



The New Inferno
by Stephen Phillips

THE NEW INFERNO

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THE NEW INFERNO

BY
STEPHEN PHILLIPS

LONDON: JOHN LANE THE BODLEY HEAD
NEW YORK: JOHN LANE COMPANY MCMXI

WILLIAM BRENDON AND SON, LTD., PRINTERS, PLYMOUTH



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An Illustrated *Edition de Luxe* of this
Poem (limited to 300 copies, 250 for sale)
will be published with Sixteen Marvellous
Inventions by Vernon Hill Reproduced
in Facsimile. The size will be Large
Quarto and the Price One Guinea net.

CANTO I

B

3

CANTO I

I

DREAMING in starless night, it seemed that I,
Lifted in spirit arms, was outward borne,
Beyond the steadfast boundaries of the earth
And the invisible orb of the vast sun.

2

Then was I 'ware that one beside me was,
Whom I felt speaking rather than heard speak.
"One whom thou lovest and who still loves thee
Despatched me to thy side," the spirit said.

3

3

“ Even the full bliss of that mighty star,
Where she abides, thou hast the power to shake ;
And interrupt her earned felicity
By thy slow rust of sensuous indolence.

4

“ Think not because thou hast no touch from her,
Nor any sound of voice, or whispered word,
Nor sudden sight by moonbeam, that at times
She is not very near to thee unseen.

5

“ Though it is pain to her to approach the earth,
And though from life she flinches as from fire,
Yet in a deep concern of thee she comes,
To visit thee in silence suffering.

6

“ Or earthward gazes, stung with pain of thee,
She deems that thou hast better in thy soul
Than still to rail on at the world’s neglect ;
Than still to coarsen what was once so fine.

7

“ Therefore at her command have I come down,
To show thee spaces of the after-world ;
How spirits on this boundary suffer still,
That thou mayst tell mankind and clasp a crown.

8

“ Rid now thy mind of the old priestly fear
That, after bodily death, the trembling spirit
Is haled before its Maker and its Judge
And, if its deeds were evil, sentenced straight.

9

“For who shall draw the undeviating line
That separates the evil from the good?
And who presume to say ‘This deed was bad,
This act was utter black but this sheer white’?”

10

“Scarcely, with such simplicity, can life
Be straightly weighed and called to straight
account.

For conduct hath a twilight of its own;
He that must judge must fare with dubious feet.

11

“Murder, ere now, hath righteousness been called
And peculation justice; red revenge
How often justified; and love itself
At times a virtue seems, at times a sin.

12

“ If then so deep the problem, difficult
The answer, how so swiftly, after death,
Shall he or she be sentenced or be spared ?
Death carries us into no higher Court.

13

“ That most conspicuous catastrophe,
No change or alteration ever brings ;
But, as we die, the same, not otherwise,
The never-ending journey we pursue.

14

“ Then fear no more the scroll, the dread assize ;
The vengeful judge, the throned Displeasure
fear ;
Nor on the one side dread the fiery lake,
Nor on the other hope the sapphire heaven.

15

“ And proof of what I here declare to thee,
Ere I conduct thee safely through this space,
Thou shalt experience, in directer speech
With various spirits yet to Earth attached.”

16

Scarce had he spoken, when a furious shade,
New-loosed from Earth it seemed, by violence
borne
Blind as a twilight bat against us flew,
And hoarse and fast cried out unto us twain.

17

“ You, you who of this space are habitants
Where can I on some means of vengeance light,
Procure some fell and spiritual aid,
Whereby I might attain to my revenge? ”

18

“ Answer not thou ” said to me then my guide ;
“ Thou little art aware how perilous
Might be to thee thy answer ” ; turning then
To the fierce shadow he thus questioned him :

19

“ On whom dost thou seek vengeance in such
storm
Of whirling speech ? Art thou but late from
Earth,
And earthly memories fire thy spirit still ?
Is it a vengeance there that thou wouldst have ? ”

20

“ Behold then,” cried the shadow, “ this dim scar
That hath not left me, ’tis the hangman’s rope,
That marked my body there, and here my soul ;
Hither from execution am I whirled.

21

“ True that in jealous madness I shed blood,
But yet I stooped not to the cup prepared,
Or took by treachery a traitor’s breath.
With full and open blow I stretched him dead.

22

“ For this condemned, they pinioned me and
broke
My neck with ceremony, and while I breathed,
A priest the ritual of the already dead
Declaimed, the slow procession moving on.

23

“ Though of that strangled body I am quit,
I feel even now the swaying drop and fall,
And strong remembrance recreates the flesh
That suffers still in spiritual place.”

24

“ See now,” said he who stood beside me, “ how
His barren rage calls up companions,
And lowest spirits from their furious gloom !
His thought attracts them to him from their lair.

25

“ No need is here for a single spoken word ;
It is enough that he for vengeance pants ;
Others, whose life is rage, will quickly rise,
From utter gloom and whisper in his ear.

