

Or hearest thou rather, pure ethereal stream,
Whose fountain who shall tell? Before the sun,
Before the heavens thou wert."

Into this region, where there is neither space nor time, but only Light, Dante is led by Beatrice. Her eyes are fixed on the eternally revolving circles of the inmost heaven; his eyes are fixed on her. For Beatrice now stands as a symbol of Divine Science; and her eyes, as Dante explains in the "Convito," are the demonstrations of Truth, as her smiles are its persuasions, "in which is shown forth the interior light of wisdom under some veil." And in the demonstrations and persuasions of Wisdom is felt the highest pleasure of that Beatitude which is the greatest good in Paradise.

The great Rose of Paradise is divided horizontally and vertically. Below the horizontal division are the billions of those who have died innocent as infants and children. At the left of the vertical di-

vision are the Old Testament saints, who died before the coming of Christ, yet looked forward to it in hope. Their seats are all full. At the right are the saints of the gospel dispensation, whose seats are only partly full. This reminds us of the famous statue of Christ on the west front of Amiens Cathedral, known as the Beau Dieu d'Amiens. At the left are the saints and patriarchs of the ancient dispensation, looking towards their Promised Redeemer with faces full of ardent hope. At the right are the apostles and saints of the Gospel, looking at Him with faces bright with the rapture of glorious fruition.

The nine Heavens are assigned to different orders of saints. The first, revolved by Angels, is the circle of the Moon; and as the Moon waxes and wanes, this is the circle assigned to those nuns whose vows have failed of perfect fulfilment from a deficiency of will.

The second circle, revolved by Archan-

gels, is that of Mercury, which is less lighted by the sun than other stars, and is therefore assigned to wills imperfect through love of earthly fame.

The third heaven is revolved by the Principalities, and is that of Venus, the last star to which earth's shadow reaches. It is assigned to souls imperfect through excess of human love.

The fourth heaven, revolved by the Powers, is that of the sun, where dwelt the great spiritual lights, the teachers of divinity and philosophy.

The fifth, revolved by Virtues, is that of Mars, the red star; and here dwelt the souls of the martyrs, confessors, and holy warriors.

The sixth, revolved by Dominions, is that of the white star Jupiter, where live the rulers famous for justice.

The seventh — the last planetary heaven — is the cold orbit of Saturn, where dwell the contemplative and abstinent hermits and monks.

The starry heavens — the heavens of the fixed stars — are revolved by the Cherubim. To this sphere descends the triumph of Christ, and here dwell the apostles and saints of the Old and New Testaments.

The ninth, starless, crystalline heaven, revolved by the Seraphim, is the *Primum Mobile*, the source of all motion, the heaven of essential light and love: and here the nine orders of the celestial hierarchy wheel in fiery rings around the Light, which no man can approach unto. Here, in the mystical White Rose, dwell the very elect. It is the heaven of Intuition — the heaven of Angels and Saints, who gaze forever on the Trinity in Unity and the Incarnate Word. And here "in supereminence of beatific vision progressing the dateless and irrevoluble circle of eternity, they clasp inseparable hands in joy and bliss in over-measure for ever."

Before he plunges into this region of divine, eternal, and dazzling abstractions,

Dante seems to have felt how few minds were qualified, or would care, to follow him. He says at the beginning of the second canto, —

“All ye who, in small bark, have following sailed
Eager to listen on the adventurous track
Of my proud keel, that singing cuts her way,
Backward return with speed, and your own shores
Revisit, nor put out to open sea,
Where, losing me, perchance ye may remain
Bewildered in deep maze. The way I pass
Ne'er yet was run.

Exactly in the same spirit Milton prays, —

‘Still govern thou my song,
Urania, and fit audience find, though few.’”

