

burned (*Josh.* vi. and vii). The fourth, from the N.T., is Ananias and his wife Sapphira, who, when the first Christian converts had all their possessions in common, sold some property for the use of the community, but brought the Apostles only part of the price, saying that it was the whole. Peter rebuked them for this gratuitous hypocrisy, and they fell dead at his feet. (*Acts* iv. 32-7, v. 1-11.) The fifth, from the O.T. Apocrypha, is Heliiodorus, chancellor to King Seleucus, who went in arms to rob the Temple treasury at Jerusalem so that the king might get the money. But “the Sovereign of spirits and of all authority caused a great apparition ... a horse with a terrible rider upon him and adorned with beautiful trappings, and he ran fiercely and smote at Heliiodorus with his forefeet, and it seemed that he that sat upon the horse had complete harness of gold” (2 *Mace.* iii. 1-40). The sixth, from the *Aeneid* (iii. 49 *sqq.*) is Polymnestor, King of Thrace, to whom Priam of Troy had entrusted a great reserve of gold by the hands of his son Polydorus. When Troy fell, Polymnestor killed Polydorus and took the gold for himself (*cf. Inf.* xxx. 13-21). The seventh, from classical history, is Marcus Licinius Crassus, surnamed “the Rich”, triumvir with Caesar and Pompey, 60 B.C. He was killed in battle against the Parthians, whose king, Hyrodes, knowing his notorious cupidity, had molten gold poured down his throat.

l. 131: *Delos, ere Latona nested there*: Delos, in the Greek Archipelago, was originally a floating island; but when Latona came to it, fleeing from the jealousy of Juno, Jupiter made it fast; and there Latona gave birth to the divine twins Apollo and Diana.

l. 136-8: *Gloria in excelsis ... Deo*: “Glory to God in the highest”: the angels’ hymn when announcing the birth of Christ to the shepherds. (*Luke* ii. 8-14.)

Canto XXI



THE STORY. *WHILE passing along the Fifth Cornice, Dante and Virgil are overtaken by the shade of the poet Statius, who tells them that the shouts and the shaking of the Mountain celebrate the release of a soul from Purgatory, and explains how that release is effected. It is he himself who has just risen up from over 500 years of prostration among the Covetous. In answer to Virgil’s question, he names himself saying how much he wishes he could have seen the author of the Aeneid, to whose example his own poetry owes so much. Despite Virgil’s warning, Dante betrays himself by an irrepressible smile and, on being desired to explain this apparent breach of good manners, has to admit that his companion is Virgil himself. Only Virgil’s own earnest dissuasions prevent Statius from falling at his feet.*

The natural thirst which nothing quenches, bar 1
That water which was begged, a bounty free,
By the poor woman of Samaria,

Distressed me still, while haste was urging me 4
Behind my guide along the cluttered way,
Where the just vengeance moved my sympathy;

When lo, now! like the tale in Luke — how they, 7
Those two wayfaring men, saw Christ appear,
New-risen from the rocky tomb that day —

A shade appeared to us, who from the rear 10
O’ertook us, while, with eyes downcast to view
The prostrate throngs, we knew not he was near

Till he spoke first: "God give His peace to you, 13
My brothers!" Then we turned as quick as thought,
And, having made the countersign thereto,

Virgil began: "So may that one true court 16
Which has doomed me to exile without ending
Bring thee in peace where all the blest consort—"

"How now!" said he — we pressed on notwithstanding — 19
"If you are souls shut out from God's high grace,
Who brought you by His stair thus far ascending?"

To whom my Doctor: "Look on this man's face, 22
Which bears the marks the angel set therein,
And know him bound to reign in that good place.

But because she who night and day doth spin as 25
Hath not for him spun all the flax to twine
Which Clotho loads and binds for each man's skein,

His soul, which is our sister, thine and mine, 28
Could not come up this mountain path alone,
Not having eyes which see like mine and thine;

Therefore from Hell's wide throat was I withdrawn 31
To be his showman, and — so far, that is,
As my school goes — I'll show and guide him on.

But tell us, if thou canst, why, just ere this, 34
The mount so quaked, and rang, as 'twere one cry,
Down to its marshy base with jubilees."