26

“ For what is earthly fury and barren rage,
Fruitless, inspiring nothing ; but an echo,
The hollow echo of a silly deed,
An answer, yet no answer profitless?

27

“Beware then how thou bringest memory
Beyond the grave; or wrath beyond the tomb!
This shall but summon thee companions,
To aid, and draw thee down into their night.

28

“See then”; I looked, and round about him rose,
Out of what pit or quagmire of the soul
I know not, shapes more hideous than our
dreams
Conceive of fiends or demons in midnight.

29

Round him they buzzed, besieging still his ear,
Suggesting that at which a dreadful glee
Lighted his face, and in his hateful eyes
Sent sudden joy, a joy by demons wrought.

30

With them he went, whither I cannot tell ;
But on some furious expedition bent ;
Schooled and advised, by sager wickedness,
To wreak his vengeance at whate'er the cost.

31

“ Fear thou then, and have care lest thou attract,
To be thy close companions and thy friends,
Those whom, perchance, a passing lawless thought
Has given the easy pass-word to thy mind.

32

“ For not alone can thoughts of vengeance draw
Horrible shapes of fury from the abyss ;
But, no less fearful, thoughts of lustful fire
Can summon lecherous legions from the deep.”

33

Then said I " But can these arisen fiends,
These summoned ministers of deepest hell,
Assail alone the dead ; or can they too
Instil into the living ear, and urge ? "

34

" To those who live and who still walk the
earth,"
He answered, " these same shapes are perilous,
If but encouraged, or not thwarted, these
Can murmur worse than thunder in the ear.

35

" How many a one hath to the gallows gone,
Or hath been sent, in agony, to pine
In solitary cell and durance dark
And penal silence that destroys the brain !

36

“ How many a one, by the unseeing judge,
All unaware of how the air is thronged
By presences pernicious and of power,
Hath lightly been despatched to utter doom ?

37

“ Yet could he view, as I have viewed so oft,
The hideous song and frantic triumphing
Of these same spirits, that had lured a soul,
Perhaps the voice that sentenced would have
shook.”

14

CANTO II

c

CANTO II

I

STILL rapt by those same arms that heretofore
Had with such strength upheld me, I was borne
Into a region cold : the thrilling chill
Inflicted frost upon my very soul.

2

Now the cold region more I realised
And clearer saw the place wherein we stood :
A world of falling snow and glittering ice,
Of frozen seas and sparkling pinnacles.

3

Yet a dead beauty had those wintry spires,
A brilliant silence : " Ah what land is this,
What country, under more than Arctic chill,
Whither thou hast conveyed me ? " I exclaimed.

4

" Behold the Cause ! " he answered, and I saw
All motionless, upon a frozen Alp,
With dreary stare and hands behind him clasped,
The Corsican who shook and lost the world.

5

" Is this the image of that dire retreat,
When blazing Moscow left him to the snows,
And all those legions to an endless frost,
Winter, not war, that eagle baffled there ? "

6

“The Scenery of Ambition here behold,”
He answered : “and a world of his own mind.
Pitiless power hath reared this sombre sky,
And ruthless Will this dazzling cold creates.

7

“He thrills from him those spires and crags of
frost,
Reflecting the cold splendour of his dreams.
They rise not but by him inspired to rise,
And fixed in the cold fury of his soul.

8

“Here his imagination kills the bird,
Nor any pasturing creature ventures here,
Nor any shy nor gentle thing presumes
To mar this glittering desert of the mind.

9

“ Shall any flower in this imperial frost,
Or grass amid this mental winter, grow ?
The spirit its own scenery creates,
And his own thought attracts these flocs and
bergs.”

10

Then, as he spoke, slow flakes began to fall,
And white in his own dreams the Emperor
stood,
Roofed by the purple vault of his own mind,
And glassed upon a glacier of the soul.

11

But when the dreamy storm had ceased to fall,
Then I perceived how many others stood
Around him, Marshals, Captains, soldiers old,
Comrades of many battles of the Earth.

12

Then said I, " Though he rears this world of ice
By his own thought, and by his will it stands,
Yet these, who still surround him, why do they,
Being dead, in the eternal winter live ? "

13

He answered " That same will that hurled them
then
Through Europe, for his sake, still binds them
here ;
Though dead, their old fidelity they keep,
And all those ghosts to the old eagles throng."

14

And still I gazed, and saw how flags they bore,
Holy from Arcola and Austerlitz,
And last with tears that Old Guard I beheld,
Dead veterans updrawn in silent line.

15

But I no longer could restrain approach
To that Grand Prisoner ; and upward climbed
By frozen hill and crag, until I stood
Before him to have audience of the dead.

16

“ Motionless Emperor, in this ice engaged,
Still on the Earth, while other glories fade,
And all into oblivion surely steal,
Thy glory waxes, and thy deeds enthrall.

