



"And who
Are those twain spirits, that escort thee there?
Be it not said thou scorn'st to talk with me."

Canto XXIII., lines 47-49.

CANTO XXIII.

ARGUMENT.

They are overtaken by the spirit of Forese, who had been a friend of our Poet's on earth, and who now inveighs bitterly against the immodest dress of their countrywomen at Florence.

ON the green leaf mine eyes were fix'd, like his
Who throws away his days in idle chase
Of the diminutive birds, when thus I heard
The more than father warn me: "Son! our time
Asks thriftier using. Linger not: away."

Thereat my face and steps at once I turn'd
Toward the sages, by whose converse cheer'd
I journey'd on, and felt no toil: and lo!
A sound of weeping, and a song: "My lips,
O Lord!" and these so mingled, it gave birth
To pleasure and to pain. "O Sire beloved!
Say what is this I hear." Thus I inquired.

"Spirits," said he, "who, as they go, perchance,
Their debt of duty pay." As on their road
The thoughtful pilgrims, overtaking some
Not known unto them, turn to them, and look,
But stay not; thus, approaching from behind
With speedier motion, eyed us, as they pass'd,
A crowd of spirits, silent and devout.
The eyes² of each were dark and hollow; pale
Their visage, and so lean withal, the bones
Stood staring through the skin. I do not think

¹ *My lips*.—"O Lord, open thou my lips; and my mouth shall show forth thy praise."—Ps. li. 15.

² *Eyes*.—Compare Ovid, "Metamorphoses," lib. viii. 801:

"Hirtus erat crinis; cava lumina, pallor in ore:

* * * * *
Dura cutis, per quam spectari viscera possent:
Ossa sub incurvis exstabant arida lumbis."

Thus dry and meagre Erisichon show'd,
 When pinch'd by sharp-set famine to the quick.
 "Lo!" to myself I mused, "the race, who lost
 Jerusalem, when Mary¹ with dire beak
 Prey'd on her child." The sockets seem'd as rings,²
 From which the gems were dropt. Who reads the name³
 Of man upon his forehead, there the M
 Had traced most plainly. Who would deem, that scent
 Of water and an apple could have proved
 Powerful to generate such pining want,
 Not knowing how it wrought? While now I stood,
 Wondering what thus could waste them (for the cause
 Of their gaunt hollowness and scaly rind
 Appear'd not), lo! a spirit turn'd his eyes
 In their deep-sunken cells, and fasten'd them
 On me, then cried with vehemence aloud:
 "What grace is this vouchsafed me?" By his looks
 I ne'er had recognised him: but the voice
 Brought to my knowledge what his cheer conceal'd.
 Remembrance of his altered lineaments
 Was kindled from that spark; and I agnized
 The visage of Forese.⁴ "Ah! respect
 This wan and leprous-wither'd skin," thus he
 Suppliant implored, "this macerated flesh.
 Speak to me truly of thyself. And who

¹ *When Mary.*—Josephus, "De Bello Jud.," lib. vii., c. xxi., p. 954, ed. Genev., fol. 1611. The shocking story is well told.

² *Rings.*—

"Senza fior prato o senza gemma anello."
Petrarca, Son. Lasciata hai, morte.

"O ring of which the rubie is outfall."
Chaucer, Troilus and Creseide, b. v.

"In this habit
 Met I my father with his bleeding rings,
 Their precious stones new lost."
Shakespeare, Lear, act. v., sc. 3.

³ *Who reads the name.*—"He who pretends to dis-

tinguish the letters which form OMO in the features of the human face, might easily have traced out the M on their emaciated countenances." The temples, nose, and forehead are supposed to represent this letter; and the eyes the two O's placed within each side of it.

⁴ *Forese.*—One of the brothers of Piccarda; he who is again spoken of in the next canto, and introduced in the "Paradise," canto iii. Cionacci, in his "Storia della Beata Umiliana," parte iv., cap. i., is referred to by Lombardi, in order to show that Forese was also the brother of Corso Donati, our author's political enemy. See next canto, v. 81. Tiraboschi, after Crescimbeni, enumerates him among the Tuscan poets, "Storia della Poes. It.," v. i., p. 139.

Are those twain spirits, that escort thee there?
 Be it not said thou scorn'st to talk with me."
 "That face of thine," I answer'd him, "which dead
 I once bewail'd, disposes me not less
 For weeping, when I see it thus transform'd.
 Say then, by Heaven, what blasts ye thus? The whilst
 I wonder, ask not speech from me: unapt
 Is he to speak, whom other will employs."
 He thus: "The water and the plant, we pass'd,
 With power are gifted, by the eternal will
 Infused; the which so pines me. Every spirit,
 Whose song bewails his gluttony indulged
 Too grossly, here in hunger and in thirst
 Is purified. The odour, which the fruit,
 And spray that showers upon the verdure, breathe,
 Inflames us with desire to feed and drink.
 Nor once alone encompassing our route,
 We come to add fresh fuel to the pain:
 Pain, said I? solace rather: for that will,
 To the tree, leads us, by which Christ was led
 To call on Eli, joyful, when he paid
 Our ransom from his vein." I answering thus:
 "Forese! from that day, in which the world
 For better life thou changedst, not five years
 Have circled. If the power¹ of sinning more
 Were first concluded in thee, ere thou knew'st
 That kindly grief which re-espouses us
 To God, how hither art thou come so soon?
 I thought to find thee lower,² there, where time
 Is recompense for time. He straight replied:
 "To drink up the sweet wormwood of affliction
 I have been brought thus early, by the tears

¹ *If the power.*—"If thou didst delay thy repentance to the last, when thou hadst lost the power of

sinning, how happens it thou art arrived here so early?"

² *Lower.*—In the Ante-Purgatory. See canto ii.