After leaving the Mount of Purgatory, Dante has risen, — by the sort of counter-gravitation of spirituality, — with Beatrice, into what seemed like a lucid, close, solid and shining cloud, a sort of eternal pearl, into which he entered as a ray of light enters the water. It is the sphere of the

Moon; and here first the music of the spheres burst upon his senses. He asks information about the spots on the face of the Moon, and in correction of his previous theories is told by Beatrice, not very lucidly, that they are the divers effects of the Divine Virtue infused into this first and farthest heaven by its Angelic movers. But the discussion is interrupted by the dim gleaming vision of many faces; and Dante, addressing the gleam that seemed most desirous to commune with him, finds that he is speaking to Piccarda, the sister of his wife Gemma Donati, and of Forese, and Corso. This is the lowest heaven, and Piccarda is only here because she had been a nun, but her brother Corso had compelled her to leave her convent, and marry Rossellino Della Tossa — a marriage which she only survived for a few months. He asks her whether the spirits in the lower spheres are conscious of any loss because they are not in a higher place, where

they may enjoy fuller vision. He receives this very beautiful and striking answer:—

“She, with those other spirits, gently smiled,
Then answer'd with such gladness, that she seem'd
With love's first flame to glow: Brother! our will
Is in composure settled by the power
Of charity, which makes us will alone
What we possess, and nought beyond desire:
If we should wish to be exalted more
Then would our wishes clash with the high will
Of Him who sets us here.
And in this will is high tranquility;
It is the mighty ocean, whither tends
Whatever it creates and nature makes.”

And Dante adds,—

“Then saw I clearly how each spot in heaven
Is Paradise, though with like gracious dew
The supreme virtue shower not over all.”

Piccarda then shows him the spirit of the Empress Costanza, daughter of Roger, King of Sicily, whom her brother had forced from her convent to marry her to Henry VI., son of Frederic Barbarossa. Then she vanished like a body that sinks in water, singing

the *Ave Maria* as she disappeared. Perhaps what Piccarda said to him may remind us of Whittier's lines:—

“My God, my God, if thither led
By thy free grace unmerited,
No crown, or palm be mine, but let me keep
A heart that still can feel, and eyes that still
may weep.”

And of Kingsley's prayer— not that he may receive any throne of glory, in that realm beyond the grave— but only that he may be thought worthy of being admitted into any distant place, were it even the humblest and farthest and lowest in God's kingdom.

The conversation had suggested to Dante some question about Plato's hypothesis of the return of disembodied spirits to the stars. Beatrice answers that, though the degree of blessedness *seems* to vary, since “one star differeth from another star in glory,” yet all the blessed, practically, have their seats in the highest heaven, and are not fixed in particular spheres. Then Dante

has another difficulty — “Why should souls suffer from a vow broken only through violence?” She answers that there are degrees of will, and that the absolute will cannot be overborne by force; — and that this *final* freedom of the will is the greatest of God’s gifts.

Then, as an arrow from a bow, they sped into the second heaven, the heaven of Mercury, inhabited by rulers who have been active in the pursuit of praise. Here the Emperor Justinian gives them his swift and nobly impressive sketch of what the Roman eagle has done from the days of Romulus to those of Charlemagne. Here, too, they meet with Romeo, who, after rendering splendid service to Raymond, Count of Berenger, and contriving the marriage of his four daughters to four kings, had been driven away by lying malice, and forced in his old age to beg his bread.

Beatrice then solves some doubts of Dante about the nature of Christ, and the ques-

tion of the Atonement, and they ascend insensibly to the third heaven, that of Venus, the heaven of holy love, where Dante converses with Charles Martel, son of Charles II. of Naples, a young prince whom at Florence Dante had known as a friend, but who had died at twenty-five. The prince explains to him the planetary influences, which, if unresisted, tend to modify character, and so may cause children to degenerate from their parents. There, too, he talks with Bishop Foulk of Toulouse, and with Cunizza, sister of Ezzelino. Into the mouth of Foulk, Dante puts one of his denunciations of the greedy and avaricious pastors of his day, who desert the Gospel for the “Decretals,” and whose thoughts “went not to Nazareth where Gabriel opened his wings.” But he prophesies — with reference to the removal of the popes to Avignon in 1309 — that Rome shall soon be free from their adultery.

