

It was the hour, when of diurnal heat  
No reliques chafe the cold beams of the moon,  
O'erpower'd by earth, or planetary sway  
Of Saturn; and the geomancer sees  
His Greater Fortune up the east ascend,  
Where gray dawn checkers first the shadowy cone;  
When 'fore me in my dream a woman's shape  
There came, with lips that stammer'd, eyes aslant,  
Distorted feet, hands maim'd, and colour pale.

I look'd upon her; and as sunshine cheers  
Limbs numb'd by nightly cold, e'en thus my look  
Unloos'd her tongue, next in brief space her form  
Decrepit rais'd erect, and faded face  
With love's own hue illum'd. Recov'ring speech  
She forthwith warbling such a strain began,  
That I, how loth soe'er, could scarce have held  
Attention from the song. "I," thus she sang,  
"I am the Siren, she, whom mariners  
On the wide sea are wilder'd when they hear:  
Such fulness of delight the list'ner feels.  
I from his course Ulysses by my lay  
Enchanted drew. Whoe'er frequents me once  
Parts seldom; so I charm him, and his heart  
Contented knows no void." Or ere her mouth  
Was clos'd, to shame her at her side appear'd  
A dame of semblance holy. With stern voice

She utter'd; "Say, O Virgil, who is this?"  
Which hearing, he approach'd, with eyes still bent  
Toward that goodly presence: th' other seiz'd her,  
And, her robes tearing, open'd her before,  
And show'd the belly to me, whence a smell,  
Exhaling loathsome, wak'd me. Round I turn'd  
Mine eyes, and thus the teacher: "At the least  
Three times my voice hath call'd thee. Rise, begone.  
Let us the opening find where thou mayst pass."

I straightway rose. Now day, pour'd down from high,  
Fill'd all the circuits of the sacred mount;  
And, as we journey'd, on our shoulder smote  
The early ray. I follow'd, stooping low  
My forehead, as a man, o'ercharg'd with thought,  
Who bends him to the likeness of an arch,  
That midway spans the flood; when thus I heard,  
"Come, enter here," in tone so soft and mild,  
As never met the ear on mortal strand.

With swan-like wings dispread and pointing up,  
Who thus had spoken marshal'd us along,  
Where each side of the solid masonry  
The sloping, walls retir'd; then mov'd his plumes,  
And fanning us, affirm'd that those, who mourn,  
Are blessed, for that comfort shall be theirs.

“What aileth thee, that still thou look’st to earth?”

Began my leader; while th’ angelic shape

A little over us his station took.

“New vision,” I replied, “hath rais’d in me

Surmizings strange and anxious doubts, whereon

My soul intent allows no other thought

Or room or entrance.”—“Hast thou seen,” said he,

“That old enchantress, her, whose wiles alone

The spirits o’er us weep for? Hast thou seen

How man may free him of her bonds? Enough.

Let thy heels spurn the earth, and thy rais’d ken

Fix on the lure, which heav’n’s eternal King

Whirls in the rolling spheres.” As on his feet

The falcon first looks down, then to the sky

Turns, and forth stretches eager for the food,

That woos him thither; so the call I heard,

So onward, far as the dividing rock

Gave way, I journey’d, till the plain was reach’d.

On the fifth circle when I stood at large,

A race appear’d before me, on the ground

All downward lying prone and weeping sore.

“My soul hath cleaved to the dust,” I heard

With sighs so deep, they well nigh choak’d the words.

“O ye elect of God, whose penal woes

Both hope and justice mitigate, direct

Tow'rds the steep rising our uncertain way."

"If ye approach secure from this our doom,  
Prostration—and would urge your course with speed,  
See that ye still to rightward keep the brink."

So them the bard besought; and such the words,  
Beyond us some short space, in answer came.

I noted what remain'd yet hidden from them:  
Thence to my liege's eyes mine eyes I bent,  
And he, forthwith interpreting their suit,  
Beckon'd his glad assent. Free then to act,  
As pleas'd me, I drew near, and took my stand  
O'er that shade, whose words I late had mark'd.  
And, "Spirit!" I said, "in whom repentant tears  
Mature that blessed hour, when thou with God  
Shalt find acceptance, for a while suspend  
For me that mightier care. Say who thou wast,  
Why thus ye grovel on your bellies prone,  
And if in aught ye wish my service there,  
Whence living I am come." He answering spake  
"The cause why Heav'n our back toward his cope  
Reverses, shalt thou know: but me know first  
The successor of Peter, and the name  
And title of my lineage from that stream,  
That' twixt Chiaveri and Siestri draws

His limpid waters through the lowly glen.  
A month and little more by proof I learnt,  
With what a weight that robe of sov'reignty  
Upon his shoulder rests, who from the mire  
Would guard it: that each other fardel seems  
But feathers in the balance. Late, alas!  
Was my conversion: but when I became  
Rome's pastor, I discern'd at once the dream  
And cozenage of life, saw that the heart  
Rested not there, and yet no prouder height  
Lur'd on the climber: wherefore, of that life  
No more enamour'd, in my bosom love  
Of purer being kindled. For till then  
I was a soul in misery, alienate  
From God, and covetous of all earthly things;  
Now, as thou seest, here punish'd for my doting.  
Such cleansing from the taint of avarice  
Do spirits converted need. This mount inflicts  
No direr penalty. E'en as our eyes  
Fasten'd below, nor e'er to loftier clime  
Were lifted, thus hath justice level'd us  
Here on the earth. As avarice quench'd our love  
Of good, without which is no working, thus  
Here justice holds us prison'd, hand and foot  
Chain'd down and bound, while heaven's just Lord shall please.  
So long to tarry motionless outstretch'd."

My knees I stoop'd, and would have spoke; but he,  
Ere my beginning, by his ear perceiv'd  
I did him reverence; and "What cause," said he,  
"Hath bow'd thee thus!"—"Compunction," I rejoin'd.  
"And inward awe of your high dignity."

"Up," he exclaim'd, "brother! upon thy feet  
Arise: err not: thy fellow servant I,  
(Thine and all others') of one Sovran Power.  
If thou hast ever mark'd those holy sounds  
Of gospel truth, 'nor shall be given ill marriage,'  
Thou mayst discern the reasons of my speech.  
Go thy ways now; and linger here no more.  
Thy tarrying is a let unto the tears,  
With which I hasten that whereof thou spak'st.  
I have on earth a kinswoman; her name  
Alagia, worthy in herself, so ill  
Example of our house corrupt her not:  
And she is all remaineth of me there."