Thus did his question thread the needle's eye 37
Of my desire, and hope to be fed full
Sufficed at once to make my thirst less dry.

The shade replied: "This mountain's holy rule 40
Admits no breach of order; nothing strange
Troubles or makes its custom mutable;

These slopes are free from every natural change; 43
What of its own Heaven for its own doth take,
Nought else, can act as cause within their range.

Wherefore nor rain nor hail nor snowy flake 46
No frost nor dew falls higher than that spot
Where the three steps their little stairway make;

Clouds dense or rare, the flashing thunder-shot, 49
And Thaumás' daughter, yonder side so fleet
To shift her lodging, this place knows them not.

No dry and gusty vapours can o'erbeat 52
The top step of the three I've spoken of,
The step where Peter's vicar sets his feet.

Below that point the hill belike may move 55
Little or much, but winds pent underground —
I know not how — shake nothing here above;

But when some spirit, feeling purged and sound, 58
Leaps up or moves to seek a loftier station,
The whole mount quakes and the great shouts resound.

The will itself attests its own purgation; 61
Amazed, the soul that's free to change its inn
Finds its mere will suffice for liberation;

True, it wills always, but can nothing win 64
So long as heavenly justice keeps desire
Set toward the pain as once 'twas toward the sin;

Thus I, who've languished in this torment dire 67
Five hundred years and more, felt only now
The enfranchised will urge me to thresholds higher;

Then didst thou feel the shock, then heardest how — 70
God send them happy — the kind souls to speed me
Gave praise from mountain-foot to mountain-brow."

Thus said the shade; and since, as you'll concede me, 73
There's nought so fine as drinking when you're dry,
I cannot tell you how much good he did me.

"Ah! now I see," my wise guide made reply, 76
"The net that holds you here, and how 'tis broken,
Why the mount quakes, and why your joint glad cry.

Next, I beseech thee, let a word be spoken 79
Of who thou wast; and fain would I be told
What all those centuries of tears betoken."

"When the good Titus was avenging bold — 82
Having the High King's aid to reckon on —
The wounds whence gushed the blood that Judas sold,

I, with that title honour waits upon 85
Longest and best, lived yonder," said the spirit;
"Great fame had I, but faith as yet had none.

So sweet a gift of song did I inherit 88
That from Toulouse Rome called me 'neath her sway,
And crowned my brows with myrtle for my merit.

Statius men call me yonder to this day; 91
I sang of Thebes and great Achilles' fame,
But with that second load fell by the way.

The sparks that lit the music in me came 94
From that great fire divine whence many another,
Thousand by thousand, fetched their light and flame;

I mean the *Aeneid*, which to me was mother, 97
To me was nurse of song; if plucked asunder
From that rich fount, la ne'er have weighed a feather.

And to have had the joy of living yonder 100
When Virgil lived, I'd lie a whole sun more
Beyond my term, in exile and face under."

These words turned Virgil's face to me, which wore 103
A look that silent said: "Be silent still,"
But will with us is not made one with power;

Tears, laughter, tread so hard upon the heel 106
Of their evoking passions, that in those
Who're most sincere they least obey the will.

I did but smile — a hint beneath the rose 109
As 'twere. The shade cut short what he was saying,
And looked me in the eyes, where truth most shows.

“Tell me,” said he, “so may a glad repaying m 112
Crown thy long toil, why, as I spoke to you,
That flickering smile across thy lips went playing.”

So now I'm fairly caught between the two; 115
One signals silence, one entreats me speak;
I heave a sigh — what else is there to do?

And to interpret me my guide is quick: 118
“Don't be afraid to say — say on,” said he,
“Give to his anxious doubts the clue they seek.”

Then I: “Thou wonderest at my smile, maybe, 121
Spirit of old; but now I want to bring
A greater wonder yet to seize on thee.

He who gives eyes to me for journeying 124
Stands here, and he is Virgil,, whose high theme
Put power in thee of men and gods to sing.

If other cause for laughter thou didst deem 127
I had, 'tis false — dismiss it; nothing weighed
With me, except those words thou saidst of him.”

Already stooping to my lord, he made 130
To kiss his feet; but: “Brother, do not so,
For shade thou art and look'st upon a shade.”