They have now left the spheres of im-

perfect will, and mount to the fourth heaven, the heaven of the Sun, where dwell the spirits of wisdom and knowledge. Here they find a most interesting choir of theologians — Dionysius the Areopagite, supposed author of the book on the celestial hierarchies, which went by his name; Gratian, author of the "Decretals;" Boethius, the author of the celebrated "Consolations of Philosophy," whom Theodoric the Goth executed; our own childlike and charming Venerable Bede; the saintly angelic doctor, Thomas Aquinas, one not only of the greatest doctors, but also of the sweetest saints of the Middle Ages; Albert the Great; and Peter Lombard, the famous Master of the Sentences. To these were afterwards added the Prophet Nathan, St. Chrysostom, our own St. Anselm, Hugo of St. Victor, St. Bonaventura, and the Abbot Joachim, who wrote on the Apocalypse, and was believed to have had the gift of prophecy. Dante evidently loves to

linger among those sweet and holy souls. St. Thomas Aquinas, though a Dominican, is so far from feeling the passionate jealousy which afterwards raged between his order and the Franciscans, that he pronounces a glowing eulogy on the humble St. Francis, who founded the Franciscans and made Poverty his bride; and he ends by bewailing the degeneracy of the Dominican order in his day. Not to be outdone in generosity, St. Bonaventura, the Seraphic doctor, follows St. Thomas, the Angelic doctor, and, having been a Franciscan, pronounces his eulogy on St. Dominic, the founder of the Dominicans. St. Thomas then renews the discourse, and speaks of the greatness of King Solomon, and of rash judgments. Solomon, at the prayer of Beatrice, solves some of Dante's doubts about the nature of the glorified bodies of the saints, which he explains as vestures of light radiated from the love of God.

They next ascend to the fifth heaven, of Mars, where they see a great vision of Christ on the cross, and the souls of warriors passing too and fro on it, uttering hymns of ineffable melody to the Conqueror of death. Here Dante is greeted by the spirit of his crusading ancestor Cacciaguida, who draws an exquisite picture of Florence, in the days when she was peaceful, simple, and chaste; when the ladies of Florence did not revel in rich attire, nor daughters prove to be a terror to their fathers, but plied the spindle and distaff in sweet childlike obedience and the pure love of home; and when Florentine nobles were brave and simple, and the city full of high aspirations. Cacciaguida went on to foretell to his descendant his sad exile, and urged him to be brave, and always speak the truth and shame the devil. His exile will be due to the Pope of that city "where Christ is all day long made merchandise," and Dante shall be maligned, and shall have experience, —

"How salt a taste cleaves to a patron's bread,
How hard a task to climb a patron's stairs."

Such were the treacheries hidden behind a few revolving years. "I wish not," he said, "that thou be envious against thy neighbors, because thy life is set in the future, far beyond the chastisement of *their* perfidies." Dante hopes that the threatened peril will not make him a timid friend to truth; and then the spirit, sparkling like a mirror of gold in the sun's ray, bids him speak the truth and fear not. Saddened by the prophecy, Dante is encouraged by the glory in the holy eyes of Beatrice, who bids him look on the arms of the visionary cross, while Cacciaguida names the saints who shine upon it, each of whom flashes out as his name is uttered, — Joshua, and Judas Maccabaeus, and Charlemagne, and Roland, and Godfrey of Bouillon, and others.

Then they ascend to the sixth heaven, that of Jupiter, where the flying spirits of

rulers have arranged themselves into the words *Diligite justitiam qui judicatis terram*; and when they reached the last M, they passed into the form of the Lily of Florence with an eagle's head; and then into the Imperial Eagle; and the saints who formed the beak of the Eagle sang of their exaltation through their love of justice and mercy. Then the saints, shining like rubies all over the Eagle, began to compare the justice of man with the larger and infinite justice of God, and then to denounce the reigning sovereigns of Europe,—the Emperor Albert, for invading Bohemia; Philip the Fair of France, for falsifying the coinage; our Edward I., for his ambition; Frederick of Aragon, for luxurious living; and Charles the Lamé of Naples, whose virtues might be represented by I (for one), and his vices by M (for a thousand). The Eagle proceeds to tell that its eye is formed of the spirits of David, Hezekiah, and other good kings, among whom are the once

