

CANTO THE THIRTEENTH.

A R G U M E N T.

DANTE arrives at the Forest of Suicide, where he finds the Spirit of Pietro de Vignes, Chancellor and Prime Minister to the Emperor Frederick the Second ; from whom he learns the nature of his punishment. In the same region, though differently punished, he finds the Spirits of those who had been led to suicide by dissipation. Among these he meets two of his contemporaries, Lano di Sanesi and Jiacapo Padouano.

HIGH wafted o'er the flood, the Centaur bore
His mortal charge, and gain'd the further shore ;
Where the deep horrors of a pathless wood
O'er-hung the wave with dark funereal frown ;
Deep tangled shades the horrid soil embrown,
And deadly venom ev'ry trunk bedew'd.

II.

No shade so dismal hides CORNETTO's shore,
As where CÆCINA hears the Tuscan roar,
Nor fouler shapes possess the haunted glade :
Their dire assemblies here the *Harpies* hold,
Whose voice pursu'd the Trojan fleet of old,
And hideous scenes of future woe display'd.

III.

They fleet around on broad portentous wing,
And hov'ring high their baleful dirges sing ;
Then people ev'ry bough, a dismal throng :
Down to the breast they seem of female race,
But dusky plumage all the rest deface,
And with strong talons to the boughs they clung.

IV.

“ See (Mæro cry'd) the Wood, whose gloomy bounds
A level tract of burning sand furrounds ;
Beyond the limits of this baleful grove :
And now, for scenes beyond the reach of faith !
Scenes yet unequall'd in the haunts of death !
Prepare your eyes, as thro' the vale we rove.”

V.

Now dismal shrieks assail'd my startled ear,
Thro' the long wood, ascending shrill and clear ;
Nor tort'ring hand, nor sentenc'd soul was seen.—
Instant, my vain surmise the *Mantuan* saw—
And—“ Let thy hardy hand (he cry'd) withdraw
Those envious boughs, the walks of death between !”

VI.

My ready hands the hanging branches tore ;
And, lo ! my hands were all embu'd in gore !
When, from the trunk, an hollow dismal sound
Exclaim'd, “ Ah ! why my bleeding fibres tear ?—
If e'er above you breath'd the vital air,
Why thus with cruel hand your brethren wound ?

VII.

Altho' confin'd in this accursed wood,
We boast a common race and kindred blood :—

But, were we born of *Lybia's* venom'd race,
Hard were the deed our tortur'd boughs to bend,
And from the trunk our bleeding members rend ;
Nor would a pious hand our plants deface !”

VIII.

He sigh'd ; and blood for tears began to flow !—
As when, in summer green, th' unseason'd bough,
Sullen and slow, the sputt'ring flame receives,
At many a vent escapes the struggling steam :
His crackling fibres burst at each extreme,
And fast th' expiring sigh reluctant heaves.

IX.

My Guide reply'd, “ ’Tis needless to upbraid :—
Had he divin'd thy fate, lamented Shade !
His guiltless hand had ne'er thy boughs profan'd ;
Or had he thought on *Polydorus'* doom,
Like thee, confin'd within a living tomb,
Thy blood his pious hands had never stain'd.

X.

“ But, tell thy lineage and paternal name ;
And if, above, thy violated fame
Hath suffer'd aught, let him thy fame defend !”
Appeas'd, the Voice rejoin'd, “ Those welcome sounds
Soothe for a while the mem'ry of my wounds :
If then your bus'ness brook delay, attend !—

XI.

“ Mine were the avenues to *Frederic's* soul ;
 The Royal Mind I held in soft controul,
 And at my wish his bounty ebb'd and flow'd :
 With faithful zeal the glorious post I kept,
 But Envy woke while I supinely slept,
 And min'd the basis of my fair abode.

XII.

“ Within the Courtier's breast she lurk'd unseen,
 Rankling the heart beneath the smiling mien,
 'Till the black poison burst in ruin round.
 To CÆSAR's heart the venom'd whisper stole :—
 Soon o'er my head I saw Destruction roll,
 And rashly dealt the self-inflicted wound.

