

CANTO FOURTEENTH.

ARGUMENT:

The third round of the Seventh Circle brings the Poets to an arid plain, where the miserable shades of blasphemers, naked, and in various postures, vainly endeavor to escape the falling flakes of fire. The Poets see also the River Phlegethon, formed by the Rivers Acheron and Styx, whose source is the tears of Time.

PERSONS SPEAKING: Dante. The Shade of Virgil. Capaneus.

PERSONS APPEARING: The shades of blasphemers.

IMPELLED by patriotic pride, the scattered leaves
I gathered up, and placed them near their source,
The tree-imprisoned soul, already hoarse.
Then came we to the turning-point where weaves
Justice Divine in patterns dread its plans,
And in the third ring penalties due demands.
To make my meaning clear, I say a plain
We reached, which from its sterile bed
Permits no plant to raise its peeping head.

The trees, its garland grim, it close retain, 10
As round the wood the burning blood-stream ran.
Our feet we stayed just where the plain began.
The ground a sand was, dry and thick, not far
In texture differing from that Cato's feet
Once on the Libyan desert chanced to meet.
O Vengeance just of God ! and God's just bar !
How must thy fear seize every soul not steeled
Who reads what unto me was here revealed !

Flocks many, all of trembling spirits nude, 19
All uttering grievous wailings here I saw,
To whom there seemed diversity given of law.
Some lying supine on the ground I viewed,
Some sitting all crouched up, and some again,
Who roamed incessantly o'er all the plain.
The souls who roamed outnumbered all the rest ;
Those on the ground supine in count were least,
But with these last the agony was increased.

With slow and gradual fall upon that waste 28
Rained fire upon the air outspread in flakes
Like snow when winds are hushed on Alpine
lakes,
Like to the flames which Alexander saw,
In India's torrid realms and sandy coast,
Fall whole from heaven upon his wondering
host,
Wherewith his legions (he to them their law)
Took care the soil to tramp, for ceased the flame
More readily when disjoined it earthward came.

So fell the eternal flames whereby the sands, 37
Like tinder under steel, were turned to flame,
Which with redoubled pangs upon them came.
Without repose danced miserable hands,
Now here, now there, in frenzied wreathings
thrown
Fresh flakes to pluck from souls all desperate
grown.

Thus I began: "My Master, thou whose power
Doth conquer all things save the demons hard
Who would our progress hitherto have barred,

"Who is that spirit great, whose features lower, 46
And who contorted lies, and proud disdain
Shows of the fire, nor ripens in its rain."

And he himself, who had of him observed
That I my Guide made question, proudly said:
"What I was living, that am I, though dead.
Though Jove should tire with work his smith strong-
nerved
Who that sharp bolt delivered to his frown
Wherewith on my last day he smote me down,

"And although one by one he weary out 55
The others at that gloomy forge, and call
'Good Vulcan, help!' in Mongibello's hall,
As at the day of Phlegra's direful rout,
And at me strike with all his vengeful might,
Yet should he not in victory's wreath delight!"
At once spoke forth my Guide words clear of doubt,
And firmer than from him I yet had heard:
"O Capaneus, in that thy pride, ill-stirred,

"Unquenchable remains, thou 'rt punished more : 64
No torture less than thine own ravings' gauge
Would pain insure proportioned to thy rage."

Then unto me, with gentler words in store,
He turned : " That was the one of those seven
kings
Who Thebes laid under siege ; him stings
His crime, contempt t'wards God, now as before,
His boast ; but, as I him assured, his bile
Is such as well befits his nature vile.

" Now follow me, and see thou place not yet 73
Thy feet upon the burning sand, but them
Keep back within the wood's protecting hem."

In silence came we to where gushed a jet
And jets from out the wood, a rivulet red
Whereof the tint still makes me shrink with
dread.

As from the Bulicamé comes a thread,
Which share the sinful women 'mongst themselves,
So ran this streamlet down the sandy shelves.

Bottom and sloping banks to stone had sped, 82
And petrified its margins too were found,
Whereby I saw our way lay on this ground.

" Midst all that I have shown thee since the gate
We passed whose threshold dark's denied to
none,

Nought in the journey we have so far won
Compares in interest to this wonder great
Which, by the vapor from its substance shed,
Extinguishes the flamelets from o'erhead."

Words these were of my Guide. Him thence I
prayed 91

That he on me that sustenance would bestow
For which his words caused appetite such to grow.
“In the mid-sea a desolate country’s laid
Whose name is Crete, and ’neath whose king was
chaste

The world entire with every virtue graced.
A mountain, Ida called, is there, when time
Was young, with founts and foliage glad, but now,
An old and wrinkled thing from foot to brow.

“Chose Rhea it, that cradled here sublime 100
Her son might be ; and that she might conceal
The weeping child, she caused loud cries to peal.
Within the mount a huge Old Man erect,
His back t’wards Damietta, stands, and e’er
He looks at Rome, as if his mirror ’t were.
Of gold refined his head is and aspect,
Of silver pure are made his arms and breast,
Of bronze, unto the groin, is made the rest.

“Downward from thence he’s all of iron choice, 109
Save that of baked clay is his right foot made,
And on this more than on the left he’s stayed.
Except the gold, seat of his unheard voice,
Each part a fissure hath in tears that speaks,
Each rivulet sad the mount’s foundation seeks.
From rock to rock into this vale they course,
And Acheron form and Styx and Phlegethon hot,
Then flow they on through kindling grot on grot,

"And at that point at which there is, perforce, 118
No further outlet, they Cocytus seek,
A lake thou 'lt see, of which I 'll not here speak."
I said: "If from our world flows down this rill
Why is 't that on this bank alone 't is found,
And not elsewhere upon our journey's round?"
And he to me: "Our journey's course to fill
In this round place, we to the left descend,
But have not yet attained unto the end.

"Wherefore if aught in our descent seems new, 127
Thy wonder should not be expressed though felt,
Until we're passed through the remotest belt."
"Let me still seek to obtain a clearer view,"
I said, "Where, Master, is that Phlegethon,
where
Is Lethe too? Thy speech gives one no care,
Thou sayest the other doth from these tears rain."
"In all thy questionings thou dost please me
well,"
He answered, "but the boiling thee might tell

"What this red water is. Thou shalt see plain 136
What Lethe is, yet not in this abyss,
But where seek guilt-cleansed penitents merited
bliss."
And then: "Now time it is the wood to leave,"
He said, "see that thou follow me; each side,
The quenching vapor forms a pathway wide,
And, upon both, hath dulled the fires that grieve."