

Between two kinds of food, both equally
Remote and tempting, first a man might die
Of hunger, ere he one could freely choose.
E'en so would stand a lamb between the maw
Of two fierce wolves, in dread of both alike:
E'en so between two deer a dog would stand,
Wherefore, if I was silent, fault nor praise
I to myself impute, by equal doubts
Held in suspense, since of necessity
It happen'd. Silent was I, yet desire
Was painted in my looks; and thus I spake
My wish more earnestly than language could.

As Daniel, when the haughty king he freed
From ire, that spurr'd him on to deeds unjust
And violent; so look'd Beatrice then.

"Well I discern," she thus her words address'd,
"How contrary desires each way constrain thee,
So that thy anxious thought is in itself
Bound up and stifled, nor breathes freely forth.
Thou arguest; if the good intent remain;
What reason that another's violence
Should stint the measure of my fair desert?

"Cause too thou findest for doubt, in that it seems,
That spirits to the stars, as Plato deem'd,

Return. These are the questions which thy will
Urge equally; and therefore I the first
Of that will treat which hath the more of gall.
Of seraphim he who is most ensky'd,
Moses and Samuel, and either John,
Choose which thou wilt, nor even Mary's self,
Have not in any other heav'n their seats,
Than have those spirits which so late thou saw'st;
Nor more or fewer years exist; but all
Make the first circle beauteous, diversely
Partaking of sweet life, as more or less
Afflation of eternal bliss pervades them.
Here were they shown thee, not that fate assigns
This for their sphere, but for a sign to thee
Of that celestial furthest from the height.
Thus needs, that ye may apprehend, we speak:
Since from things sensible alone ye learn
That, which digested rightly after turns
To intellectual. For no other cause
The scripture, condescending graciously
To your perception, hands and feet to God
Attributes, nor so means: and holy church
Doth represent with human countenance
Gabriel, and Michael, and him who made
Tobias whole. Unlike what here thou seest,
The judgment of Timaeus, who affirms
Each soul restor'd to its particular star,

Believing it to have been taken thence,
When nature gave it to inform her mold:
Since to appearance his intention is
E'en what his words declare: or else to shun
Derision, haply thus he hath disguis'd
His true opinion. If his meaning be,
That to the influencing of these orbs revert
The honour and the blame in human acts,
Perchance he doth not wholly miss the truth.
This principle, not understood aright,
Erewhile perverted well nigh all the world;
So that it fell to fabled names of Jove,
And Mercury, and Mars. That other doubt,
Which moves thee, is less harmful; for it brings
No peril of removing thee from me.

"That, to the eye of man, our justice seems
Unjust, is argument for faith, and not
For heretic declension. To the end
This truth may stand more clearly in your view,
I will content thee even to thy wish

"If violence be, when that which suffers, nought
Consents to that which forceth, not for this
These spirits stood exculpate. For the will,
That will not, still survives unquench'd, and doth
As nature doth in fire, tho' violence

Wrest it a thousand times; for, if it yield
Or more or less, so far it follows force.
And thus did these, whom they had power to seek
The hallow'd place again. In them, had will
Been perfect, such as once upon the bars
Held Laurence firm, or wrought in Scaevola
To his own hand remorseless, to the path,
Whence they were drawn, their steps had hasten'd back,
When liberty return'd: but in too few
Resolve so steadfast dwells. And by these words
If duly weigh'd, that argument is void,
Which oft might have perplex'd thee still. But now
Another question thwarts thee, which to solve
Might try thy patience without better aid.
I have, no doubt, instill'd into thy mind,
That blessed spirit may not lie; since near
The source of primal truth it dwells for aye:
And thou might'st after of Piccarda learn
That Constance held affection to the veil;
So that she seems to contradict me here.
Not seldom, brother, it hath chanc'd for men
To do what they had gladly left undone,
Yet to shun peril they have done amiss:
E'en as Alcmaeon, at his father's suit
Slew his own mother, so made pitiless
Not to lose pity. On this point bethink thee,
That force and will are blended in such wise

As not to make the' offence excusable.
Absolute will agrees not to the wrong,
That inasmuch as there is fear of woe
From non-compliance, it agrees. Of will
Thus absolute Piccarda spake, and I
Of th' other; so that both have truly said."

Such was the flow of that pure rill, that well'd
From forth the fountain of all truth; and such
The rest, that to my wond'ring thoughts I found.

"O thou of primal love the prime delight!
Goddess!" I straight reply'd, "whose lively words
Still shed new heat and vigour through my soul!
Affection fails me to requite thy grace
With equal sum of gratitude: be his
To recompense, who sees and can reward thee.
Well I discern, that by that truth alone
Enlighten'd, beyond which no truth may roam,
Our mind can satisfy her thirst to know:
Therein she resteth, e'en as in his lair
The wild beast, soon as she hath reach'd that bound,
And she hath power to reach it; else desire
Were given to no end. And thence doth doubt
Spring, like a shoot, around the stock of truth;
And it is nature which from height to height
On to the summit prompts us. This invites,

This doth assure me, lady, rev'rently
To ask thee of other truth, that yet
Is dark to me. I fain would know, if man
By other works well done may so supply
The failure of his vows, that in your scale
They lack not weight." I spake; and on me straight
Beatrice look'd with eyes that shot forth sparks
Of love celestial in such copious stream,
That, virtue sinking in me overpower'd,
I turn'd, and downward bent confus'd my sight.