

CANTO TWENTY-EIGHTH.

ARGUMENT:

As the Poets are enjoying the Terrestrial Paradise, they observe Matilda. She and Dante hold a conversation in the presence of the two other Poets. Matilda tells them of Lethe and Eunoë, and refers to those passages in the works of the ancient Poets which recall the memories of the Golden Age.

Statius still remains with Dante, and will be mentioned in the two last Cantos of the present division of the *Commedia*.

Virgil also remains, but will return to the Lower World in the Thirtieth Canto.

TIME: Morning of Easter Wednesday.

PERSONS SPEAKING: Dante. Matilda.

PERSONS APPEARING: The shade of Virgil. Statius.

THROUGHOUT those heavenly woodlands whose
dense shade

With living green made mild the sun's new gold,
Eager to find what might their depths unfold,
At once I from the brink in wonder strayed,
Along the level, with pleased gait restrained,
Upon a soil above which fragrance reigned.
A balmy air, which breathed in changeless flow,
Upon my forehead played, and with a sweet,
Kind touch did my enraptured senses greet.

And bent this gentle wind the branches so 10
With tremulous motion t'wards that side which
gave

The sacred Mount's first shadow to the wave,
That still, in their brave tops, without annoy,
The birds, delighted, all their lessons tried,
And warblings spread throughout the charmed
air wide,
And filled the hours of prime with welcoming joy,
While to their jocund songs the foliage sent
Responsive whisperings forth with odors blent,

Such as from bough to bough each other chase, 19
When through the pines on Chiassi's sounding
shores

The surging southern breezes Æolus pours.
Already me had carried my slow pace
So far into the antique wood that lost
The place I had which I did first accost,
When lo, my further course a stream's waves barred,
Which to the left with dimpling waters laved
The grass that on its emerald margin waved.

All waters that on earth are purest, marred 28
The least with substances that dim and stain,
Ne'er could the clearness of this stream attain,
As, in its sweet brown bed, it moves profound
'Neath the perpetual shade which gently wraps
Suns' rays and moons' e'er from its lisping lapse.
My feet were stayed, but passed mine eyes beyond
The other bank to scan the various dyes
Wherewith the May there rivalled sunset skies ;

And there appeared unto mine eyesight fond, 37
E'en as with wonder sometimes doth possess
The mind which only that thought would caress,
A Lady, all alone, who, as she went,
Was singing, and selecting flowers, which, choice,
Made all the pathway where she moved rejoice.
"Ah, Lady beautiful! to whom hath lent
Love his own beams to warm thee, if the heart
May testimony take thy looks impart,

"May it thee please to approach the river's
marge," 46
I said to her, "so close that to mine ear
May what thou singest manifest be and clear.
This place and thy fair self my memory charge
With what and where Proserpina was, when lorn
Her mother wept, and she from Spring was torn."
As doth a Lady, in her dancing turned,
Her feet restrain with slow and easy grace,
So that foot gradually to foot gives place,

Thus, on the ground where red and gold tints
burned, 55
She t'wards me came, nor in aught other wise
Than would a shrinking maid with downcast
eyes;

And my request was granted, and I heard
The dulcet voice so near that wrapped me round
The melody and the meaning of its sound.
Soon as she stood where were the grasses stirred
By waves the beauteous river rolled, she me,
'Neath eyelids raised, her eyes allowed to see,

Her Discourse.

Whence on me shone such fire as never came 64
From Venus' lids, what time her son's keen shaft
Tore her white breast, and missed its wonted craft.
Upon the bank she stood, and smiled, the flame
Of lively colors in her hands, from bowers
That lofty land fills with spontaneous flowers.
The stream is held but paces three apart
But not the Hellespont's flood, where Xerxes
passed,
(To human pride a curb that e'er will last,)

More hatred poured within Leander's heart 73
That it 'twixt Sestos and Abydos rolled,
Than this, not opening, made my breast to hold.
"Ye strangers are, and, possibly, in this place,"
She said, "of all our race the joyous natal nest,
Ye from my smile some inference wrong may
wrest,
Or seem therein unfriendly thoughts to trace ;
But gives the psalm 'Thou, Lord, hast made me
glad '
Enlightenment such as seers and prophets had.