Thus he; and the other, rising: “Now thou'lt know 133
How large and warm my love about thee clings,
When I forget our nothingness, and go

Treating these shadows like material things.” 136

The Images.

Stattus: Publius Papinius Statius (c. a.d. 45-96) was the author of the *Thebaid* (an epic on the history of Eteocles and Polynices — v. *Inf.* xxvi. 54 and note) and part of an *Achilleid*, together with a volume (the *Silvae*) of occasional poems, the libretto of a pantomime, the *Agave* (now lost, but mentioned by Juvenal), and a poem on the German wars of Domitian (also lost).

Dante's evident admiration for this poet of the “Silver Age” was a standing puzzle to the older and severer school of classical criticism, but modern scholarship tends to take a more favourable view (see *Oxf. Class. Dict.*, art. *Stattus*), and his poems were highly popular both in the Middle Ages and in his own day. C. S. Lewis (*Allegory of Love*, p-56) finds in his work the first beginnings of allegory as a literary form, and this may help to account for Dante's interest in him.

The significance of Statius in the imagery of the *Comedy* has been much disputed; but it seems likely that Dante wished to show the soul as being accompanied and helped on its journey, not only by Old Rome (natural Humanism) but also by the New (Christian) Rome (redeemed Humanism). The story of Statius's conversion, if it does not derive from ecclesiastical legend, may have been invented by Dante for this purpose.

Notes.

l. 3: *the poor woman of Samaria*: See *John* iv. 15.

l. 6: *the just vengeance (la giusta vendetta)*: i.e. the divine retribution for sin. This is Dante's first use of this famous phrase, which is given a

profounder significance in *Para.* vi. 88-93 and vii. 20 *sqq.*

l. 7: *the tale in Luke*: Luke xxiv. 13 *sqq.*

l. 15: *the countersign thereto*: i.e. the ritual response. The shade greets them with “*Pax vobiscum* — peace be unto you,” and Virgil replies— “*Et cum spiritu tuo* — and with thy spirit.”

l. 25: *she who night and day doth spin*: Lachesis, the Fate who spins the thread of every man’s destiny, which Clotho has arranged upon the distant and which *is* cut at death by the shears of Atropos.

l. 30: *not having eyes*, etc.: another of the poet’s indications that the Three Kingdoms of Death are not located in the world of sense. Virgil is Dante’s “contact”, by whom he is able to perceive what takes place in the world of spirits.

l. 44: *what of its own Heaven for its own doth take*: i.e. the human soul, which belongs to the supernatural order. Changes in the *natural* order (l. 43) do not affect the Mountain above Peter’s Gate, the point at which it emerges from the Earth’s atmosphere (ll. 46 *sqq.*).

l. 50: *Thaumas’ daughter*: Iris, the rainbow. Thaumas was the son of Pontus (the Sea) and Ge (the Earth), and father by the Ocean-nymph Electra of Iris and the Harpies.

l. 61: *the will itself* etc.: (See *Purgatory: the Doctrine*, .)

l. 82: *the good Titus*: Roman Emperor a.d. 79-81. The son of Vespasian, he served under his father in the Jewish wars, and in 70 besieged and captured Jerusalem, thus avenging upon the Jews the death of Christ (l. 84). During his brief reign he was immensely popular for his generosity and clemency; Suetonius calls him “the darling of the human race”.

l. 85: *that title*, etc.: the title of poet.

l. 89: *from Toulouse*: Dante follows a common error of his period in confusing the poet P. Papinius Statius, who was born at Naples, with the rhetorician Lucius Statius, who was born at Toulouse *c.* a.d. 58. He is correct

in saying that the greater part of Statius’s life was passed in Rome, where he enjoyed the protection of Domitian, to whom his father had been tutor.

l. 91: *Statius*: See Images; *yonder*: in the N. hemisphere.

l. 92. *fell by the way*: the *Achilleid* was left unfinished at Statius’s death.

l. 131: *Brother, do not so*: Cf. Canto xix. 127 *sqq.* Virgil, who had allowed Sordello to do him honour (vii. 13-15), appears to have profited by Pope Adrian’s instruction to Dante.