17

“ Not least indeed in our foam-sundered isle,
Whither sea-gazing thou didst crouch to spring,
Art thou in all imaginations throned,
Thy face than any living face more real.”

18

He answered, as if answering his own mind
Rather than me who spoke, "Behold me caged
Here as on earth! When I had died, I thought,
I shall be freed at least if in despair!

19

"What is this region where I am confined?
Am I a peril to the universe?
And is it feared I shall lay siege to suns,
Or bring to planetary battle stars?

20

"How is this happier than still to and fro
To pace the Helena shingle, or to gaze
Wistful across the waters evermore?
What Power that is not Europe holds me still?

21

“ And yet behold ! this army leaves me not,
Their loyalty unshaken by the grave,
They stayed not stark upon the battle-field,
But being spirits hasted to my side.

22

“ These are not happy, save with me unhappy,
Their only bliss my sorrow is to share,
They would reject a heaven where I am not,
And hurry to a hell were I but there.”

23

So saying through the host he passed along,
I with him, yet a fear took hold on me
And awe of him, with whom I silent passed,
To see dead men saluting still the dead.

24

He stayed : " Doth any sun," he murmured still,
" Into this region peer, or any rain
Fall on this fixed monotony of ice ;
Hath God mislaid the secret of the flower ? "

25

As he was speaking, stole a woman up
Toward him, whose pictured countenance I
knew,
Easily passed she o'er the fields of ice ;
And he beholding her, aloud exclaimed :

26

" O art thou, art thou Josephine indeed ?
Once were we two how happy on the Earth,
Till politic fear of an extinguished line
Divorced thee from my arms though not my
heart,

27

“ And left me but a garden and memory.”
She answered : “ But why here dost thou abide,
Quenched after death as thou wast quenched in
 life,
Reviewing ghostly armies in the snow ? ”

28

“ What Power consigned me here, I cannot tell,”
He muttered : “ but this prison-house of ice
I feel I cannot break ; indeed it seems
Climate and atmosphere of my own soul.”

29

“ When I had died,” she answered, “ I was rapt
Into a region all of streams and flowers,
Where gentle creatures in a glory moved,
And spoke to me in voices low and sweet.

30

“ But ah ! I withered 'mid celestial flowers,
And listened to those voices, hearing not :
Sudden thy white face in the garden came,
The cold of thee was dearer than that warmth.

31

“ I wandered in felicity of woe,
Remembered amid glory earthly grief,
The thought of thee threw pallor on those blooms,
And I began to explore all space for thee.

32

“ And many stars and planets I approached,
But heard in all the universe no news,
Till one I met who told me thou didst live
Excluded in a winter of the mind.

33

“And in some heartless glory of bright ice
Thou didst abide, a lord of armies yet.
So to this frozen country have I pierced,
Whose numbness gives a pause to love itself.

34

“For I had learned that happiness requires
Not fruit nor flower nor sweet society,
But thrives upon a sternness of the soul,
And hath as much of fire in it as light.”

35

When she had spoken, to the Emperor's eyes
Came a new softness, and in silence both
Long looked upon each other; so that I
From that communion like a pagan stole.

36

Then as that softness on the imperial brow
Grew, I beheld a few flowers venture up
Near to his feet ; and that new tenderness
Brought from the vault some faltering drops of
dew.

CANTO III

D

CANTO III

I

YET did that tenderness not long abide ;
Again returned the cold and fixed stare :
So slow the process of omnipotence,
So loth to hurry the immortal soul.

2

And she, beseeching him, with arms outstretched
And shining eyes of sorrow, drew away,
Over the snow, like to some creature true
Commanded home, that turns and turns again.

3

She vanished, and still colder left that world,
Those few flowers withered up, and no dew fell.
“ There is no future for this fixed mind,”
He murmured, “ I abide but in the past.”

4

And as he spoke, I saw how drifted past
Remembered battle-fields of many lands,
Now Syrian sands beneath a blistering sun,
Now fields of moonlit grass, now crimson snow.

5

And now arose a wailing on a wind,
And in a still procession past him stole
Myriads of women, mothers, daughters, wives,
Each carrying with them scarred ensanguined
forms.

6

And as they passed, they paused and showed
to him

Marred husbands, wounded fathers, and pierced
sons.

Silent I wept : their dead they seemed to bring
Like dreadful gifts to lay them at his feet.

7

And now, behind, more furious faces seen,
A storm of hands, a tempest of wild arms,
Invoking from above the Eternal wrath,
All in a silence worse than any cry.

8

Then, thinking I might move him to a tear,
"Art thou not moved," I said, "by all these ghosts,
Each carrying its burden owed to thee,
And yonder frenzied faces and wild arms?"

9

“ Too many fields, too many dead have I,”
He answered, “ coldly viewed beneath the moon,
Now to be moved : what once had brought me
tears
Passes me by, so used to human woe.”

