

CANTO VI.

ARGUMENT.

The spirit, who had offered to satisfy the inquiries of Dante, declares himself to be the Emperor Justinian; and after speaking of his own actions, recounts the victories, before him, obtained under the Roman Eagle. He then informs our Poet that the soul of Romeo the pilgrim is in the same star.

“AFTER that Constantine the eagle turn’d¹
Against the motions of the heaven, that roll’d
Consenting with its course, when he of yore,
Lavinia’s spouse, was leader of the flight;
A hundred years twice told and more,² his seat
At Europe’s extreme point,³ the bird of Jove
Held, near the mountains, whence he issued first;
There under shadow of his sacred plumes
Swaying the world, till through successive hands
To mine he came devolved. Cæsar I was;
And am Justinian; destined by the will
Of that prime love, whose influence I feel,
From vain excess to clear the incumber’d laws.⁴
Or e’er that work engaged me, I did hold
In Christ one nature only;⁵ with such faith
Contented. But the blessed Agapete,⁶

After that Constantine the eagle turn’d.—Constantine, in transferring the seat of empire from Rome to Byzantium, carried the eagle, the Imperial ensign, from the west to the east. Æneas, on the contrary, had, with better augury, moved along with the sun’s course, when he passed from Troy to Italy.

² *A hundred years twice told and more.*—The Emperor Constantine entered Byzantium in 324; and Justinian began his reign in 527.

³ *At Europe’s extreme point.*—Constantinople being situated at the extreme of Europe, and on the borders of Asia, near those mountains in the neighbourhood of Troy from whence the first founders of Rome had emigrated.

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⁴ *To clear the incumber’d laws.*—The code of laws was abridged and reformed by Justinian.

“Giustiniano son io, disse il primajo,
Che ’l troppo e ’l van secai for delle leggi,
Ora soggette all’ arme e al denajo.”

Frezzi, Il Quadriregio, lib. iv., cap. 13.

⁵ *In Christ one nature only.*—Justinian is said to have been a follower of the heretical opinions held by Eutyches, “who taught that in Christ there was but one nature, viz. that of the incarnate word.”—*MacLaine’s Mosheim, tom. ii., cent. v., p. ii., cap. v., § 13.*

⁶ *Agapete.*—“Agapetus, Bishop of Rome, whose ‘Scheda Regia,’ addressed to the Emperor Justinian,

Who was chief shepherd, he with warning voice
To the true faith recall’d me. I believed
His words: and what he taught, now plainly see,
As thou in every contradiction seest
The true and false opposed. Soon as my feet
Were to the church reclaim’d, to my great task,
By inspiration of God’s grace impell’d,
I gave me wholly; and consign’d mine arms
To Belisarius, with whom heaven’s right hand
Was link’d in such conjointment, ’twas a sign
That I should rest. To thy first question thus
I shape mine answer, which were ended here,
But that its tendency doth prompt perforce
To some addition; that thou well mayst mark,
What reason on each side they have to plead,
By whom that ho iest banner is withstood,
Both who pretend its power¹ and who oppose.²

“Beginning from that hour, when Pallas died³
To give it rule, behold the valorous deeds
Have made it worthy reverence. Not unknown⁴
To thee, how for three hundred years and more
It dwelt in Alba, up to those fell lists
Where, for its sake, were met the rival three;⁵
Nor aught unknown to thee, which it achieved
Down⁶ from the Sabines’ wrong to Lucrece’ woe;
With its seven kings conquering the nations round;
Nor all it wrought, by Roman worthies borne

procured him a place among the wisest and most judicious writers of this century.”—*Ibid.*, cent. vi., p. ii., cap. ii., § 8. Compare Fazio degli Uberti, “Dittamondo,” l. ii., cap. xvi.

¹ *Who pretend its power.*—The Ghibellines.

² *And who oppose.*—The Guelphs.

³ *Pallas died.*—See Virgil, “Æneid,” lib. x.

⁴ *Not unknown.*—In the second book of his treatise “De Monarchiâ,” where Dante endeavours to prove that the Roman people had a right to govern the world, he refers to their conquests and successes in nearly the same order as in this passage. “The

Roman,” he affirms, “might truly say, as the Apostle did to Timothy, There is laid up for me a crown of righteousness; laid up, that is, in the eternal providence of God.”—Page 131. And again: “Now it is manifest, that by *duel* (per duellum) the Roman people acquired the Empire; therefore they acquired it by right, to prove which is the main purpose of the present book.”—Page 132.

⁵ *The rival three.*—The Horatii and Curiatii.

⁶ *Down.*—“From the rape of the Sabine women to the violation of Lucretia.”

