

# CANTO XXIII.

## ARGUMENT.

He sees Christ triumphing with his church. The Saviour ascends, followed by his virgin Mother. The others remain with St. Peter.

**E**N as the bird, who midst the leafy bower  
Has, in her nest, sat darkling through the night,  
With her sweet brood; impatient to descry  
Their wished looks, and to bring home their foe  
In the fond quest unconscious of her toil:  
She, of the time prevenient, on the spray,  
That overhangs their couch, with wakeful gaze  
Expects the sun; nor ever, till the dawn,  
Removeth from the east her eager ken:  
So stood the dame erect, and bent her glance  
Wistfully on that region,<sup>1</sup> where the sun  
Abateth most his speed; that, seeing her  
Suspense and wondering, I became as one,  
In whom desire is waken'd, and the hope  
Of somewhat new to come fills with delight.

Short space ensued; I was not held, I say,  
Long in expectance, when I saw the heaven  
Wax more and more resplendent; and, "Behold,"  
Cried Beatrice, "the triumphal hosts  
Of Christ, and all the harvest gather'd in,  
Made ripe by these revolving spheres." Meseem'd,  
That, while she spake, her image all did burn;

<sup>1</sup> *That region.*—Towards the south, where the course of the sun appears less rapid than when he is in the east or the west.

And in her eyes such fulness was of joy,  
As I am fain to pass unconstrued by.  
As in the calm full moon, when Trivia<sup>1</sup> smiles,  
In peerless beauty, 'mid the eternal nymphs,<sup>2</sup>  
That paint through all its gulfs the blue profound;  
In bright pre-eminence so saw I there  
O'er million lamps a sun, from whom all drew  
Their radiance, as from ours the starry train:  
And, through the living light, so lustrous glow'd  
The substance, that my ken endured it not.

O Beatrice! sweet and precious guide,  
Who cheer'd me with her comfortable words:  
"Against the virtue, that o'erpowereth thee,  
Avails not to resist. Here is the Might,<sup>3</sup>  
And here the Wisdom, which did open lay  
The path, that had been yearned for so long,  
Betwixt the heaven and earth." Like to the fire,  
That, in a cloud imprison'd, doth break out  
Expansive, so that from its womb enlarged,  
It falleth against nature to the ground;  
Thus, in that heavenly banqueting, my soul  
Outgrew herself; and, in the transport lost,  
Holds now remembrance none of what she was.

"Ope thou thine eyes, and mark me: thou hast seen  
Things, that empower thee to sustain my smile."

I was as one, when a forgotten dream<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Trivia.*—A name of Diana.

<sup>2</sup> *The eternal nymphs.*—The stars.

"Σελάνα τε καὶ αἰθέρ  
Δαμπάδ', ἵν' ὀκνῶσαι νύμφαι  
Ἰππεύουσι δὲ δροναίας."

*Euripides, Supp.*, 995, edit. Barnes.

"Those starry nymphs, which dance about the pole." *Drummond, Sonnet.*

Musgrave and Herman would dismiss the word *νύμφαι*, "nymphs," from this passage in Euripides; but the use of it by our author in the text, tends to prove that it is the genuine reading: and it is thus that poets of the most distant ages, and without any

knowledge of each other's writings (for we can scarcely imagine Dante to have read the plays of Euripides), may often protect one another against the verbal critics. Drummond, I believe, had learning enough to be indebted to either of his predecessors. Expressions somewhat similar in Theocritus and Tibullus are observed by Markland.

<sup>3</sup> *The Might.*—Our Saviour.

<sup>4</sup> *A forgotten dream.*—

"You might as well  
Hunt half a day for a forgotten dream."

