

CANTO XXXI.

ARGUMENT.

The Poet expatiates further on the glorious vision described in the last Canto. On looking round for Beatrice, he finds that she has left him, and that an old man is at his side. This proves to be St. Bernard, who shows him that Beatrice has returned to her throne, and then points out to him the blessedness of the Virgin Mother.

IN fashion, as a snow white rose, lay then
Before my view the saintly multitude,¹
Which in his own blood Christ espoused. Meanwhile,
That other host,² that soar aloft to gaze
And celebrate his glory, whom they love,
Hover'd around; and, like a troop of bees,³
Amid the vernal sweets alighting now,
Now, clustering, where their fragrant labour glows,
Flew downward to the mighty flower, or rose
From the redundant petals, streaming back
Unto the stedfast dwelling of their joy.
Faces had they of flame, and wings of gold;⁴
The rest was whiter than the driven snow;
And, as they flitted down into the flower,
From range to range, fanning their plummy loins,
Whisper'd the peace and ardour, which they won
From that soft winnowing. Shadow none, the vast
Interposition of such numerous flight
Cast, from above, upon the flower, or view

¹ *The saintly multitude.*—Human souls, advanced to this state of glory through the mediation of Christ.

² *That other host.*—The angels.

³ *Bees.*—Compare Homer, "Iliad," ii. 87; Virgil, "Æneid," i. 430; and Milton, "Paradise Lost," b. i. 768.

⁴ *Wings of gold.*—

"The middle pair

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Skirted his loins and thighs with downy gold."

Milton, *Paradise Lost*, b. v. 282.

Obstructed aught. For, through the universe,
Wherever merited, celestial light
Glides freely, and no obstacle prevents.

All there, who reign in safety and in bliss,
Ages long past or new, on one sole mark
Their love and vision fix'd. O trinal beam
Of individual star, that charm'st them thus!
Vouchsafe one glance to gild our storm below.¹

If the grim brood,² from Arctic shores that roam'd
(Where Helice³ for ever, as she wheels,
Sparkles a mother's fondness on her son),
Stood in mute wonder 'mid the works of Rome,
When to their view the Lateran arose⁴
In greatness more than earthly; I, who then
From human to divine had past, from time
Unto eternity, and out of Florence
To justice and to truth, how might I chuse
But marvel too? 'Twixt gladness and amaze,
In sooth no will had I to utter aught,
Or hear. And, as a pilgrim, when he rests
Within the temple of his vow, looks round
In breathless awe, and hopes some time to tell
Of all its goodly state; e'en so mine eyes
Coursed up and down along the living light,
Now low, and now aloft, and now around,

¹ *To gild our storm below.*—To guide us through the dangers to which we are exposed in this tempestuous life.

² *If the grim brood.*—The northern hordes who invaded Rome. Landino justly observes that "this is a most excellent comparison to show how great his astonishment was at beholding the realms of the blest."

³ *Helice.*—Callisto, and her son Arcas, changed into the constellations of the Greater Bear and Arctophylax, or Boötes. See Ovid, "Metamorphoses," lib. ii., fab. v. vi.

⁴ *The Lateran arose.*—

"Quando Laterano
Alle cose mortali andò di sopra."

This reminds us of the celebrated passage in Aken-side:

"Mark how the dread Pantheon stands,
Amid the domes of modern hands."

Ode, xviii., b. i.

It is remarkable that Dante has no allusion to the magnificence of Gothic architecture, which was then in so much perfection, and which, as Tiraboschi endeavours to show, by a passage in Cassiodorus, describing its peculiar character of slender columns and lanceated arches, was introduced into Italy so early as the end of the fifth century. See "Storia della Lett. Ital.," tom. iii., lib. i.

Visiting every step. Looks I beheld,
Where charity in soft persuasion sat;
Smiles from within, and radiance from above;
And, in each gesture, grace and honour high.

So roved my ken, and in its general form
All Paradise survey'd: when round I turn'd
With purpose of my lady to inquire
Once more of things, that held my thought suspense,
But answer found from other than I ween'd;
For, Beatrice when I thought to see,
I saw instead a senior, at my side,
Robed, as the rest, in glory. Joy benign
Glow'd in his eye, and o'er his cheek diffused,
With gestures such as spake a father's love.
And, "Whither is she vanish'd?" straight I ask'd.

"By Beatrice summon'd," he replied,
"I come to aid thy wish. Looking aloft
To the third circle from the highest, there
Behold her on the throne, wherein her merit
Hath placed her." Answering not, mine eyes I raised,
And saw her, where aloof she sat, her brow
A wreath reflecting of eternal beams.
Not from the centre of the sea so far
Unto the region of the highest thunder,
As was my ken from hers; and yet the form
Came through that medium down, unmix'd and pure.