St. xi. l. 2.] This suicide was the famous Pietro delle Vigne, or Petrus de Vinois, confidential minister and physician to Frederic the Second (see Notes on Canto x.); he was a Capuan by birth, of the lowest parentage, but rose to the highest offices under the Emperor. He is supposed to have written the book of *The Three Impostors* (Moses, Mahomet, and J. C.) to ingratiate himself with Frederic; but it was the fashion of the Guelf writers to blacken the characters of the Ghibellines. His rise was attended with the envy of all the old Patrician Courtiers, who, by fictitious letters from Pope Innocent the IVth, promising him a considerable reward if he would poison his sovereign, occasioned his fall. Frederic, equally credulous and cruel, caused him to be blinded, by holding a red-hot basin to his eyes. The fallen minister retired to Pisa; and his pride being hurt by the neglect of the Pisans, or not being able to brook his disgrace, he resolved to put an end to his existence. One day, being led out, he asked his guide to conduct him to Paul's Church; and, when he found himself within reach of the wall, he ran his head violently against it and fractured his skull. Others say, that he flung himself out of a window into the street, when he heard the Emperor's retinue was passing by.

XIII.

“ In death I hop’d to shun the deep disgrace ;
 But winged Vengeance knew my foul to trace.
 Yet, by those bonds, that hold me to the foil,
 I swear, that still, unconscious of a stain,
 This hand upheld the glories of his reign,
 Nor fold my fame, nor shar’d the public spoil.”

XIV.

“ And oh ! if yonder world expects you still,
 Let not Detraction on my name distil
 Her pois’nous dew, but chase the Fiend away !”
 He ceas’d, and seem’d to wait my last reply.
 “ Haste, haste ! (exclaim’d the Bard) the minutes fly,
 While here you waste the hours in fond delay.”

XV.

“ Ask thou, (I cry’d,) whate’er imports to know :—
 So fast my rising tears began to flow
 That utterance is deny’d.”—The Bard began :
 “ So may thy fervent pray’r prevail above,
 Say, what strange spell, in this *Tartarean* grove,
 In ev’ry trunk infolds a sentenc’d man ?

XVI.

“ Does no kind chance the prison’d soul redeem ?”
 I spoke, the Ghost renew’d the doleful theme :
 “ When the fierce soul, disdaining longer stay,
 Spontaneous leaves the bounds of upper air,
 Seven times the depth of this infernal sphere
 He falls, for ever in those bounds to stay.

XVII.

“ Wherever flung, he casts a random root,
Thence up, amain, the horrid fibres shoot ;
And soon the savage plant o’ershades the foil :
On ev’ry stem a baleful bird descends,
And with insatiate bill our foliage rends ;
While blood and mingled tears the trunk defile.

XVIII.

“ The general doom shall bid us seek our dust ;
But not to clothe us in the hated bust :
That odious union no command compels.
At ev’ry trunk within the woody waste,
The hanging corse shall taint the coming blast !
While deep within the wailing spirit dwells.”

XIX.

It ceas’d, and still we stood, intent to hear ;—
When thro’ the gloomy grove, distinct and clear,
We heard the clamours of the chase afar.
As when, to vengeance rous’d, the chafing boar,
Prepares his cruel fangs to bathe in gore,
So seem’d the discord of the Sylvan war.

XX.

At length the bloody hunt appear’d in view ;
The hounds of Hell a wretched pair pursue !
Naked they ran, and, all besmear’d with gore,
The crackling branches broke before their flight.
“ Oh, Death ! (the foremost cry’d,) assert thy right ;
Nor let us still in vain thy aid implore !”

XXI.

“ Had you thus ply’d your feet on TOPPO’s plain,
 (The second cry’d) thy corpse among the slain
 Had not been found on that ill-omen’d day.”
 Faintly he spoke, and, on a bough reclin’d,
 Heard the loud questing in the coming wind,
 And, sternly patient, seem’d to stand at bay.

XXII.

Soon issuing from the grove, the Brood of night
 Traverse the tainted ground with fell delight,
 And snuff with eager scent the poison’d gale:
 Arriv’d, the falling wretch they soon surround,
 Fasten at once, and drag him to the ground ;
 Then bear his mangled members down the dale.

XXIII.

The plaintive tree his shatter’d arms upheld,
 From ev’ry bough a crimson current well’d:
 While *Maro* led me to the scene of blood,
 “ Ah ! *Giacomo*, why my branches tear ?
 Ought I the vengeance of thy crimes to bear ?”
 Thus wail’d the Spirit, in his shrine of wood.

