

## CANTO VIII.

### ARGUMENT.

Two angels, with flaming swords broken at the points, descend to keep watch over the valley, into which Virgil and Dante entering by desire of Sordello, our Poet meets with joy the spirit of Nino, the judge of Gallura, one who was well known to him. Meantime three exceedingly bright stars appear near the pole, and a serpent creeps subtly into the valley, but flees at hearing the approach of those angelic guards. Lastly, Conrad Malaspina predicts to our Poet his future banishment.

NOW was the hour that wakens fond desire  
In men at sea, and melts their thoughtful heart  
Who in the morn have bid sweet friends farewell,  
And pilgrim newly on his road with love  
Thrills, if he hear the vesper bell from far<sup>1</sup>  
That seems to mourn for the expiring day:<sup>2</sup>  
When I, no longer taking heed to hear,  
Began, with wonder, from those spirits to mark  
One risen from its seat, which with its hand  
Audience implored. Both palms it join'd and raised,  
Fixing its stedfast gaze toward the east,  
As telling God, "I care for nought beside."  
"Te Lucis Ante,"<sup>3</sup> so devoutly then  
Came from its lip, and in so soft a strain,  
That all my sense<sup>4</sup> in ravishment was lost.  
And the rest after, softly and devout,

<sup>1</sup> Hear the vesper bell from far.—

"I hear the far-off curfew sound."

*Milton's Penseroso.*

<sup>2</sup> That seems to mourn for the expiring day.—

"The curfew tolls the knell of parting day."

*Gray's Elegy.*

"Giorno—che si muore"

is from Statius:

"Jam moriente die."

*Sylve*, l. iv. 6. 3.

<sup>3</sup> *Te Lucis Ante*.—"Te lucis ante terminum," says Lombardi, is the first verse of the hymn sung by the church in the last part of the sacred office termed *compieta*, a service which our Chaucer calls "complin."

<sup>4</sup> *All my sense*.—

"Fece me a me uscir di mente.

Me surpuerat mihi."

*Horat.*, *Carm.*, lib. iv., od. 13.

Follow'd through all the hymn, with upward gaze  
Directed to the bright supernal wheels.

Here, reader!<sup>1</sup> for the truth make thine eyes keen:  
For of so subtle texture is this veil,  
That thou with ease mayst pass it through unmark'd.

I saw that gentle band silently next  
Look up, as if in expectation held,  
Pale and in lowly guise; and, from on high,  
I saw, forth issuing descend beneath,  
Two angels, with two flame-illumined swords,  
Broken and mutilated of their points.  
Green as the tender leaves but newly born,  
Their vesture was, the which, by wings as green  
Beaten, they drew behind them, fann'd in air.

A little over us one took his stand;  
The other lighted on the opposing hill;  
So that the troop were in the midst contain'd.

Well I descried the whiteness on their heads;  
But in their visages the dazzled eye  
Was lost, as faculty<sup>2</sup> that by too much  
Is overpower'd. "From Mary's bosom both  
Are come," exclaim'd Sordello, "as a guard  
Over the vale, 'gainst him, who hither tends,

<sup>1</sup> *Here, reader!*—Lombardi's explanation of this passage, by which the commentators have been much perplexed, though it may be thought rather too subtle and fine-spun, like the veil itself spoken of in the text, cannot be denied the praise of extraordinary ingenuity. "This admonition of the poet to his reader," he observes, "seems to relate to what has been before said, that these spirits sung the whole of the hymn 'Te lucis ante terminum' throughout, even that second strophe of it:—

'Procul recedant somnia,  
Et noctium phantasmata,  
Hostemque nostrum comprime,  
Ne polluantur corpora;'

and he must imply that these souls, being incorporeal, did not offer up this petition on their own account, but on ours, who are yet in this world, as he afterwards makes those other spirits, who repeat the

'Pater Noster,' expressly declare, when after that prayer they add—

'This last petition, dearest Lord! is made

Not for ourselves,' &c.

Canto xi.