10

“ Therefore,” said I, “ this ice surrounds thee, sire,
And therefore art thou caged in thy own cold.
A single tear this mountain would dissolve,
A solitary sigh that ocean melt.”

11

He heard not, spoke not, stirred not : but re-
mained
Placid, while still those myriad women passed,
Each laying her own tribute at his feet,
Behind the silent tempest of wild arms.

12

Seeing no hope, I turned and found my guide,
Who all the while had stood in thought apart.
“Now take me hence,” I cried, “he stands un-
moved,
Nor wounds, nor blood, nor fury changes him.

13

“O shall this desolate winter of the soul
For aye endure ; and must ambition here
Spend everlasting years in endless ice,
Though self-created ? Is no limit set ?”

14

He answered, “Not for ever shall this snow
Hold him. At last the human tenderness,
Or the world-pity to his brain shall steal,
And all the numb Inferno shall dissolve.

15

“Then shall be heard again the voice of the bird
And all this desert burst to leaf and bloom,
Perhaps a young face on those battle-fields,
Which float before him still, shall wring his heart.

16

“Then shall those heavy legions be dismissed,
And on a kindlier flight that eagle soar,
Not now to bloody plains, but on some quest
Of sunnier purpose, brighter ministry.”

17

“Why then,” I said, “doth not Omnipotence
Suddenly strike a warmth into his heart,
And, intervening, end his world of ice,
Release the mighty prisoner from himself?”

18

“The slow Benignity that upward draws us,”
He answered, “intervenes and hastens not ;
A dreadful leisure is permitted us,
An endless leave to shun felicity.

19

“Were it not so, how hollow were that bliss,
How unperpetual, not self-built and sure !
In his own time Napoleon shall dissolve
His self-created hell of dazzling ice.”

20

When he had spoken, rose a sound of storm,
And all the glittering region moaned and sighed,
I trembled and clung fast unto my guide,
Who held me to him as a father might.

21

Now falling pyramids I seemed to see,
And toppling cities, fire, and burning towns,
Whirlwinds of cavalry, storms of spears, and
heard
Trumpets and neighing, drums, cannon, and cries.

22

"Fear not," the Shadow said, "for that which
seems .
An earthy tempest here is but the storm
Raised by his mind, a thunder of the soul,
The electric tumult of some memory."

23

Sudden as tropic anger it had passed,
And all again grew glittering and still.
"Tell to the world what here thou hast beheld,"
He said, "and thus to her some solace bring."

24

So saying in his arms he lifted me.
Then a deep sleep came down upon my eyes,
Till slowly on the Earth at dawn I woke,
And heard the bird beginning in the leaves.

25

How good to hear the patter of earthly rain,
After that silent arctic of the soul ;
Noises of summer dawn, and far away
A sweet monotony of creeping seas !

CANTO IV

CANTO IV

I

IN falling gloom and hour of kindling lights,
It seemed that from the body I was borne
Upward, until upon the bounds of Earth
Hovering, I felt near by my former guide.

2

“Not now,” he said, “to glittering winter spires,
Or frozen ocean or dumb fields of snow,
Which pitiless Ambition rears and holds,
Making its proper scenery in the void ;

3

“ Not now into Napoleon's mental ice,
Shall I convey thee, but slow, wandering,
In the near atmosphere shall we abide,
Contented with the boundaries of the Earth.

4

“ Here may we see and here perhaps have speech
With those who, of the body now bereft,
Have not put off the body's appetites,
Spirits enchained in memories of the flesh.

5

“ Millions about the Earth and on the Earth
Revisit still the scenery of their sins,
And cannot tear them from the ancient lure,
Which made that mortal life so briefly sweet.

6

“ Here one still craving, without lips of flesh,
The ancient draught, though dead, yet still
athirst.

Another, though his body long ago
Has rotted, still with the old lust inflamed.

7

“ A quivering spectator he can still
Behold the couch, the lamp, the hot embrace,
And from the living spectrally enjoy,
Possessing them, a furious habitant.

8

“ Or on some famous city's pavement stand,
A dreadful and invisible introducer
Of breathing women unto breathing men,
With ghostly smile and shadowy invitation.

E

9

“ Or here a mother that in vain pursues,
From place to place, from hour to hour, unseen,
Her deeply loved and deeply tended son ;
He, deaf to her, plunges through pleasure down.

10

“ Here the seducer, stung with strong remorse,
Follows, with wild, inaudible entreaty,
Her whom he softly motioned hell-ward first ;
But she his lesson taught too well has learned.

11

“ Here one so deeply injured, that the grave
Cannot distract him from his injury,
His living enemy pursues. These ghosts
Not any stars nor peace from Earth can draw.

12

“ And here a tender woman cannot leave
Home and the old trees and the rising spire,
Or the familiar room where still he sits,
Gazing before him, fixed in memory.”