"But thou who foremost art, and didst me call, 82
Say if thou more wouldst hear, for answers mine,
As need may be, I bring to doubts of thine."
"These waves," I said, "and forest sounds that fall
Mine ears around clash with a faith I held,
And which to abandon I am now compelled."
And she: "How that arises cause doth give
For wonder in thy mind I will relate,
And thus the haze that thee surrounds abate.

“The First Good, who sole in His joy doth live, 91
Man good created, and this place assigned
That herein he might peace eternal find.

Through fault of his short while he here sojourned;
Through fault of his to tears he turned and toil
His laughter free and sports nought else could
foil.

That might not vapors which beneath are spurned
From land and water, mostly thence through heat
Exhaled when temperatures unequal meet,

“Thence make ascent to vex here man’s estate, 100
This Mount was raised towards the Heaven so
high,

And b’yond its Gate these vapors do not fly.
Now since the general atmosphere elate
Wheels, by its primal impulse driven, where
nought

To check its direct onward course is brought,
Upon this summit, which on all sides stands
In living ether, doth this free air bound,
And make the dense umbrageous forest sound;

“And in the plant such power resides when fans 109
The breeze its limbs, its virtue fills the air,
And it abroad, on all its wings, doth fare;

And yonder earth, as may its merits claim,
Of soil or climate, takes the seed, and nurse
Therefrom the seasons plants and fruits diverse.

Now, this being known, no marvel ’t is when name
None can a plant that springeth from the earth,
Because it oweth to this fair land its birth.

“ And further learn, this sacred lofty plain 118
Of every seed is full, and fruits doth bear
The like whereof hath ne’er been gathered there.
The water in this stream is from no vein
By vapors fed which in the cold condense
And loses breath or gains through casual vents ;
’Tis from a fountain sent of sure supply,
Which, through God’s will, regains what it doth
lose,
Nor unto rivers two doth aid refuse.

“ Each river claims its several virtue high : 127
This flood destroys of sin all memory more ;
That all past good doth to the mind restore.
Lethe the one, Eunoë the other ’s named,
And none effect hath either until taste
Thereof hath us beneath its influence placed ;
And by Eunoë’s other sweets are tamed.
And now, albeit thy thirst is slaked, and more
Of heavenly truths I give not from my store,

“ Yet a corollary still I ’ll freely give, 136
Deeming that not less grateful will be found
What doth beyond my promise given abound.
Those who at that time sung when feigned to live
The Golden Age was and its blissful hours
Perhaps fed dreams Parnassian on these bowers.
Here man was innocent, here was endless Spring,
Here every fruit that e’er from arbor hung ;
Here is the nectar of which each one sung.”

Then did my body I, in gentle swing, 145
 Towards my Poets turn, and marked the smile
 That on their faces had reposed the while;
 But to her beauty still mine eyes did cling.

NOTES TO THE TWENTY-EIGHTH CANTO.

1. "*Those heavenly wood'lands.*" Now that the summit of the Purgatorial Mountain has been reached, it will be well to recall those passages in the text and notes which describe its origin and elevation, especially the Second Canto of the present division of the Poem, at line 1, and the Third, at line 15, as well as the Twenty-eighth of the *Paradiso* at line 139. The Mountain is described by Dante as the loftiest elevation on the globe. At its summit is the Garden of Eden, the Terrestrial Paradise, whence Adam and Eve were banished.

Milton's description of the Terrestrial Paradise is found in the Fourth Book of the *Paradise Lost*. It and Dante's Terrestrial Paradise recall the much feebler pictures by other Poets: that of the Island of Calypso by Homer in the Fifth Book of the *Odyssey*, and of the Garden of Alcinous in the Seventh; that of Colonos by Sophocles in his *Œdipus Colonus*; that of the Garden of Amida by Tasso in his *Jerusalem*; and that of Mount Acidale by Spenser in his *Faerie Queene*.

16. "*Welcoming joy.*" The bird-twitterings in the early dawn of Spring have found their way into the fairest lines of the Poets. Virgil and Milton have excelled therein.

It should be borne in mind that these sounds are peculiar to the season in which Dante supposes himself to have been on the Purgatorial Mountain.

20. "*Chiassi.*" A spacious pine-forest which stretches along the seashore from Ravenna to Cervia. Doubtless its towering trees often cast their shadow upon the Author of the *Commedia*.

25. "*A stream.*" The river Lethe.