CANTO XXVIII.

ARGUMENT.

Dante wanders through the forest of the terrestrial Paradise, till he is stopped by a stream, on the other side of which he beholds a fair lady, culling flowers. He speaks to her; and she, in reply, explains to him certain things touching the nature of that place, and tells that the water, which flows between them, is here called Lethe, and in another place has the name of Eunoe.

THROUGH that celestial forest, whose thick shade
With lively greenness the new-springing day
Attemper'd, eager now to roam, and search
Its limits round, forthwith I left the bank;
Along the champain leisurely my way
Pursuing, o'er the ground, that on all sides
Delicious odour breathed. A pleasant air,[1]
That intermitted never, never veer'd,
Smote on my temples, gently, as a wind
Of softest influence: at which the sprays,
Obedient all, lean'd trembling to that part[2]
Where first the holy mountain casts his shade;
Yet were not so disorder'd, but that still
Upon their top the feather'd quiristers[3]
Applied their wonted art, and with full joy
Welcomed those hours of prime, and warbled shrill

[1] *A pleasant air.*—

"Cantan fra i rami gli augelletti vaghi,
Azzurri, e bianchi, e verdi, e rossi, e gialli;
Mormoranti ruscelli, e cheti laghi
Di limpidezza vincono i cristalli.
Una dolc' aura, che ti par che vaghi
A un modo sempre, e dal suo stil non falli,
Facea si l'aria tremolar d'intorno,
Che non potea nojar calor del giorno."

Ariosto, Orlando Furioso, c. xxxiv., st. 50.

"Therewith a winde, unnethe it might be less,
Made in the levis grene a noise soft,
Accordant to the foulis song on loft."

Chaucer, The Assemble of Foules.

[2] *To that part.*—The west.

[3] *The feather'd quiristers.*—Imitated by Boccaccio, "Fiammetta," lib. iv.: "Odi i queruli uccelli," &c.—"Hear the querulous birds plaining with sweet songs, and the boughs trembling, and moved by a gentle wind, as it were keeping tenour to their notes."

Amid the leaves, that to their jocund lays
Kept tenour; even as from branch to branch,
Along the piny forests on the shore
Of Chiassi,[1] rolls the gathering melody,
When Eolus hath from his cavern loosed
The dripping south. Already had my steps,
Though slow, so far into that ancient wood
Transported me, I could not ken the place
Where I had enter'd; when, behold! my path
Was bounded by a rill, which, to the left,
With little rippling waters bent the grass
That issued from its brink. On earth no wave,
How clean soe'er, that would not seem to have
Some mixture in itself, compared with this,
Transpicuous clear; yet darkly on it roll'd,
Darkly beneath perpetual gloom, which ne'er
Admits or sun or moon-light there to shine.

My feet advanced not; but my wondering eyes
Pass'd onward, o'er the streamlet, to survey
The tender may-bloom, flush'd through many a hue,
In prodigal variety: and, there,
As object, rising suddenly to view,
That from our bosom every thought beside
With the rare marvel chases, I beheld
A lady[2] all alone, who, singing, went,
And culling flower from flower, wherewith her way
Was all o'er painted. "Lady beautiful!

[1] *Chiassi.*—This is the wood where the scene of Boccaccio's sublimest story (taken entirely from Elinaud, as I learn in the notes to the "Decameron," ediz. Giunti, 1573, p. 62) is laid. See "Decameron," Giorn. 5, Nov. 8, and Dryden's "Theodore and Honoria." Our poet perhaps wandered in it during his abode with Guido Novello da Polenta.

[2] *A lady.*—Most of the commentators suppose that by this lady, who in the last canto is called Matilda, is to be understood the Countess Matilda, who endowed the holy see with the estates called the Patrimony of St. Peter, and died in 1115. See G. Villani, lib. iv., cap. xx. But it seems more probable that she should be intended for an allegorical personage. Venturi accordingly supposes that she represents the active life. But, as Lombardi justly observes, we have had that already shadowed forth in the character of Leah; and he therefore suggests, that by Matilda may be understood that affection which we ought to bear towards the holy church, and for which the lady above mentioned was so remarkable.

Thou, who (if looks, that use to speak the heart,
Are worthy of our trust) with love's own beam
Dost warm thee," thus to her my speech I framed;
"Ah! please thee hither towards the streamlet bend
Thy steps so near, that I may list thy song.
Beholding thee and this fair place, methinks,
I call to mind where wander'd and how look'd
Proserpine, in that season, when her child
The mother lost, and she the bloomy spring."
As when a lady, turning in the dance,
Doth foot it featly, and advances scarce
One step before the other to the ground;
Over the yellow and vermilion flowers
Thus turn'd she at my suit, most maiden-like,
Valing her sober eyes; and came so near,
That I distinctly caught the dulcet sound.
Arriving where the limpid waters now
Laved the green swerd, her eyes she deign'd to raise,
That shot such splendour on me, as I ween
Ne'er glanced from Cytherea's, when her son
Had sped his keenest weapon to her heart.
Upon the opposite bank she stood and smiled;
As through her graceful fingers shifted still
The intermingling dyes, which without seed
That lofty land unbosoms. By the stream
Three paces only were we sunder'd: yet,
The Hellespont, where Xerxes pass'd it o'er
(A curb for ever[1] to the pride of man),
Was by Leander not more hateful held
For floating, with inhospitable wave,
'Twixt Sestus and Abydos, than by me
That flood, because it gave no passage thence.

