

CANTO XVII.

A R G U M E N T.

Cacciaguida predicts to our Poet his exile and the calamities he had to suffer; and, lastly, exhorts him to write the present poem.

SUCH as the youth,¹ who came to Clymene,
To certify himself of that reproach
Which had been fasten'd on him (he whose end
Still makes the fathers chary to their sons),
E'en such was I; nor unobserved was such
Of Beatrice, and that saintly lamp,²
Who had erewhile for me his station moved;
When thus my lady: "Give thy wish free vent,
That it may issue, bearing true report
Of the mind's impress: not that aught thy words
May to our knowledge add, but to the end
That thou mayst use thyself to own thy thirst,³
And men may mingle for thee when they hear."
"O plant, from whence I spring! revered and loved!
Who soar'st so high a pitch, that thou as clear,⁴
As earthly thought determines two obtuse
In one triangle not contain'd, so clear
Dost see contingencies, ere in themselves
Existent, looking at the point⁵ whereto
All times are present; I, the whilst I scaled

¹ *The youth.*—Phaëton, who came to his mother Clymene, to inquire of her if he were indeed the son of Apollo. See Ovid, "Metamorphoses," lib. i. ad finem.

² *That saintly lamp.*—Cacciaguida.

³ *To own thy thirst.*—"That thou mayst obtain

from others a solution of any doubt that may occur to thee."

⁴ *That thou as clear.*—"Thou beholdest future events with the same clearness of evidence that we discern the simplest mathematical demonstrations."

⁵ *The point.*—The divine nature.

With Virgil the soul-purifying mount¹
And visited the nether world² of woe,
Touching my future destiny have heard
Words grievous, though I feel me on all sides
Well squared³ to fortune's blows. Therefore my will
Were satisfied to know the lot awaits me.
The arrow,⁴ seen beforehand, slacks his flight."
So said I to the brightness, which erewhile
To me had spoken; and my will declared,
As Beatrice will'd, explicitly.
Nor with oracular response obscure,
Such as, or e'er the Lamb of God was slain,
Beguiled the credulous nations: but, in terms
Precise, and unambiguous lore, replied
The spirit of paternal love, enshrined,
Yet in his smile apparent; and thus spake:
"Contingency,⁵ whose verge extendeth not
Beyond the tablet of your mortal mold,
Is all depicted in the eternal sight;
But hence deriveth not necessity,⁶
More than the tall ship, hurried down the flood,
Is driven by the eye that looks on it.
From thence,⁷ as to the ear sweet harmony
From organ comes, so comes before mine eye

¹ *The soul-purifying mount.*—See "Purgatory," canto viii. 133, and canto xi. 140.

² *The nether world.*—See "Hell," canto x. 77, and canto xv. 61.

³ *Well squared.*—See Plato, "Protagoras," ed. Bipont., vol. iii., p. 145, and Aristotle, "Rhetor.," lib. iii., where Pietro Vettori, in his Commentari, p. 656, remarks: "Quis nescit Dantem etiam suo in poemate tetragonum vocasse apposite hominem, qui adversis casibus non frangitur sed resistit fortiter ipsis?"

⁴ *The arrow.*—A line repeated by Ruccellai in his "Oreste:"

"Nam prævisa minus ladere tela solent."

Ovid.

"Che piaga antiveduta assai men duole."

Petrarca, *Trionfo del Tempo.*

⁵ *Contingency.*—

"La contingenza, che fuor del quaderno
Della vostra materia non si stende."

I had before understood this, "Contingency, which is not exposed to view on the tablet of your nature," "which is not discoverable by your human understanding," and had translated it accordingly; but have now adopted Lombardi's explanation: "Contingency, which has no place beyond the limits of the material world."

⁶ *Necessity.*—"The evidence with which we see casual events portrayed in the source of all truth no more necessitates those events, than does the image reflected in the sight by a ship sailing down a stream necessitate the motion of the vessel."

⁷ *From thence.*—"From the eternal sight; the view of the Deity himself."

The time prepared for thee. Such as driven out
 From Athens, by his cruel step-dame's¹ wiles,
 Hippolytus departed; such must thou
 Depart from Florence. This they wish, and this
 Contrive, and will ere long effectuate, there,²
 Where gainful merchandise is made of Christ
 Throughout the live-long day. The common cry,³
 Will, as 'tis ever wont, affix the blame
 Unto the party injured: but the truth
 Shall, in the vengeance it dispenseth, find
 A faithful witness. Thou shalt leave each thing⁴
 Beloved most dearly: this is the first shaft
 Shot from the bow of exile. Thou shalt prove
 How salt the savour is of other's bread;
 How hard the passage, to descend and climb
 By other's stairs. But that shall gall thee most,
 Will be the worthless and vile company,
 With whom thou must be thrown into these straits.
 For all ungrateful, impious all, and mad,
 Shall turn 'gainst thee: but in a little while,
 Theirs,⁵ and not thine, shall be the crimson'd brow,
 Their course shall so evince their brutishness,
 To have ta'en thy stand apart shall well become thee.
 "First refuge thou must find, first place of rest.
 In the great Lombard's⁶ courtesy, who bears,
 Upon the ladder perch'd, the sacred bird.
 He shall behold thee with such kind regard,

¹ *His cruel stepdame.*—Phædra.

