

## CANTO THIRTY-SECOND.

### ARGUMENT :

Saint Bernard explains the divisions of the Rose of the Blessed, and discourses on law and grace as controlling admission to the highest seats in heaven. Dante beholds the Empress of the Skies. Saint Bernard urges him to invoke by earnest prayer her intercession, that he may be accorded a view of the Almighty Father.

The Empyrean.

PERSONS SPEAKING : Saint Bernard. Dante.

PERSONS APPEARING : The immediate presence of God. Angels. The Blessed Virgin. Anna. Lucia. Beatrice. Eve. Rachel, Sarah, Judith, Rebecca, Ruth, and other Hebrew women. Gabriel. Saint John the Baptist. Augustine. Francis. Benedict. Adam. Peter. John. Moses. The celestial multitudes. The heavenly choirs. The eminently happy exalted to the Empyrean. The Rose of the Blessed.

FREELY the Sage contemplative, though rapt  
In musings high, a teacher's part assumed,  
Wherein he thus his sacred words resumed :  
"She, there, at Mary's feet, in beauty lapped,  
The wound both made and pierced which Mary  
sought,  
And to which, closed, she perfumed ointments  
brought.  
Within that order which the third tier makes  
See Rachel seated, than the others lower,  
With Beatrice ; and yet below are more.

“ Sarah, Rebecca, Judith, she who wakes      10  
Remembrance of the Singer of her line,  
Who, for his faults, sung: ‘Show me mercy  
thine!’

These thou dost see from seat to seat descend  
Down in gradation, as, with name of each,  
I lead thee down the Rose’s leafy reach.  
And, from the seventh seat downward, wend,  
As from above, the Hebrew women, so  
The Rose’s leaves dividing as they go;

“ For these are a partition-wall whereby      19  
The sacred stairs are severed, as divides  
The date of Christ the Faith in severed sides.  
Upon this side where every petal high  
Its happy inmate hath, sit souls elate  
Who faith in Christ had ere his era’s date;  
Upon the other, where the eye doth meet  
With vacant thrones the semicircles hold,  
Are those who did with faith Christ come behold.

“ And, as, in this part, doth the glorious seat      28  
The Lady of Heaven hath, and those below,  
This great division’s limit plainly show,  
So doth, on the other opposite, that of John  
Of desert fame, and martyrdom, and Hell,  
Wherein he for two years confined did dwell.  
And, under him, such severance carry on  
Francis, and Benedict, and Augustine,  
And down t’wards us the line to come is seen.

“ And note the ways divine high Providence hath, 37  
For shall the Faith's two sides fill equal space  
In this blest garden of celestial grace.  
And know that downward from that rank whose  
path  
Midway across the two divisions lies,  
Their bliss doth not from their own merit rise ;  
But from another's, 'neath conditions fixed,  
For these are spirits all set free ere power  
Of choice their own was their celestial dower.

“ Thou seest it in their little faces mixed, 46  
And childish voices, if thou seest them well,  
And hearest their melody sweet the chorus swell.  
Now dost thou doubt, and doubt thee silence brings,  
But I will for thee the strong tie unbind  
While holds a prisoner thine inquiring mind.  
Within this realm chance ne'er its pathway wings,  
It here, no more than grief, can claim abode,  
Or be here mortal thirst or hunger sowed ;

“ For here a changeless law all things controls, 55  
And all that thou beholdest doth here sit  
Adjusted close as rings to fingers fit.  
And therefore do these little hastening souls  
Not without cause in this true life possess  
Degrees of excellence, more some, and some less.  
The King, by means of whom this realm doth rest  
In love so great, in joy so absolute,  
That those perfections will nor mind dispute,

“Hath at his pleasure variously here blest      64  
Each soul created in his joyous sight ;  
The effect attests the glory of his might.  
And to this end doth Holy Writ prepare  
An instance clear, where we of those twins read  
Who in their mother gave their anger speed.  
And so may rule the color of the hair,  
And make decision as to who shall wear  
The loftiest light created souls may bear.