As, therefore, if we look through a very fine veil, the sight easily passes on, without perceiving it, to objects that lie on the other side, so here the poet fears that our mind's eye may insensibly pass on to contemplate these spirits, as if they were praying for the relief of their own wants; without discovering the veil of our wants, with which they invest themselves in the act of offering up this prayer."

<sup>2</sup> *As faculty*.—

"My earthly by his heavenly overpower'd

\* \* \* \* \*

As with an object, that excels the sense.

Dazzled and spent."

*Milton, Paradise Lost*, b. viii. 457.



The serpent." Whence, not knowing by which path  
He came, I turn'd me round; and closely press'd,  
All frozen, to my leader's trusted side.

Sordello paused not: "To the valley now  
(For it is time) let us descend; and hold  
Converse with those great shadows: haply much  
Their sight may please ye." Only three steps down  
Methinks I measured, ere I was beneath,  
And noted one who look'd as with desire  
To know me. Time was now that air grew dim;  
Yet not so dim, that, 'twixt his eyes and mine,  
It clear'd not up what was conceal'd before.  
Mutually towards each other we advanced.  
Nino, thou courteous judge!<sup>1</sup> what joy I felt,  
When I perceived thou wert not with the bad.

No salutation kind on either part  
Was left unsaid. He then inquired: "How long,  
Since thou arriv'd'st at the mountain's foot,  
Over the distant waves?"—"Oh!" answer'd I,  
"Through the sad seats of woe this morn I came;  
And still in my first life, thus journeying on,  
The other strive to gain." Soon as they heard  
My words, he and Sordello backward drew.  
As suddenly amazed. To Virgil one,  
The other to a spirit turn'd, who near  
Was seated, crying: "Conrad!"<sup>2</sup> up with speed:  
Come, see what of his grace high God hath willed."  
Then turning round to me: "By that rare mark  
Of honour, which thou owest to him, who hides  
So deeply his first cause it hath no ford;  
When thou shalt be beyond the vast of waves,  
Tell my Giovanna,<sup>3</sup> that for me she call

<sup>1</sup> *Nino, thou courteous judge.*—Nino di Gallura de' Visconti, nephew to Count Ugolino de' Gherardeschi, and betrayed by him. See notes to "Hell," canto xxxiii.

<sup>2</sup> *Conrad.*—Currado, father to Marcello Malaspina.

<sup>3</sup> *My Giovanna.*—The daughter of Nino, and wife of Riccardo da Camino of Treviso, concerning whom see "Paradise," c. ix. 48.

There, where reply to innocence is made.  
Her mother,<sup>1</sup> I believe, loves me no more;  
Since she has changed the white and wimpled folds,<sup>2</sup>  
Which she is doom'd once more with grief to wish.  
By her it easily may be perceived,  
How long in woman lasts the flame of love,  
If sight and touch do not relume it oft.  
For her so fair a burial will not make  
The viper,<sup>3</sup> which calls Milan to the field,  
As had been made by shrill Gallura's bird."<sup>4</sup>

He spoke, and in his visage took the stamp  
Of that right zeal, which with due temperature  
Glowes in the bosom. My insatiate eyes  
Meanwhile to heaven had travel'd, even there  
Where the bright stars are slowest, as a wheel  
Nearest the axle; when my guide inquired:  
"What there aloft, my son, has caught thy gaze?"

I answered: "The three torches,<sup>5</sup> with which here  
The pole is all on fire." He then to me:  
"The four resplendent stars, thou saw'st this morn,  
Are there beneath; and these, risen in their stead."

<sup>1</sup> *Her mother.*—Beatrice, Marchioness of Este, wife of Nino, and after his death married to Galeazzo de' Visconti of Milan. It is remarked by Lombardi that the time which Dante assigns to this journey, and consequently to this colloquy with Nino Visconti—the beginning, that is, of April—is prior to the time which Bernardino Corio, in his history of Milan, part the second, fixes for the nuptials of Beatrice with Galeazzo; for he records her having been betrothed to that prince after the May of this year (1300), and her having been solemnly espoused at Modena on the 29th of June. Besides, however, the greater credit due to Dante, on account of his having lived at the time when these events happened, another circumstance in his favour is the discrepancy remarked by Giovambattista Giraldi ("Commentar. delle cose di Ferrara") in those writers by whom the history of Beatrice's life has been recorded. Nothing can set the general accuracy of our poet as to historical facts in a stronger point of view, than the difficulty there is in convicting him of even so slight a deviation from it as is here suspected.