*Wordsworth, Hart-Leap Well.*



Doth come across him, and he strives in vain  
 To shape it in his fantasy again:  
 Whenas that gracious boon was proffer'd me,  
 Which never may be cancel'd from the book  
 Wherein the past is written. Now were all  
 Those tongues to sound, that have, on sweetest milk  
 Of Polyhymnia and her sisters, fed  
 And fatten'd; not with all their help to boot,  
 Unto the thousandth parcel of the truth.  
 My song might shadow forth that saintly smile,  
 How merely, in her saintly looks, it wrought.  
 And, with such figuring of Paradise,  
 The sacred strain must leap, like one that meets  
 A sudden interruption to his road.  
 But he, who thinks how ponderous the theme,  
 And that 'tis laid upon a mortal shoulder,  
 May pardon, if it tremble with the burden.  
 The track, our venturous keel must furrow, brooks  
 No unribb'd pinnace, no self-sparing pilot.

"Why doth my face," said Beatrice, "thus  
 Enamour thee, as that thou dost not turn  
 Unto the beautiful garden, blossoming  
 Beneath the rays of Christ? Here is the rose,<sup>1</sup>  
 Wherein the Word Divine was made incarnate;  
 And here the lilies,<sup>2</sup> by whose odour known  
 The way of life was follow'd." Prompt I heard  
 Her bidding, and encounter'd once again  
 The strife of aching vision. As, erewhile,  
 Through glance of sun-light, stream'd through broken cloud,  
 Mine eyes a flower-besprinkled mead have seen;  
 Though veil'd themselves in shade: so saw I there  
 Legions of splendours, on whom burning rays

<sup>1</sup> *The rose.*—The Virgin Mary, who, says Lombardi, is termed by the church, Rosa Mystica. "I was exalted like a palm-tree in Engaddi, and as a rose-plant in Jericho."—Ecclesiasticus xxiv. 14.

<sup>2</sup> *The lilies.*—The Apostles. "And give ye a sweet savour as frankincense, and flourish as a lily."—Ecclesiasticus xxxix. 14.

Shed lightnings from above; yet saw I not  
 The fountain whence they flow'd. O gracious virtue!  
 Thou, whose broad stamp is on them, higher up  
 Thou didst exalt thy glory,<sup>1</sup> to give room  
 To my o'erlabour'd sight; when at the name  
 Of that fair flower,<sup>2</sup> whom duly I invoke  
 Both morn and eve, my soul with all her might  
 Collected, on the goodliest ardour fix'd.  
 And, as the bright dimensions of the star  
 In heaven excelling, as once here on earth,  
 Were, in my eye-balls lively pourtray'd;  
 Lo! from within the sky a cresset<sup>3</sup> fell,  
 Circling in fashion of a diadem;  
 And girt the star; and, hovering, round it wheel'd.  
 Whatever melody sounds sweetest here,  
 And draws the spirit most unto itself,  
 Might seem a rent cloud, when it grates the thunder;  
 Compared unto the sounding of that lyre,<sup>4</sup>  
 Wherewith the goodliest sapphire,<sup>5</sup> that inlays  
 The floor of heaven, was crown'd. "Angelic Love  
 I am, who thus with hovering flight enwheel  
 The lofty rapture from that womb inspired,  
 Where our desire did dwell: and round thee so,  
 Lady of Heaven! will hover; long as thou  
 Thy Son shalt follow, and diviner joy  
 Shall from thy presence gild the highest sphere."

Such close was to the circling melody:  
 And, as it ended, all the other lights  
 Took up the strain, and echoed Mary's name.

The robe,<sup>6</sup> that with its regal folds enwraps  
 The world, and with the nearer breath of God

<sup>1</sup> *Thou didst exalt thy glory.*—The divine light retired upwards, to render the eyes of Dante more capable of enduring the spectacle which now presented itself.

<sup>2</sup> *The name of that fair flower.*—The name of the Virgin.

<sup>3</sup> *A cresset.*—The angel Gabriel.

<sup>4</sup> *That lyre.*—By synecdoche, the lyre is put for the angel.

<sup>5</sup> *The goodliest sapphire.*—The Virgin.

<sup>6</sup> *The robe.*—The ninth heaven, the primum mobile, that enfolds and moves the eight lower heavens.