13

Sudden a spirit Earthward-flying stayed
His flight, beholding us, and cried aloud,
“ Ye who are dead, yet still ye can enjoy,
Away with me! Pleasure hath perished not.

14

“ Look on me, though beneath the sunlit sward,
And peaceful steeple where my father taught,
My body long since mouldered, yet I taste
Still the old rapture, still I live and lust.

15

"Aye, though our flesh is to corruption turned,
Yet can we borrow bodies of the living,
And these inhabiting with these enjoy,
Using their eyes, their ears, their lips, their hands.

16

"Away! away! the earthly night begins!
Then hurl yourselves with me back to the world,
Shatter this grey monotony of gloom,
Still joy and laughter, and all desire endures."

17

"Were it not," said my guide, "that I perceive
Fall on you a divine, defending dew,
I would not urge you on this perilous flight,
But being so aided we will go with him."

18

Imagining from these his fearful words,
That to some town of torment we were bound,
Yet now familiar all the place appeared,
Streets, buildings, spires as in a dream arose.

19

The ancient river running, whose grey wave
Is heavy with the bodies of the unhappy,
And rolleth slow with all those memories,
And tardy from the plunge of desperate hands.

20

“Whither now are we come?” I asked my guide.
That to some crimson hell we three were making
I feared, yet in my fear desired to view.
“Is this not London, that the dome of Paul?”

21

“ This is that city where his life was lived,
And in no other city can he live.
His thirst contracted, and his lust indulged,
Still backward hither whirls the yearning ghost.”

22

Instantly in a tavern of old time
We hovered to and fro ; the place I knew,
The spurt of the drawn cork, the sippers weary,
The hazy fume, tobacco's clinging reek.

23

Reflected, women upon benches sat,
Grown garrulous with gin, and silly tears
Started to foolish eyes, as they repeat
All the pent trouble of long alleys drear.

24

But gazing on a scene so well remembered,
Sudden my eyes were opened, and I saw
That all the air was dense with ghostly forms,
Urging, cajoling these who lived, to drink.

25

O listen, thou who readest or dost lean
Easily o'er the counter all regarding,
Blinded with eyes, and by the ear made deaf,
Ah, couldst thou see but once as now I saw !

26

For as the living drank, the dead did drink,
And through the living satiated thirst,
That not the grave or long corrupted flesh
Could stifle ; still a borrowed joy they drew.

27

Here one that turned to go, yet turned again,
Led backward by some spirit unsatisfied.
I saw the very dead reel to and fro,
And ghosts that stumbled, slept, and wept and
laughed.

28

And this not all ; lightnings of lust were sent
From living eyes through the dense fume and
haze,
Instilled by shadows yearning still for blood,
And for the corporal means of old desire.

29

And here a girl that laughed a wicked laugh,
But I, I only, knew wherefore she laughed,
Another laughed behind her ; and at times
I saw the dead into the living pass ;

30

Possess and use them ; moving as they moved,
Drinking as they drank, lusting with their lust,
And all transparent human bodies seemed
With furious real inhabitants in them.

31

But now the vision of the tavern smote
My heart so sorely, to my guide I said,
“ Hence let us fly, and for a time at least
Forget,” and on the word we passed without

32

Still hovering on the boundary of the Earth,
“ How,” said I, “ with this hell shall be compared
That pale Elysium of futile folk,
Imagined by the Hellenes, and the slow stream?

33

“How shall that shadowy kingdom of vain shapes
Surpass in terror or in thought that scene?
Or formal torment by the Italian shown,
Physical anguish, with that sight compare?”

34

“For now I see that Hell no city is,
Nor place appointed, that no judge presides,
Nor our Creator in his anger sits
To sentence, and to punish the freed soul.

35

“Far worse! the stain contracted leaves us not.
No deepest grave obliterates a fault,
But to the Earth the immortal spirit clings,
And being spirit in greater madness burns.

36

“ How then shall living creatures to account
Be called, if urged by these besieging ghosts ?
How do I sin, if one within me sins,
Using my body for remembered guilt ?

37

“ How many crimes, if we the truth could gauge,
Have been committed by the dead? What thefts,
What murder, madness, ravishing, disease,
The furious dead through living things have
wrought ?

38

“ Who then can say henceforth : ‘ This act was
mine ’ ?
Awful the white throne in the heaven set,
The separation of the sheep and goats,
But ah, far worse, the human will to lose.

39

“ Far worse to be the living house of these,
Whom we have seen, or even more miserable,
Ourselves to inhabit others wickedly,
Still to promote, impel, persuade to guilt.”

40

My guide replied to me : “ But answer that
And all is answered, the long why of time ;
Little more light as yet have I than thou ;
Æons alone this question shall resolve.

41

“ But others are there of a different bent,
Yet clinging earthward, on far other quests,
By sorrow more than fury here impelled !
One now approaches, we will speak with her.”