"O lady! thou in whom my hopes have rest;
Who, for my safety, hast not scorn'd, in hell
To leave the traces of thy footsteps mark'd;
For all mine eyes have seen, I to thy power
And goodness, virtue owe and grace. Of slave
Thou hast to freedom brought me: and no means,
For my deliverance apt, hast left untried.
Thy liberal bounty still toward me keep:
That, when my spirit, which thou madest whole,
Is loosen'd from this body, it may find

Favour with thee." So I my suit preferr'd:
And she, so distant, as appear'd, look'd down,
And smiled; then towards the eternal fountain turn'd.

And thus the senior, holy and revered:
"That thou at length mayst happily conclude
Thy voyage (to which end I was dispatch'd,
By supplication moved and holy love),
Let thy upsoaring vision range, at large,
This garden through: for so, by ray divine
Kindled, thy ken a higher flight shall mount;
And from heaven's queen, whom fervent I adore,
All gracious aid befriend us; for that I
Am her own faithful Bernard."¹ Like a wight,
Who haply from Croatia wends to see
Our Veronica;² and the while 'tis shown,
Hangs over it with never-sated gaze,
And, all that he hath heard revolving, saith
Unto himself in thought: "And didst thou look
E'en thus, O Jesus, my true Lord and God?
And was this semblance thine?" So gazed I then
Adoring; for the charity of him,³

¹ *Bernard*.—St. Bernard, the venerable abbot of Clairvaux, and the great promoter of the second crusade, who died A.D. 1153, in his sixty-third year. His sermons are called by Henault, "chefs-d'œuvres de sentiment et de force."—*Abregé Chron. de l'Hist. de Fr.*, 1145. They have even been preferred to all the productions of the ancients, and the author has been termed the last of the fathers of the church. It is uncertain whether they were not delivered originally in the French tongue.—*Ibid.* That the part he acts in the present poem should be assigned to him, appears somewhat remarkable, when we consider that he severely censured the new festival established in honour of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin, and "opposed the doctrine itself with the greatest vigour, as it supposed her being honoured with a privilege which belonged to Christ alone."—*Dr. MacLaine's Mosheim*, vol. iii., cent. xii., part ii., c. iii., § 19.

² *Our Veronica*.—

"A vernicle had he sewed upon his cappe."
Chaucer, Prologue to the Canterbury Tales.

"Vernicle, diminutive of Veronike, Fr. A copy in miniature of the picture of Christ, which is supposed to have been miraculously imprinted upon a handkerchief preserved in the church of St. Peter at Rome.—*Du Cange in v. Veronica*. Madox 'Form. Angl.' 1, p. 428, Testam. Joh. de Nevill, an. 1386. Item Domino Archiepiscopo Eborum fratri meo, vestimentum rubeum de velvet cum le veronike (r. Veronike) in granis rosarum de super Brondata (r. brondata). It was usual for persons returning from pilgrimages, to bring with them certain tokens of the several places which they had visited; and therefore the Pardoner, who is just arrived from Rome, is represented with a vernicle sewed upon his cappe. See *Pierce Plowman*, 28, b.—*Tyrwhitt's Glossary to Chaucer*. Our poet alludes to this custom in his "Vita Nuova," p. 275, "Avenne in quel tempo," &c. "It happened, at that time, that many people were going to see that blessed image, which Jesus Christ left to us for a pattern of his most beautiful form, which my lady now beholds in glory."

³ *Him*.—St. Bernard.

Who musing, in this world *that* peace enjoy'd,
Stood lively before me. "Child of grace!"
Thus he began: "thou shalt not knowledge gain
Of this glad being, if thine eyes are held
Still in this depth below. But search around
The circles, to the furthest, till thou spy
Seated in state, the queen,¹ that of this realm
Is sovran." Straight mine eyes I raised; and bright,
As, at the birth of morn, the eastern clime
Above the horizon, where the sun declines;
So to mine eyes, that upward, as from vale
To mountain sped, at the extreme bound, a part
Excell'd in lustre all the front opposed.
And as the glow burns ruddiest o'er the wave,
That waits the ascending team, which Phaeton
Ill knew to guide, and on each part the light
Diminish'd fades, intensest in the midst;
So burn'd the peaceful oriflamb,² and slack'd
On every side the living flame decay'd.
And in that midst their sportive pennons waved
Thousands of angels; in resplendence each
Distinct, and quaint adornment. At their glee
And carol, smiled the Lovely One of heaven,
That joy was in the eyes of all the blest.

Had I a tongue in eloquence as rich,
As is the colouring in fancy's loom,
'Twere all too poor to utter the least part
Of that enchantment. When he saw mine eyes
Intent on her, that charm'd him; Bernard gazed
With so exceeding fondness, as infused
Arduour into my breast, unfelt before.

¹ *The queen*.—The Virgin Mary.

² *Oriflamb*.—Menage, on this word, quotes the "Roman des Royaux Lignages" of Guillaume Ghart:

"Orflamme est une banniere
De cendal roujoyant et simple
Sans portraiture d'autre affaire."