'Gainst Brennus and the Epirot prince,¹ and hosts
Of single chiefs, or states in league combined
Of social warfare: hence, Torquatus stern,
And Quintius² named of his neglected locks,
The Decii, and the Fabii hence acquired
Their fame, which I with duteous zeal embalm.
By it the pride of Arab hordes⁴ was quell'd,
When they, led on by Hannibal, o'erpass'd
The Alpine rocks, whence glide thy currents, Po!
Beneath its guidance, in their prime of days
Scipio and Pompey triumph'd; and that hill⁵
Under whose summit⁶ thou didst see the light,
Rued its stern bearing. After, near the hour,⁷
When heaven was minded that o'er all the world
His own deep calm should brood, to Cæsar's hand
Did Rome consign it; and what then it wrought⁸
From Var unto the Rhine, saw Isere's flood,
Saw Loire and Seine, and every vale, that fills
The torrent Rhone. What after that it wrought,

¹ *The Epirot prince.*—King Pyrrhus.

² *Quintius.*—Quintius Cincinnatus.

"E Cincinnato dall' inculta chioma."

Petrarca.

Compare "De Monarchiâ," lib. ii., p. 121, &c.
"Itaque, inquit, et majores nostri," &c.

³ *Embalm.*—The word in the original is "mirro," which some think is put for "miro," "I behold or regard;" and others understand as I have rendered it.

⁴ *Arab hordes.*—The Arabians seem to be put for the barbarians in general. Lombardi's comment is, that as the Arabs are an Asiatic people, and it is not recorded that Hannibal had any other troops except his own countrymen the Carthaginians, who were Africans, we must understand that Dante denominates that people Arabs on account of their origin. "Ab Ifrico Arabia Felicis rege, qui omnium primus hanc terram (Africam) incoluisse fertur," &c.—*Leo Africanus, Africæ Descriptio*, lib. i., cap. i.

⁵ *That hill.*—The city of Fesulæ, which was sacked by the Romans after the defeat of Catiline.

⁶ *Under whose summit.*—"At the foot of which is situated Florence, thy birth-place."

⁷ *Near the hour.*—Near the time of our Saviour's birth. "The immeasurable goodness of the Deity being willing again to conform to itself the human creature, which by transgression of the first man had from God departed, and fallen from his likeness, it was determined in that most high and closest consistory of the Godhead, the Trinity, that the Son of God should descend upon earth to make this agreement. And because it was behoveful that at his coming, the world, not only the heaven but the earth, should be in the best possible disposition—and the best disposition of the earth is when it is a monarchy, that is, all under one prince, as hath been said above—therefore through the divine forecast was ordained that people and that city for the accomplishment, namely, the glorious Rome."—*Convito*, p. 138. The same argument is repeated at the conclusion of the first book of our author's treatise "De Monarchiâ."

⁸ *What then it wrought.*—In the following fifteen lines the poet has comprised the exploits of Julius Cæsar, for which, and for the allusions in the greater part of this speech of Justinian's, I must refer my reader to the history of Rome.

When from Ravenna it came forth, and leap'd
The Rubicon, was of so bold a flight,
That tongue nor pen may follow it. Towards Spain
It wheel'd its bands, then toward Dyrrachium smote,
And on Pharsalia, with so fierce a plunge,
E'en the warm Nile was conscious to the pang;
Its natives shores Antandros, and the streams
Of Simois revisited, and there
Where Hector lies; then ill for Ptolemy
His pennons shook again; lightening thence fell
On Juba; and the next, upon your west,
At sound of the Pompeian trump, return'd.

"What following, and in its next bearer's gripe,¹
It wrought, is now by Cassius and Brutus
Bark'd of² in hell; and by Perugia's sons,
And Modena's, was mourn'd. Hence weepeth still
Sad Cleopatra, who, pursued by it,
Took from the adder black and sudden death.
With him it ran e'en to the Red Sea coast;
With him composed the world to such a peace,
That of his temple Janus barr'd the door.

"But all the mighty standard yet had wrought,
And was appointed to perform thereafter,
Throughout the mortal kingdom which it sway'd,
Falls in appearance dwindled and obscured,
If one with steady eye and perfect thought
On the third Cæsar³ look; for to his hands,
The living Justice, in whose breath I move,
Committed glory, e'en into his hands,
To execute the vengeance of its wrath.

¹ *In its next bearer's gripe.*—With Augustus Cæsar.

² *Bark'd of.*—

τοιαῦθ' ὕλακται.

Sophocles, Electra, 299.

³ *The third Cæsar.*—The eagle in the hand of Tiberius, the third of the Cæsar's, outdid all its achievements, both past and future, by becoming

the instrument of that mighty and mysterious act of satisfaction made to the divine justice in the crucifixion of our Lord. This is Lombardi's explanation; and he deserves much credit for being right, where all the other commentators, as far as I know, are wrong. See note to "Purgatory," canto xxxii. 50.