CANTO V

CANTO V

I

A WOMAN towards us flying with wild arms
I now perceived, who flying cried aloud
"O you, if you have suffered, aid me now !
If any still you love on yonder Earth.

2

"There is a lovely star, set round with peace,
Which nightly I would gaze at from the Earth,
Pondering its glory amid evening dew ;
Thither at death with ease I did arise.

3

“ There flowers at last can speak unto the soul
With delicate voices half of bloom and scent,
Murmur to odour, and odour to murmur blown,
And gardens send deep music to the heart.

4

“ And trees are there which lull to a perfect sleep
And seas with silent foam from fairy land,
And birds that reconciled us unto God,
When dawns were ghostly and when moons
were low.

5

“ There spirits who have suffered slide though
calm
Stealing as swans upon the unruffled stream ;
Our life is to forget that we have lived ;
Recovering from the bright wound of the Sun.

6

“Yet, tho’ so needed, yet this peace I left ;
Since neither flowers that speak at last to souls,
Nor birds of the low Moon, nor fairy heave
Of foam, could e’er one memory dispel.

7

“My son ! my son !” So piercingly she cried,
That all that lovely star had faded quite,
And with us was a woman in her woe,
And wild and weak and of the tragic Earth.

8

“Such hopes I had of him ! His father now
Is vanished into gloom I cannot pierce,
Sunk in some deep and spiritual gulph,
I cannot reach him ; but the boy yet breathes.

F

9

“ Aid me to stay him in headlong career !
He grew beside me like a rosy day,
That rises in silent summer without cloud.
Did he but stir in sleep, my day had come.

10

“ Like the lashed pane my face was in its tears,
When in the aisle I kneeled and first his lips
Touched from the cup the blood that seemeth
 wine,
If prayer could save, already was he saved.

11

“ Too much perhaps I sheltered him ; too close
Watched every step and pondered every word.
Then luring London caught him from my arms,
And his first manhood into madness plunged.

12

“Wine and the lips of women him enthrall,
And I being dead through him have learned of
life

More than I living guessed ; Earth to have left
Is Earth to know at last, alas how well.

13

“Yet still I leave him not and I endure
The tossing bed, the night that burneth down
To ashy morning ; can ye not conceive
How from the scene I quail, yet quailing stay.

14

“He cannot bear my earnest, earnest words,
Nor see this face that hath survived the tear,
And if he once remembers, thinks me cold
For ever and beyond the reach of grief.

15

“So am I still spectator of these sins,
And in a meek obedience follow him
To tavern and to parlour fruitlessly.
They call me from your violet star in vain..

16

“He lied that wrote ‘she sleepeth’ on my
tomb,
There is no slumber for immortal souls,
Now I am further from my God since death,
Than in the old credulity of life.

17

“Can ye not aid me?” Turning to my guide,
“Thou seemest strong, and of authority,
Able to pierce the porches of the ear,
And with a sudden sight astound the eye.”

18

“ Fain would I help, were help permitted me,”
Answered my guide, “ but here I cannot stir,
Feeling no deep commission from on high,
Nor special leave transmitted from above.

19

“ I on a different errand am despatched,
And with no less of love have I been winged,
Than thou thyself; the time, the hour, none
knows,
But what thou seekest, the high leisure grants.”

20

“ Thy grief! What is thy grief with mine
compared ? ”
Broke in another voice, and I beheld
One so distraught, and by such memories urged,
That even the grieving woman I forgot.

21

“Thou hast not sinned, thou hast not led to
doom,

However deep thy woe,” this spirit cried.

“Thou wouldst reclaim what thou hast injured
not,

I cannot save her that to doom I sent.

22

“I even as thou am following, following ever,

And follow evermore as thou in vain,

But with a dreadful difference pursue,

I cannot stay what first I kissed to hell.

23

“And the sweet Earth did aid us to this woe ;

Dew and the Moon and fragrance of the field,

Her mother’s harshness and blind blood of youth,

Drew to that grassy couch of endless woe !

24

“So sweet, so brief! and for all time to pay!
O, who shall measure inconsiderate joy?
Or put a period to one moment's lust?
Eternity avenges a wild kiss.

25

“She then whom ne'er I loved, but then desired,
Is now a market for the drunkard's purse,
At beck and call; her heart is turned to stone,
She paces without soul the London flags.

26

“Vain were all living voices in her ear,
Vain the appeal of woman or of man,
A dreadful smiling is her sole reply,
But vain, more vain, the accent of the dead.

27

“ From street to street to tavern house and
bridge,
I, but a fruitless shadow, her pursue ;
And in her maddest moment am I near,
Beseeching still the ruin I have made.

28

“ Ah God, could I regain the corporal power,
The hands, the human speech, the touch of
Earth !
I am so near, yet further than the Sun,
How close, and yet more distant than a star !