² *There.*—At Rome, where the expulsion of Dante's party from Florence was then plotting, in 1300.

³ *The common cry.*—The multitude will, as usual, be ready to blame those who are sufferers, whose cause will at last be vindicated by the overthrow of their enemies.

⁴ *Thou shalt leave each thing.*—Compare Euripides, "Phœnissæ," 399, &c.

⁵ *Theirs.*—"They shall be ashamed of the part they have taken against thee." Lombardi, I think, is

very unhappy in his conjecture, that "rotta la tem-
 pia," a reading of the Nidobeatina edition, should
 be adopted, and that it may mean "the broken heads
 of his companions."

⁶ *The great Lombard.*—Either Bartolommeo della
 Scala, or Alboino his brother; although our poet
 has spoken ambiguously of him in his "Convito,"
 p. 179. Their coat of arms was a ladder and an
 eagle. For an account of the rise of this family
 from a very mean condition, see G. Villani, lib. xi.,
 cap. xciv.

That 'twixt ye two, the contrary to that
 Which 'falls 'twixt other men, the granting shall
 Forerun the asking. With him shalt thou see
 That mortal,¹ who was at his birth imprest
 So strongly from this star, that of his deeds
 The nations shall take note. His unripe age
 Yet holds him from observance; for these wheels
 Only nine years have compast him about.
 But, ere the Gascon² practise on great Harry,³
 Sparkles of virtue shall shoot forth in him,
 In equal scorn⁴ of labours and of gold.
 His bounty shall be spread abroad so widely
 As not to let the tongues, e'en of his foes,
 Be idle in its praise. Look thou to him,
 And his beneficence: for he shall cause
 Reversal of their lot to many people;
 Rich men and beggars interchanging fortunes.
 And thou shalt bear this written in thy soul,
 Of him, but tell it not:" and things he told
 Incredible to those who witness them;
 Then added: "So interpret thou, my son,
 What hath been told thee.—Lo! the ambushment
 That a few circling seasons hide for thee.
 Yet envy not thy neighbours: time extends
 Thy span beyond their treason's chastisement."

Soon as the saintly spirit, by silence, mark'd
 Completion of that web, which I had stretch'd
 Before it, warped for weaving; I began
 As one, who in perplexity desires
 Counsel of other, wise, benign, and friendly:
 "My father! well I mark how time spurs on

¹ *That mortal.*—Can Grande della Scala, born
 under the influence of Mars, but at this time only
 nine years old. He was, as the other two, a son of
 Alberto della Scala.

² *The Gascon.*—Pope Clement V. See "Hell,"

canto xix. 86, and note, and "Paradise," canto xxvii.
 53, and canto xxx. 141.

³ *Great Harry.*—The Emperor Henry VII. See
 canto xxx. 135.

⁴ *In equal scorn.*—See "Hell," canto i. 98.

Toward me, ready to inflict the blow,
Which falls most heavily on him who most
Abandoneth himself. Therefore 'tis good
I should forecast, that, driven from the place¹
Most dear to me, I may not lose myself²
All other by my song. Down through the world
Of infinite mourning; and along the mount,
From whose fair height my lady's eyes did lift me;
And, after, through this heaven, from light to light;
Have I learnt that, which if I tell again,
It may with many wofully disrelish:
And, if I am a timid friend to truth,
I fear my life may perish among those,
To whom these days shall be of ancient date."

The brightness, where enclosed the treasure³ smiled,
Which I had found there, first shone glisteningly,
Like to a golden mirror in the sun;
Next answered: "Conscience, dimm'd or by its own
Or other's shame, will feel thy saying sharp.
Thou, notwithstanding, all deceit removed,
See the whole vision be made manifest.
And let them wince, who have their withers wrung.
What though, when tasted first, thy voice shall prove
Unwelcome: on digestion, it will turn
To vital nourishment. The cry thou raisest,⁴
Shall, as the wind doth, smite the proudest summits;
Which is of honour no light argument.
For this, there only have been shown to thee,

¹ *Driven from the place.*—Our poet here discovers both that Florence, much as he inveighs against it, was still the dearest object of his affections, and that it was not without some scruple he indulged his satirical line.

² *I may not lose myself.*—"That being driven out of my country, I may not deprive myself of every

other place by the boldness with which I expose in my writings the vices of mankind."

³ *The treasure.*—Cacciagnida.

⁴ *The cry thou raisest.*—"Thou shalt stigmatise the faults of those who are most eminent and powerful; for men are naturally less moved by instances adduced from among those who are in the lower classes of life."

Throughout these orbs, the mountain, and the deep,
Spirits, whom fame hath note of. For the mind
Of him, who hears, is loth to acquiesce
And fix its faith, unless the instance brought
Be palpable, and proof apparent urge."