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[1] *A curb for ever.*—Because Xerxes had been so humbled, when he was compelled to repass the Hellespont in one small bark, after having a little before crossed with a prodigious army, in the hopes of subduing Greece.

"Strangers ye come; and haply in this place,
That cradled human nature in her birth,
Wondering, ye not without suspicion view
My smiles: but that sweet strain of psalmody,
'Thou, Lord! hast made me glad,'[1] will give ye light,
Which may uncloud your minds. And thou, who stand'st
The foremost, and didst make thy suit to me,
Say if aught else thou wish to hear: for I
Came prompt to answer every doubt of thine."
She spake; and I replied: "I know not how
To reconcile this wave,[2] and rustling sound
Of forest leaves, with what I late have heard
Of opposite report." She answering thus:
"I will unfold the cause, whence that proceeds,
Which makes thee wonder; and so purge the cloud
That hath enwrapt thee. The First Good, whose joy
Is only in himself, created man,
For happiness; and gave this goodly place,
His pledge and earnest of eternal peace.
Favour'd thus highly, through his own defect
He fell; and here made short sojourn; he fell,
And, for the bitterness of sorrow, changed
Laughter unblamed and ever-new delight.
That vapours none, exhaled from earth beneath,
Or from the waters (which, wherever heat
Attracts them, follow), might ascend thus far
To vex man's peaceful state, this mountain rose
So high toward the heaven, nor fears the rage
Of elements contending;[3] from that part
Exempted, where the gate his limit bars.
Because the circumambient air, throughout,

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[1] *But that sweet strain of psalmody, 'Thou, Lord! hast made me glad.'*—Ps. xcii. 4.

[2] *I know not how to reconcile this wave.*—See canto xxi. 45.

[3] *Of elements contending.*—In the "Dittamondo" of Fazio degli Uberti, l. i., cap. xi., there is a description of the terrestrial Paradise, in which the poet has had Dante before him.

With its first impulse circles still, unless
Aught interpose to check or thwart its course;
Upon the summit, which on every side
To visitation of the impassive air
Is open, doth that motion strike, and makes
Beneath its sway the umbrageous wood resound:
And in the shaken plant such power resides,
That it impregnates with its efficacy
The voyaging breeze, upon whose subtle plume
That, wafted, flies abroad; and the other land,[1]
Receiving (as 'tis worthy in itself,
Or in the clime that warms it), doth conceive;
And from its womb produces many a tree
Of various virtue. This when thou hast heard,
The marvel ceases, if in yonder earth
Some plant, without apparent seed, be found
To fix its fibrous stem. And further learn,
That with prolific foison of all seeds
This holy plain is fill'd, and in itself
Bears fruit that ne'er was pluck'd on other soil.
"The water, thou behold'st, springs not from vein,
Restored by vapour, that the cold converts;
As stream that intermittently repairs
And spends his pulse of life; but issues forth
From fountain, solid, undecaying, sure:
And, by the will omnific, full supply
Feeds whatsoe'er on either side it pours;
On this, devolved with power to take away
Remembrance of offence; on that, to bring
Remembrance back of every good deed done.
From whence its name of Lethe on this part;

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[1] *The other land.*—The continent, inhabited by the living, and separated from Purgatory by the ocean, is affected (and that diversely, according to the nature of the soil, or the climate) by a virtue, or efficacy, conveyed to it by the winds from plants growing in the terrestrial Paradise, which is situated on the summit of Purgatory; and this is the cause why some plants are found on earth without any apparent seed to produce them.

On the other, Eunoe: both of which must first
Be tasted, ere it work; the last exceeding
All flavours else. Albeit thy thirst may now
Be well contented, if I here break off,
No more revealing; yet a corollary
I freely give beside: nor deem my words
Less grateful to thee, if they somewhat pass
The stretch of promise. They, whose verse of yore
The golden age recorded and its bliss,
On the Parnassian mountain,[1] of this place
Perhaps had dream'd. Here was man guiltless; here
Perpetual spring,[2] and every fruit; and this
The far-famed nectar." Turning to the bards,
When she had ceased, I noted in their looks
A smile at her conclusion; then my face
Again directed to the lovely dame.

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[1] *On the Parnassian mountain.*—
"In bicipiti somniasse Parnasso."
Persius, Prol.

[2] *Perpetual spring.*—
"Ver erat æternum, placidique tepentibus auris
Mulcebant zephyri natos sine semine flores.
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Flumina jam lactis, jam flumina nectaris ibant."
Ovid, Metamorphoses,
lib. i., v. 111.