St. xxi. l. 3.] This Spirit, who is described so expeditious in his flight, was named LANO, a native of Siena : he was sent with a detachment of his countrymen to assist the FLORENTINES against the ARETINES ; but finding the fortune of the day turning against him, and reflecting that he had survived his patrimony, and all the enjoyments he had any relish for, he rushed into the thickest of the battle, and was killed. The other Spirit, companion of his flight and torment, was *Jiacapo Di Santa Andrea*, a Paduan, who had spent

XXIV.

“ Say! who art thou that stain’st the dismal shore
(Exclaim’d the Roman Bard) with streaming gore?”

Sighing, the Voice reply’d, “ Whatever Pow’r
Leads you this scene of carnage to survey;
With pious hand my shatter’d members lay,
Where late you saw the fiends their prey devour.

XXV.

“ You know those walls that own’d the martial God,
Then chang’d the terrors of his iron rod,

Relenting, for the *Baptist’s* milder sway:
Their change the furious Pow’r indignant saw,
And bent her down beneath *his* sterner law,
Wasting their strength in many a bloody fray.

XXVI.

“ Where now on *Arno’s* flood his statue frowns,
Whose demon pow’r the abject city owns,

spent his substance with a profusion that look’d like frenzy. In order to make a bonfire for the welcome of some friends, he ordered all his labourers’ cottages, corn, and waggons, to be consumed in one conflagration. He killed himself in a fit of despair, after a life of dissipation.

St. xxv. l. 3.] The Church of the Baptist at Florence was formerly a Temple of Mars. The Poet insinuates, from their love of war and discord, that they were still more attached to the ancient object of their worship, than the “ mild sway of the Baptist.”

(Else

(Else were her ruins spread along the shore ;)
 The furies saw me there the cord extend,
 And from the fatal beam my weight suspend ;
 Mine own ill-omen'd roof the burthen bore."

St. xxvi. l. 6.] This catastrophe was such a common result of a life of dissipation in the 13th century, that, say the Commentators, it is hard to ascertain the particular person meant by the Poet here, under the image of a shattered tree.—A life of extravagance, closed by suicide, is delineated with great justness of design, and strength of colouring, in Cecilia, or Memoirs of an Heiress, Vols. I. and II See also Letters on Infidelity.

The hint of this punishment (as of many others) is taken from VIRGIL, *Æn.* vi. 435.

——— lucemque perosi
 Projecere animas.—Quam vellent æthere in alto,
 Nunc et pauperiem et duros perferre labores !

DANTE, in this Canto, gives a striking instance of poetical art, in combining two or three scattered images in VIRGIL into one sublime and terrible picture. The Metamorphosis of Polydorus, an insipid fiction where it stands *, the punishment of *suicide* passed slightly over in a general description †, and the cruelty of *Mexen-tius*, in binding living bodies to the dead, are all brought together in one of the most striking representations in the whole Poem.—This is the most noble species of imitation, and only to be attempted by that sort of superior genius, which can give such resemblances the air of an original. Thus VIRGIL has treated HOMER, and MILTON, in the same manner, has availed himself of the fictions of OVID and CLAUDIAN.

As to the propriety of this punishment, it seems at least a sort of poetical justice to confine the Spirits who had left their allotted stations without leave, to other bodies, which besides, being infinitely more disagreeable, they could not so easily forsake. Something

* *Æn.* iii. 6. *Æn.* vi. 435.

† *Æn.* viii. 485.

like

like it at least we can perceive in this world. Those who endeavour to quit their appointed stations by unwarrantable means, are *generally* driven back, and *confined* to *them* or something worse, with the addition of disgrace. This gives their activity a proper direction *, if they will improve by the dispensation. If some will not learn this lesson, and degrade themselves still further, it only shows that the will of man is free, and that some rather chuse to make themselves *warnings* than *examples*. Instances of successful fraud often occur; but as those are not punished here, it furnishes a strong probability of a future dispensation. As the instances of these who are corrected here, proves the superintendence of a moral Governor.

* See Essay on the *Purgatorio*.

END OF THE THIRTEENTH CANTO.