pagan Trajan and Rhipeus, made perfectly virtuous by miracles of grace. Trajan owes his beatification apparently to a pure mistake. There was, opposite to the Pantheon, in old days, a bas-relief representing a city, symbolized as a woman doing homage to Trajan; this was misinterpreted into the story of Trajan stopping to do justice to the widow, which caused Gregory to secure by his prayers the Emperor's liberation from the Limbo. Trajan was popularly supposed to have been by a miracle resuscitated and baptized, and Rhipeus to have been baptized by the outpouring of the Spirit.

They then passed to the seventh heaven of Saturn, where Beatrice smiles no longer, for otherwise her smile would consume Dante by its burning gleam. For a similar reason no heavenly song is heard there, because it would be too overpowering. This is explained to Dante by St. Peter Damian. In this sphere he sees the golden

ladder of Jacob, emblem of divine contemplation. St. Peter Damian then proceeds (as indeed he had done in life) to denounce the backslidings of the clergy into luxury, sloth, and avarice; whereat the air became full of spirits like flamelets, and a cry like thunder went up from the multitude, which terrified the poet's heart. In this heaven they see St. Benedict, the founder of the great Benedictine order at Monte Cassino. He shines like the largest and brightest of pearls, and he points out "other fires, who were men of contemplation, kindled with that heat which brings to birth the holy flowers and fruits." Among them is the hermit Macarius of Egypt, and St. Romuald, the founder of the Camaldolese in Casentino. St. Benedict promises that higher up he will be visible in bodily form, when Dante has mounted that ladder of Jacob, "to ascend which no one now parts his feet on earth." Then he complains that his famous rule of St. Benedict has now on earth be-

come mere waste paper, because "the walls that used to be an Abbey are now dens of thieves, and the cowls are sacks full of the flour of sin, in which the church hoards her wealth, which she no longer gives to the poor, but to relatives and worse. Luxury now abounds, whereas St. Peter began without gold or silver, and St. Francis in humility, and he himself with prayer and fasting. But now the white is turned to brown, and God alone could perform the miracle of reformation. Then he drew back to his company, which closed up, and gathered itself to heaven as with a whirlwind.

Dante with Beatrice now began to mount the ladder; but in a moment they were in the sign of the Gemini, the heaven of the fixed stars, and they looked down upon earth through all the planetary heavens, smiling at the mean semblance of "the little floor that makes us mortals so fierce." In this heaven they see a vision of the tri-

umph of Christ surrounded by His saints. The Virgin, the Mystic Rose, crowned by the Archangel Gabriel with a wreath of lilies formed of light and melody,—she being herself “the fair sapphire wherewith the brightest heaven is jewelled,”—followed Christ upwards, while the saints chant *Regina Cœli* and remain behind. From the throng came forth the apostle Peter, who examines Dante on faith, and approves his answers. Then St. James questions him concerning hope; and St. John the Evangelist joins them, in light so dazzling that Dante is for the moment blinded. St. John questions Dante about the love of God; and then amid the chant of “*Holy, Holy, Holy,*” Beatrice points out to Dante our father Adam, who speaks to him about the first state of man. But at that point came a change in the effulgence. The saints had all been chanting “Glory to Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,” so that—surrounded by what seemed to him the smile of the uni-

verse, and hearing this seraphic chant—Dante feels inebriated with gladness, and exclaims, “O joy! O ineffable blitheness! O life, complete of love and peace! O riches secure without craving!” But then, lo! of the four torches burning before him—the three apostles and Adam—the form of St. Peter began to bicker into a flash of angry redness, sympathetically reflected by the rest of the blessed company, as St. Peter exclaims, “If I change my hue, marvel not. He that usurps on earth My place, My place, My place which is vacant in the sight of the Son of God, has of the city of my burial made a chaos of the blood and of the filth, wherewith the Perverse One is appeased down there, who fell from the place on high.” At these words of indignation, as it were a burning blush overspread the face of heaven, while St. Peter continues that the Church, the Bride of Christ, has not been nurtured by the blood of the early martyrs only to be degraded into gain of