29

“ No sea that ever rolled 'twixt living souls
So severs as the river we call Death,
Ah, is not my repentance deep, my pain
Sufficient, hath the human fault no cure ?

30

“ She whom so lightly on this path I sent,
Hath now become my lonely universe,
And laughter and soft whispers weave a hell.
A little madness : what sane punishment !

31

“ So am I her companion till she die ;
And being dead what meeting will be ours !
What disembodied accusation hers !
What challenge by the spirit free of flesh !

32

“ Into what gulph, what darkness may she pass,
By me invited, by a few soft words,
Plunged into ageless gloom ; that soul is mine,
Mine by its memory, by its ruin mine !

33

“ Now must I hence and close attend on her,
In wild and vain entreaty.” Saying thus
He vanished, and the woman with him fled,
Back to the Earth to shadowy labour vain !

34

“ Not all by fury or by misery
Are earth-bound,” said my guide, “ that woman
see
Who softly as a twilight bird returns
To the remembered trees and fields of earth.”

35

Toward us she floated, gentle as a dove,
Quite without pain, at peace upon the air,
No anguish, and no trouble discomposed
Her placid face, or quiet brow disturbed.

36

“Thou, thou,” I said, “who so serenely goest
Whither so many go in agony,
Back to the Earth ; what human quest is thine,
On what sweet errand dost thou calmly pass?”

37

“I am not freed as yet of earthly thought,”
She answered, “though a starry home is mine,
Yet still from time to time I must return,
Revisit the old garden and the house.

38

“And he, he sits most lonely, whom I loved
Through the long years of difficulty dark,
He knows not I am with him in the room,
Or that I walk beside him in the field.

39

“ Hard is the separation without sound,
But I in silent knowledge visit him,
Printing a spirit kiss on earthly brows,
I cannot speak, I touch him and depart.

40

“ There comes a luring from more lustrous orbs,
There steals a summons from more perfect stars,
But in no brighter light could I abide
As yet ; the imperfect Earth enthalls me still.”

41

So speaking quietly she floated down,
Reseeking the old places of the Earth,
And Earthward was I whirled without a thought,
Till I awoke in dawn remembering.

CANTO VI

CANTO VI

I

THENCE onward journeying, a dreadful hush
Worse than all tempest, or despairing cries,
Seized on my spirit till at last he stood
Amid a heavy region without sound.

2

“ Behold these prostrate forms ! ” the spirit said,
“ All these upon themselves laid violent hands,
Some poison drank ; some slit the vein and died,
Here now they lie as though they ne'er would
rise.

3

“For to a spiritual exile these
Are now committed ; if they lie not thus
Then do they wander outcast in the void ;
No place appointed, homeless as are winds.”

4

“But these,” I said, “I know not from what
cause
Self-slain ; requested no permission
Or leave to live the difficult Earthly span,
They sued not sunbeam, no, nor falling dew.

5

“Elected to exist, chosen to breathe,
Or creatures of the last cup of the night
Born of an animal whim, or sudden clasp,
They battered them against the Earthly law.

6

“ And some with wild impulses of the blood
Inherited ; by insane thirst or lust
Transmitted, from the cradle to the grave
Fettered and futile, beaten from the start ;

7

“ The odds too heavy, howsoe'er gallant
The rush and desperate thunder to the goal.
Places can kill, the very streets can slay,
And sad conditions wear away the soul.

8

“ Why then should these, and many such there
 be,
Not put away the cup they loathe to quaff?
Hurled upon life, they know not why or whence,
And sentenced to the womb without their leave,

G

9

“ Why even here should doom pursue this folk,
Exiled thou sayest and from bliss cut off,
The sad result of a wild midnight kiss,
To be for aye excluded in the dusk ?

10

“ Why should one then be forced upon the
 wrack,
Or driven to the shambles like a cow ;
Scenting the place, yet onward plied with blows.
What final wisdom lies behind this woe ?

11

“ Or are we to suppose the universe
Does by a whirling accident cohere,
That myriad atoms, as Lucretius thought,
Combined to build this orb as now it rolls ?

12

“ Then were this causeless misery explained,
That man, o'er sensitive, by accident
Slowly into a cold world did arise,
More moral than his Maker, suffers thus.

13

“ For even from what little has been seen,
I see no reason for the inflicted pain,
Unless some demon gloats upon the woe,
And wrings from torture his sole happiness.

14

“ And yet the grand process of Nature makes
Against this thought fantastic, Nature too,
Not cruel, but indifferent to pain,
Slowly her path she goes, and cares for none.

15

“ Yet she can suffer even the helpless sheep
Prostrate to lie while his two eyes are wrung
Out from his head by the black wandering crow,
O she is full of torture and of toil !

16

“ And hundreds upon thousands will she whelm
By earthquake : women, children without cause,
These innocent lives by sudden crash dissolved,
What had they done to be in dark involved ?

