



Petrarch's Secret

Francesco Petrarca

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Most modern writers on Petrarch agree in stating that of all his works the Dialogues which he calls *Secretum meum* are the one which throws most light upon the man himself.

Yet no English translation has hitherto been published. A French version by M. Victor Develay was issued a few years ago, and received the recognition of the French Academy; and, considering the great importance of Petrarch in the history of the Renaissance, not merely in Italy but in Europe, it is time that a similar opportunity of knowing him more fully was offered to English readers; for there are signs on both sides of the Atlantic that the number of those interested in him is steadily growing. The reason for this is undoubtedly the fact that, as the whole work of Petrarch comes to be better known, interest in him as a man increases. Mr. Sidney Lee has lately reminded us of his wide range and predominating influence in the matter of the sonnet in France and in Elizabethan England, as well as in his own country; and yet that influence was very far indeed from revealing all that Petrarch was. It was largely an influence of style, a triumph of the perfection of form, and his imitators did not trouble much about the precise nature of the sentiment and spirit informing the style. When this came to be weighed in the balances of a later day, the tendency of English feeling was to regard his sentiment as a trifle too serious and weak. The love-making of the Cavaliers brought in a robust tone. When once the question was raised, "Why so pale and wan, fond lover?" there was really no good answer to it on Petrarchan lines, and the consequence was that his name and fame suffered something of eclipse among us. But eclipses are transient events, and when literary England felt once more the attraction of Italy in the end of the eighteenth century it was not only Dante who began to resume his sway and to provoke translation, but Petrarch also. Then attention was turned chiefly to his Italian poetry, but also in some degree to the general body of his Latin works and to his Letters, of which it is reported that Fox was among the first to perceive the high value. In England the pioneers in this direction were Mrs. Susannah Dobson, who published first a *Life of Petrarch* in two volumes in 1775, which had by 1805 reached a sixth edition, and, soon after, another volume called *Petrarch's View of Life*, purporting to be a translation, but in fact a very loose and attenuated abstract of the treatise *De remediis utriusque Fortunæ*, which nevertheless reached a new edition in 1797. Then came a volume of *Essays on Petrarch* (Murray 1823) by the Italian exile Ugo Foscolo, and a little later a second *Life of the Poet* by no less a person than Thomas Campbell, also in two volumes.

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