gold, after the martyrdoms and tears of the early and sainted popes; nor were the keys meant to be borne on the Devil's banners to fight against baptized Christians; nor was it ever intended that he (St. Peter) should be a figure on a seal, affixed to traffic and to lying privileges, whereat he often blushed and glowed. But now there are seen in the pastures ravening wolves in shepherds' clothing, and Jews from Cahors and Gascony are preparing to drink our blood. O defence of God, why slumberest thou ever? O good beginning, to what vile end must thou needs fall? But the promise from on high will soon come to aid." St. Peter then bids Dante reveal to the world what he has seen. The air becomes full of a snow of fire, and they mount to the ninth heaven, the *Primum Mobile*, where there is neither time nor place, and "no other Where than the Mind of God." It is the source of all motion, and is girt about with light and love, which suggests to Beatrice

the meanness of cupidity, so common on earth that innocence and faith remain with babes alone. Then Dante sees a point of intense brightness, and, revolving around it, nine circles, which are the Hierarchies of Angels, respecting whose orders and nature Beatrice discourses to him, digressing for a moment to reprove the silly and vulgar buffooneries which had become common in sermons, of which mediæval records furnish us with many proofs.

Then they mount to the Empyrean and the Rose of the Blessed, which he at first mistakes for a river of light resplendent with splendors, from which issued living sparks, which, like gold-encircled rubies, settled on the flowers upon its banks, until, as though inebriate with odors, they would plunge again into the wondrous stream. The ruby-like sparks are Angels, and the flowers are blessed Spirits. With one parting eulogy of the Emperor Henry of Luxemburg, and denunciation of Boniface VIII.

and Clement V., Beatrice parts from Dante, and takes her place among the blessed, leaving him to the tutelage of the ardent St. Bernard, who shows him the throne where sits the Virgin Mary and the orders of the various saints, and speaks to him of the salvation of infants. St. Bernard breaks into a hymn to the Virgin, and Dante gazes fixedly on the Divine Light. He sees the vision of the Triune God:—

“In that abyss
Of radiance, clear and lofty, seemed methought
Three orbs of triple hue, clipt in one bound,
And from the other, one reflected seemed,
As rainbow is from rainbow: and the third
Seem'd fire, breathed equally from both. O speech,
How feeble and how faint art thou to give
Conceptions birth! Yet this to what I saw
Is less than little. . . .

Here vigor failed the towering fantasy;
But yet the will rolled onward like a wheel
In even motion by the love impelled
That moves the sun in heaven, and all the stars.”

So ends one of the grandest poems ever written. It actually uplifts and dilates our

mortal nature to observe the sublime confidence, the holy audacity of human grandeur, with which the poet ventures, with unflinching footstep, to tread alike the burning marle of Hell, the steep ascents of Purgatory, and the eternal azure of the floor of Heaven:—nor this only, but also to mingle with Saints, Patriarchs, Apostles, amid the glories of lucent Seraphim and ardent Cherubim:—nor this only, but to stand before the very Throne of the Triune God, in the light of that rainbow in sight like unto an emerald. Of our own Milton another poet says that—

“He rode sublime
Upon the seraph wings of ecstasy;
The secrets of the abyss to espy,
He passed the flaming bounds of time and space,
The living throne, the sapphire blaze
Where angels tremble while they gaze:
He saw, but blasted with excess of light,
Closed his eyes in endless light.”

The last line is a fanciful allusion to Milton's blindness; but Dante did not close

his eyes in night. Nay, the inward illumination added to the clearness of the outward vision, and, amid the anguish of his exile and of his earthly defeat, he passed along the steep up-hillward path of life, not only "bating no jot of heart or hope," but more and more confident, and more and more convinced that the Spirit witnesseth with our spirit that we are sons of God;—and that, by His grace, it is possible for us to win that eternal foretaste of immortality, wherein "God is Man in one with Man in God."