Doth burn and quiver, held so far retired  
 Its inner hem and skirting over us,  
 That yet no glimmer of its majesty  
 Had stream'd unto me: therefore were mine eyes  
 Unequal to pursue the crowned flame,<sup>1</sup>  
 That towering rose, and sought the seed<sup>2</sup> it bore.  
 And like to babe, that stretches forth its arms  
 For very eagerness toward the breast,  
 After the milk is taken; so outstretch'd  
 Their wavy summits all the fervent band,  
 Through zealous love to Mary: then, in view,  
 There halted; and "Regina Cœli"<sup>3</sup> sang  
 So sweetly, the delight hath left me never.

Oh! what o'erflowing plenty is up-piled  
 In those rich-laden coffers,<sup>4</sup> which below  
 Sow'd the good seed, whose harvest now they keep.  
 Here are the treasures tasted, that with tears  
 Were in the Babylonian exile<sup>5</sup> won,  
 When gold had fail'd them. Here, in synod high  
 Of ancient council with the new convened.  
 Under the Son of Mary and of God,  
 Victorious he<sup>6</sup> his mighty triumph holds,  
 To whom the keys of glory were assign'd.

<sup>1</sup> *The crowned flame.*—The Virgin, with the angel hovering over her.

<sup>2</sup> *The seed.*—Our Saviour.

<sup>3</sup> *Regina Cœli.*—"The beginning of an anthem, sung by the church at Easter, in honour of our Lady."—Volpi.

<sup>4</sup> *What o'erflowing plenty is up-piled in those rich-*

*laden coffers.*—Those spirits, who, having sown the seed of good works on earth, now contain the fruit of their pious endeavours.

<sup>5</sup> *In the Babylonian exile.*—During their abode in this world.

<sup>6</sup> *He.*—St. Peter, with the other holy men of the Old and New Testament.

## CANTO XXIV.

### ARGUMENT.

St. Peter examines Dante touching Faith, and is contented with his answers.

"O YE! in chosen fellowship advanced  
 To the great supper of the blessed Lamb,  
 Whereon who feeds hath every wish fulfill'd;  
 If to this man through God's grace be vouchsafed  
 Foretaste of that, which from your table falls,  
 Or ever death his fated term prescribe;  
 Be ye not heedless of his urgent will:  
 But may some influence of your sacred dews  
 Sprinkle him. Of the fount ye alway drink,  
 Whence flows what most he craves." Beatrice spake;  
 And the rejoicing spirits, like to spheres  
 On firm-set poles revolving, trail'd a blaze  
 Of comet splendour: and as wheels, that wind  
 Their circles in the horologe, so work  
 The stated rounds, that to the observant eye  
 The first seems still, and as it flew, the last;  
 E'en thus their carols<sup>1</sup> weaving variously,

<sup>1</sup> *Their carols.*—"Carole." The annotator on the Monte Casino MS. observes, "carolæ dicuntur tripudium quoddam quod fit saliendo, ut Napolitani faciunt et dicunt." The word had also that signification, which is now the only one that common use attaches to it. "Au tiers jour il s'en partit" (the King of Cyprus coming from Canterbury to Edward III.), "et chevaucha le chemin de Londres; et fit tant qu'il vint a Altem; ou le roi se tenoit, et grand foison de Seigneurs appareillés pour le recevoir. Ce fut un dimanche a heure de relevee qu'il vim là. Si eut entre celle heure et le souper grans danses et grans karolles. Là estoit le jeune Seigneur de Coucy

qui s'efforçoit de bien danser et de bien chanter quand son tour venoit," &c.—*Froissart*, vol. i., cap. 219, fol. edit., 1559.

"These folke, of which I tell you so,  
 Upon a karole wenten tho:  
 A ladie karoled hem, that hight  
 Gladnesse, blissfull, and light,  
 Well could she sing, and lustely."

*Chaucer, Romaunt of the Rose*, edit. 1602, fol. 112.

"I saw her daunce so comely,  
 Carol and sing so sweetly."

*Chaucer, The Dreame, or Booke of the Duchesse*, fol. 231.