

Again mine eyes were fix'd on Beatrice,
And with mine eyes my soul, that in her looks
Found all contentment. Yet no smile she wore
And, "Did I smile," quoth she, "thou wouldst be straight
Like Semele when into ashes turn'd:
For, mounting these eternal palace-stairs,
My beauty, which the loftier it climbs,
As thou hast noted, still doth kindle more,
So shines, that, were no temp'ring interpos'd,
Thy mortal puissance would from its rays
Shrink, as the leaf doth from the thunderbolt.
Into the seventh splendour are we wafted,
That underneath the burning lion's breast
Beams, in this hour, commingled with his might,
Thy mind be with thine eyes: and in them mirror'd
The shape, which in this mirror shall be shown."
Whoso can deem, how fondly I had fed
My sight upon her blissful countenance,
May know, when to new thoughts I chang'd, what joy
To do the bidding of my heav'nly guide:
In equal balance poising either weight.

Within the crystal, which records the name,
(As its remoter circle girds the world)
Of that lov'd monarch, in whose happy reign
No ill had power to harm, I saw rear'd up,
In colour like to sun-illumin'd gold.

A ladder, which my ken pursued in vain,
So lofty was the summit; down whose steps
I saw the splendours in such multitude
Descending, ev'ry light in heav'n, methought,
Was shed thence. As the rooks, at dawn of day
Bestirring them to dry their feathers chill,
Some speed their way a-field, and homeward some,
Returning, cross their flight, while some abide
And wheel around their airy lodge; so seem'd
That glitterance, wafted on alternate wing,
As upon certain stair it met, and clash'd
Its shining. And one ling'ring near us, wax'd
So bright, that in my thought: said: "The love,
Which this betokens me, admits no doubt."

Unwillingly from question I refrain,
To her, by whom my silence and my speech
Are order'd, looking for a sign: whence she,
Who in the sight of Him, that seeth all,
Saw wherefore I was silent, prompted me
T' indulge the fervent wish; and I began:
"I am not worthy, of my own desert,
That thou shouldst answer me; but for her sake,
Who hath vouchsaf'd my asking, spirit blest!
That in thy joy art shrouded! say the cause,
Which bringeth thee so near: and wherefore, say,

Doth the sweet symphony of Paradise
Keep silence here, pervading with such sounds
Of rapt devotion ev'ry lower sphere?"

"Mortal art thou in hearing as in sight;"

Was the reply: "and what forbade the smile
Of Beatrice interrupts our song.
Only to yield thee gladness of my voice,
And of the light that vests me, I thus far
Descend these hallow'd steps: not that more love
Invites me; for lo! there aloft, as much
Or more of love is witness'd in those flames:
But such my lot by charity assign'd,
That makes us ready servants, as thou seest,
To execute the counsel of the Highest.

"That in this court," said I, "O sacred lamp!
Love no compulsion needs, but follows free
Th' eternal Providence, I well discern:
This harder find to deem, why of thy peers
Thou only to this office wert foredoom'd."

I had not ended, when, like rapid mill,
Upon its centre whirl'd the light; and then
The love, that did inhabit there, replied:
"Splendour eternal, piercing through these folds,
Its virtue to my vision knits, and thus
Supported, lifts me so above myself,
That on the sov'ran essence, which it wells from,
I have the power to gaze: and hence the joy,

Wherewith I sparkle, equaling with my blaze
The keenness of my sight. But not the soul,
That is in heav'n most lustrous, nor the seraph
That hath his eyes most fix'd on God, shall solve
What thou hast ask'd: for in th' abyss it lies
Of th' everlasting statute sunk so low,
That no created ken may fathom it.
And, to the mortal world when thou return'st,
Be this reported; that none henceforth dare
Direct his footsteps to so dread a bourn.
The mind, that here is radiant, on the earth
Is wrapt in mist. Look then if she may do,
Below, what passeth her ability,
When she is ta'en to heav'n." By words like these
Admonish'd, I the question urg'd no more;
And of the spirit humbly sued alone
T' instruct me of its state. "'Twixt either shore
Of Italy, nor distant from thy land,
A stony ridge ariseth, in such sort,
The thunder doth not lift his voice so high,
They call it Catria: at whose foot a cell
Is sacred to the lonely Eremite,
For worship set apart and holy rites."
A third time thus it spake; then added: "There
So firmly to God's service I adher'd,
That with no costlier viands than the juice
Of olives, easily I pass'd the heats

Of summer and the winter frosts, content
In heav'n-ward musings. Rich were the returns
And fertile, which that cloister once was us'd
To render to these heavens: now 't is fall'n
Into a waste so empty, that ere long
Detection must lay bare its vanity
Pietro Damiano there was I yclept:
Pietro the sinner, when before I dwelt
Beside the Adriatic, in the house
Of our blest Lady. Near upon my close
Of mortal life, through much importuning
I was constrain'd to wear the hat that still
From bad to worse it shifted.—Cephas came;
He came, who was the Holy Spirit's vessel,
Barefoot and lean, eating their bread, as chanc'd,
At the first table. Modern Shepherd's need
Those who on either hand may prop and lead them,
So burly are they grown: and from behind
Others to hoist them. Down the palfrey's sides
Spread their broad mantles, so as both the beasts
Are cover'd with one skin. O patience! thou
That lookst on this and doth endure so long."
I at those accents saw the splendours down
From step to step alight, and wheel, and wax,
Each circuiting, more beautiful. Round this
They came, and stay'd them; uttered them a shout
So loud, it hath no likeness here: nor I

Wist what it spake, so deaf'ning was the thunder."