<sup>2</sup> *The white and wimpled folds.*—The weeds of widowhood.

<sup>3</sup> *The viper.*—The arms of Galeazzo and the ensign of the Milanese.

<sup>4</sup> *Shrill Gallura's bird.*—The cock was the ensign of Gallura, Nino's province in Sardinia. "Hell," xxii. 80, and notes. It is not known whether Beatrice had any further cause to regret her nuptials with Galeazzo than a certain shame which appears, however unreasonably, to have attached to a second marriage.

<sup>5</sup> *The three torches.*—The three evangelical virtues, Faith, Hope, and Charity. These are supposed to rise in the evening, in order to denote their belonging to the contemplative, as the four others, which are made to rise in the morning, were probably intended to signify that the cardinal virtues belong to the active life: or perhaps it may mark the succession, in order of time, of the Gospel to the heathen system of morality.



While yet he spoke, Sordello to himself  
Drew him, and cried: "Lo there our enemy!"  
And with his hand pointed that way to look.

Along the side, where barrier none arose  
Around the little vale, a serpent lay,  
Such haply as gave Eve the bitter food.<sup>1</sup>  
Between the grass and flowers, the evil snake  
Came on, reverting oft his lifted head;  
And, as a beast that smooths its polish'd coat,  
Licking his back. I saw not, nor can tell,  
How those celestial falcons from their seat  
Moved, but in motion each one well descried.  
Hearing the air cut by their verdant plumes,  
The serpent fled; and, to their stations, back  
The angels up return'd with equal flight.

The spirit, (who to Nino, when he call'd,  
Had come,) from viewing me with fixed ken,  
Through all that conflict, loosen'd not his sight.

"So may the lamp, which leads thee up on high,<sup>2</sup>  
Find, in thy free resolve, of wax so much,  
As may suffice thee to the enamel'd height,"  
It thus began: "If any certain news  
Of Valdimagra<sup>3</sup> and the neighbour part  
Thou know'st, tell me, who once was mighty there.  
They call'd me Conrad Malaspina; not  
That old one;<sup>4</sup> but from him I sprang. The love  
I bore my people is now here refined."

"In your domains," I answer'd, "ne'er was I.  
But, through all Europe, where do those men dwell,  
To whom their glory is not manifest?"

<sup>1</sup> *Such haply as gave Eve the bitter food.*—Compare Milton's description of that serpent in the ninth book of the "Paradise Lost."

<sup>2</sup> *May the lamp, which leads thee up on high.*—"May the divine grace find so hearty a co-operation on the part of thy own will, as shall enable thee to

ascend to the terrestrial paradise, which is on the top of this mountain."

<sup>3</sup> *Valdimagra.*—See "Hell," canto xxiv. 144, and notes.

<sup>4</sup> *That old one.*—An ancestor of Conrad Malaspina, who was also of that name.

The fame, that honours your illustrious house,  
Proclaims the nobles, and proclaims the land;  
So that he knows it, who was never there.  
I swear to you, so may my upward route  
Prosper, your honour'd nation not impairs  
The value of her coffer and her sword.  
Nature and use give her such privilege,  
That while the world is twisted from his course  
By a bad head, she only walks aright,  
And has the evil way in scorn." He then:  
"Now pass thee on: seven times the tired sun  
Revisits not the couch,<sup>1</sup> which with four feet  
The forked Aries covers, ere that kind  
Opinion shall be nail'd into thy brain  
With stronger nails than others' speech can drive;  
If the sure course of judgment be not stay'd."

<sup>1</sup> *Seven times the tired sun revisits not the couch.*  
—"The sun shall not enter into the constellation of Aries seven times more, before thou shalt have still better cause for the good opinion thou expressest of

Valdimagra, in the kind reception thou shalt there meet with." Dante was hospitably received by the Marchese Marcello, or Morello Malaspina, during his banishment, A.D. 1307.