“Not, then, desert their deeds have shown the  
grade      73  
Of each hath fixed, their gifts alone do this,  
The primal sharpening of their souls for bliss.  
’T is true, availed that innocence pure, with aid  
Of faith their parents had, to save their souls  
In times remote the distant past enfolds ;  
And that, when took the later ages place,  
’T was meet that should their innocence virtue  
seek,  
And be through circumcision rendered meek ;

“But after that had come the time of grace,      82  
Without the baptism perfect given of Christ  
Such innocence came not here. But now, where  
Christ  
Hath most resemblance, look thou in that face.  
It, by its exquisite brightness, thou wilt find  
Will soon inform thy keen, adoring mind,  
And this alone will help thee look on Christ.”  
Forthwith I saw so great a gladness poured  
From forms angelic in that height that soared,

That whatsoever yet had met my gaze 91  
Did not me thrill with admiration such,  
Nor so near what I thought God might be touch.  
And he who once above her showered his rays,  
Spread now, in homage forth, his wings, and sang  
"Hail, Mary, full of grace!" whereto there rang  
Responses forth from all the sacred host,  
And seemed each soul possessed of sight more  
clear  
As went the anthem round from tier to tier.

"O holy Father, who dost leave thy post, 100  
Thy place of honor by decree divine,  
And dost endure this lower station mine,  
Say who the Angel is, that with such joy  
Into the eyes is looking of our Queen,  
Enamored so that fiery seems his sheen?"  
Thus I again the knowledge would employ  
Of him who beauty caught from Mary far  
As from the sun draws light the morning star.

And he to me: "Such grace and dignity calm 109  
As may in Spirit or in Angel be,  
All is in him; and thus we would him see,  
For he that messenger is who bore the palm  
Down unto Mary when God's Son decreed  
That he for us upon the cross would bleed.  
But, as we go, give me thy heedful eyes;  
The great patricians thou shalt see of this  
Most just and merciful Empire throned in bliss.

“Those two who o’er the rest enraptured rise, 118  
Rejoiced to be Augusta near, two roots,  
As ’t were, are whence this Rose celestial shoots.  
He who upon her left so near is placed  
The general parent is, through whose rash taste  
Mankind hath been by ills so many chased.  
Upon the right that ancient Father’s graced  
Of Holy Church, to whom Christ gave the keys  
Of all this flower, admitting to it these.

“And he who saw, ere death, the suffering days 127  
Allotted to the beauteous Bride, whom won  
The spear and nails and all on Calvary done,  
Beside him sits; and by the other rays  
That leader under whom the manna-fed,  
Stiff-necked, ingrate, and fickle tribes were led.  
To Peter opposite, see’st thou Anna, face  
So happy bearing for her daughter’s guise,  
While she Hosanna sings ne’er move her eyes.

“And, opposite to the sire of all the race, 136  
Lucia sits, she who thy Lady sent  
When thou thy brows o’er ruin’s precipice bent.  
But, since soon fades the mighty vision’s glow,  
Desist we here (a tailor good will shape  
According to his cloth the coat or cape);  
And t’wards that Primal Love our gaze bestow,  
That, seeing Him, thou may’st His lustre scale  
As far as sight may unto thee avail.

"But now lest, while thy wings assail the air, 145  
 Advance defeat becomes, and progress vain,  
 'T is meet that prayer should grace for thee obtain,  
 Grace from that one who can thy soul prepare;  
 And do thou, then, me follow, with thy mind  
 And heart unto my purpose well-inclined."  
 And spoke those honied accents then this prayer.

#### NOTES TO THE THIRTY-SECOND CANTO.

6. "*She . . . at Mary's feet.*" Eve.

11. "*She who wakes.*" Ruth, the ancestress of David.

12. "*Mercy.*" "Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy loving kindness." *Psalm li. 1.*

22, 25. "*Upon this side . . . upon the other.*" It is observable that the Rose is equally divided between the blest of the two Dispensations, that of the pre-Christian age, and that of the post-Christian age. In *De Monarchia*, iii. 3, Dante argues that "those who have believed in Christ, whether to come, or present, or as having already suffered, and who from their faith have hoped, and from their hope have kindled into love, will, burning with love, be made co-heirs with Him."

31. "*On the other opposite . . . John.*" Saint John the Baptist, classed among the saints of the Old Dispensation, but, with appropriateness, placed on the boundary line. A member of the Holy Family, the Elijah of the New Testament, he is worthily made prominent. He suffered martyrdom "two years" before the Resurrection, and during that term of time was in the Limbo, the Border-Land of the Fathers.

40, 41, 46. "*Downward . . . midway . . . little faces.*" The centre a glow of golden light from "little faces" with their freshness and beauty, the blonde curls, the beaming eyes; on one side the multitudinous leaves, each a throne for some saint of the Old Dispensation; on the other the multitudinous leaves, partly filled by the saints of the New.