ever He would hold intercourse with His saints by the power of the Holy Ghost. He has given us the plain assurance, “Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world (the age).” The saints of all ages have claimed these promises, and have found them true.

But the world cannot receive the Spirit of Truth, because it seeth Him not, neither knoweth Him. Nevertheless “Ye know Him, for He dwelleth with you, and shall be in you. I will not leave you comfortless, I will come to you. Yet a little while *the world* seeth Me no more; but ye see Me: because I live ye shall live also. At that day ye shall know that I am in My Father, and ye in Me, and I in you.” And again, “He that loveth Me shall be loved of My Father, and I will love him, and will manifest Myself to him.” [156]

Thus in spite of delusions caused by the false teaching of the corrupted Church, in spite of the hallucinations caused by unnatural bodily conditions, the Lord was true to His word, and made to His servants that revelation of His love that passeth knowledge, which marks their testimony.

And because it passeth knowledge, and all that it is possible for the heart of man to conceive, we recognise it as His revelation to the soul. The God of Catholicism was a Judge, awful and terrible. Even the thought that the righteous anger of the Father needed to be appeased by the merciful intervention of the Son, gave place in time to the thought that the Son also was but a righteous Judge, in whom was justice without mercy. Therefore it was necessary that His mother should be the hope and refuge of sinners, and that her intercession should incline His heart to pity. And there followed in due time a host of other mediators between God and man, to whom the sinful and the suffering should turn rather than to the great and dreadful God.

And it was in the face of this teaching that those who knew His voice had the absolute assurance of His immeasurable and unspeakable love. They passed, as it were, through the host of mediators and intercessors to cast themselves at His feet, and to wash them with their tears, and anoint them with the love which the Holy Spirit of God had shed abroad in their hearts. [157]

Nor had they, as some Protestants in our days, the strange delusion that there is a something called “religion” to which, if they turn in their last days, they may perhaps be fit for heaven. They knew, and we know, if we will look into our hearts, that this is not the answer to our need.

Can “religion” love us? We need love. We need a living heart who can love us with a love utterly unchangeable and eternal. And we find it in Him whose name is Love; in Him who is absolutely just, but who is also the justifier of him that believeth in Jesus. “The Just God and the Saviour”—well may it be added, “there is none besides Me.” No God has ever been invented by the thoughts of man who can be at once the Just One and the Saviour, in whom “Mercy and Truth are met together, in whom Righteousness and Peace have kissed each other.” [158]

We find this revelation of Himself all through the ages, and it is thus that He is now revealed to every soul whose eyes have been opened to see Him, whose ears have been unstopped to hear that marvellous Voice, which is as clear and distinct to the soul now, as will be the shout, and the voice of the Archangel, and the trumpet of God in the day that is to be.

Is it not by the teaching of God Himself, through His Word and Spirit, that we find the solid path upon which to walk, day by day, in all circumstances of our ordinary life? He thus becomes wisdom to the foolish, and strength to the weak. He directs the path of those who in all their ways acknowledge Him. We find a safer guide than our own understanding, than the “common-sense” of the natural heart, which may mislead, and will mislead, those who have no better teacher, as dreams and visions misled the true-hearted servants of God in former days.

The guidance and teaching of Him who is the Wisdom of God, and who hears and answers the prayers of those who seek Him, will assuredly not lead us to commit acts of folly; but the common-sense will be more fully exercised, because all existing facts will then be taken into account. [159]

The greatest and most universal failure in common-sense must be the leaving out of God in all our thoughts; and therefore is it written of the natural man, not only “there is none that doeth good, no not one,” but also, “there is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God.”

[1] Described in her own words in “Trees Planted by the River” (Nisbet).

[2] This pope was Gregory X.

[3] The Latin translation of Matilda’s book appears to have been published very early, as it does not contain the seventh book, probably, therefore, considerably earlier than the year 1300. We know that the 6th and 7th Cantos of the *Purgatorio* were written between 1308 and 1313; the 24th Canto after the year 1314. If Dante passed through Cologne in his wanderings, as appears probable from his reference to Cologne in the *Inferno*, xxiii. 63, he may there have seen the book. It was, however, no doubt widely circulated before the end of the

thirteenth century. The supposition that Matilda of Hackeborn was the origin of Dante's Matilda is disproved by the later date of the *Mechthilden Buch*, which could scarcely have been published before the year 1310.

[4] In his lecture on Dante's Matilda, delivered at a later period, Preger raises the question whether the book of the Béguine is of such a nature as to have attracted in so considerable a measure the appreciation of a Dante. "I must here only repeat," he says, "that which I have formerly written with regard to the spirit and poetical power of this work, as it appears in Morel's edition. I think I may say that amongst all the known works of this nature up to the end of the thirteenth century, there is none that attains to the importance of this work. Only the second part of the book of the Nun Gertrude, written by herself, can be placed in any point of view in comparison with it. It is evident that the Béguine Matilda was of sufficient significance to make an impression on Dante, and to be used by him as a type of that form of contemplation which I have described under the name of practical mysticism."

[5] The contents of the seven books may be thus summarised:—

1. Disconnected passages—visions, or parables related as visions.
2. Disconnected parables, visions, and prophecies. With regard to one of these visions Matilda remarks, "That this so happened is not to be understood literally, but spiritually; it was that which the soul saw, and recognised, and rejoiced in. The words sound human, but the natural mind can but partly receive that which the higher sense of the soul perceives of spiritual things."

Commendations of the preaching friars of the order of S. Dominic.

References to passing events and contemporary persons, or persons lately departed.

3. Refers chiefly to ecclesiastical matters. Contains prophecies of the last days, of the Antichrist, of the return of Enoch and Elijah. In these prophecies occur passages reproduced in the *Divine Commedia*.

4. The book of love, between God and the soul.

5. Practical.

6. Descriptions of hell (the City of Eternal Hate) and Purgatory, with which the *Divine Commedia* may be compared.

Preparation for death.

7. Various and disconnected. References to contemporary persons and events.

[6] Author of the "Psalter of the Blessed Virgin."

[7] See *Purgatoria*, Canto xxxi. 129.

"My soul was tasting of the food that while
It satisfies us, makes us hunger for it."

[8] See Isaiah lx. 19, 20, as explaining this thought: "The sun shall be no more thy light by day; neither for brightness shall the moon give light unto thee: but the Lord shall be unto thee an everlasting light, and thy God thy glory. Thy sun shall no more go down; neither shall thy moon withdraw itself: for the Lord shall be thine everlasting light, and the days of thy mourning shall be ended."

[9] In which the Church, the Body of Christ, is spoken of as existing not only before His death and resurrection, but before He became Incarnate.

[10] "Why did I thus pray?" she writes. "Because I find that I am still just as despicable and unworthy as I was thirty years ago when I began to write. But the Lord showed me that He had healing roots stored, as it were, in a little sack, and with them should the sick be refreshed, and the healthy strengthened, and the dead raised, and the godly sanctified."

[11] Matilda the Béguine's own words relating to the death of a friend may better describe her own—

"He laid him down upon the breast of God
In measureless delight,
Enfolded in the tenderness untold,
The sweetness infinite."

The account given by Matilda of Hackeborn is but an evidence of the unreal state of those who were for ever craving for some fresh revelations to supplement the Word of God; who unconsciously to themselves were walking, so far, by sight, and not by faith, and by the sight, moreover, of a disordered body.

^[12]In general no doubt their delusions arose from the fact that the falsehood presented itself in the form of authorised teaching. They were not on their guard against those whom they had learnt from their cradles to reverence—who represented to them the Apostles of Christ. And these delusions, acting upon over-strained and ill-taught minds and half-starved bodies, kept up a state of mental disease, in which clear and reasonable thought was at times obliterated. It was a spiritual alcohol or opium that was constantly measured out by the accredited teachers of the Church.

THE END.

*Printed by BALLANTYNE, HANSON & Co.
Edinburgh and London*

TRANSCRIBER'S NOTES

- Silently corrected a handful of typos: mostly missing quotation marks.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK MATELDA AND THE CLOISTER OF HELLFDE ***

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