17

“ If then no cause nor reason we can find
For sudden death's deliberate cruelty
There on the Earth, here too the law will hold,
And in the world of spirits the sane mind.”

18

“ Now think and tremble ! ” said to me my
guide ;

“ Consider yonder prostrate woman form !
She drugged herself into a dreamy death
Endeavouring to escape the edge of life.

19

“ A spirit beautiful in all things else ;
But unto her intolerable grew
The to and fro of life ; and slightest things
Better put by, had power to stab her soul.

20

“ Until a careless gesture or wild word
Was brooded on till solemn it appeared,
And fraught with all too false significance
She hugged slight injuries and clasped them
close.

21

“ And ever with more melancholy rose
The sun, and with more misery the moon ;
And she beheld the stars but through her tears,
Yet a few flowers with passion would she tend.

22

“ And nearest came she to a kind of peace
When over them in earliest dew she leaned.
But being in an agony one night
With pain, the sleepy drug that was her doom

23

“ Was given her by authority ; and she
Henceforward that oblivion could not fly,
Nor false forgetfulness could ever shun.
And still more languid through the months she
grew.

24

"At length she passed unconscious to this
place

Now listen and of Time take thou account !
'Tis sixty years as measured on the Earth
That she hath lain as now thou seest her lie.

25

"And only now, and slow, from time to time,
Comes a slight stir upon her, as a brief
Awakening shiver on that fell repose .
And centuries may pass ere she shall rouse."

26

I on the slumbering form long gazing stood
And never a quiver or slight tremble passed
Over that drugged recumbency of soul
For opium furnished her eternity.

27

Then said I, " Here again the punishment
Seems all too mighty for the weakness shown,
' She did but tranquillise the flinching nerve
And lacked the courage the drear days to face ?

28

" And why if this so heinous is a sin,
To snatch at laudanum and opium,
To deaden and subdue too fierce a grief,
Why are the means for this damnation sent ?

29

" 'Tis the old story of the garden snake
Here is the sweet temptation to our hand ;
Yet if we fall, then yonder dreadful sleep,
And sleep prolonged as to eternity.

30

“ And when she wakes all those she loved on
Earth
Will long since have gone onward into light ;
Or wheresoe'er their destiny is set,
She will awake in dark and loneliness.”

31

“ None now could aid that soul,” the spirit said,
“ But be assured that ministering shapes
Hover around, to thee invisible,
Ready to seize the first moment of hope.

32

“ All eager with divine impatience fired,
Sweetly and skilfully that soul they'll woo
Back to the real life that once she feared.
Not without pain and slow is that return ;

33

“ More slow, in that the taking of the drug
So easy seemed, and so to smooth her way ;
Ah ! they must speak to her as to a child
And lead her with great gentleness to light.”

34

Long stood I musing on that woman soul,
And still no slightest stir of life or hope.
“ How long ? ” I cried ; “ how long ? ” but turning
saw
My guide more sternly beckon me away.

CANTO VII

CANTO VII

I

THE falling kindness of the silent sun,
The rose and the melodious lily besieged
These must we leave, when it arrives to die,
And dare the dark realities of mind.

2

Again upon the earth-plane, spirit rapt,
I wandered till we came unto a space
Where rose what seemed a building of this
 world
Of gloomy masonry resembling stone.

3

“Behold,” then said my guide, “this woeful
house,

Those purgatorial pillars of remorse,
Those penitential walls and grieving roof!
Hear'st thou the sighing of the souls within?

4

“Hither are brought, or hither of free-will
Spirits repair who still by old desires
And sensual yearnings to the earth are bound,
With difficulty to divest themselves and pain.

5

“But none may be by force detained within.
Freely they come, and freely may depart,
And often are they whirled back to the earth,
By some compelling fury of old sins.”

6

Entering I saw the gloomy mansion filled
With suffering shadows, some in anguish strewn
On seeming couches, ministering shapes
Bending above them with mesmeric aid.

7

At times a music dropping from the spheres,
Merciful melodies from some high place,
Assuaged a moment pangs of memory,
At times a voice assured them of a hope.

8

One passing I accosted, "Who art thou?
Whence art thou come and wherefore art thou
here?"

"I on the Earth," he said, "in fleshly lust
Enthralled my soul and now would I be free.

9

“ By ministering spirits hither brought,
I and all these around in such a gloom
With pain, with sharpest anguish, strive to purge
How slowly! the contracted ancient stain.

10

“ You see me withered and bowed and loathsome
 grown,
But I in life was fair and strong to view,
But ah, the very soul can stain through flesh,
Can dwindle and peak, and scar and wound incur.

11

“ I who in strength and splendour paced the
 Earth
Unbridled, lecherous, victorious, proud,
Now wander in the guise of my desires,
At last revealed and in my proper shape.

12

“Slowly I trust by ministry and aid
Of others the old fury to dispel.
Yet oft the ancient passions seize on me,
Nigh uncontrollable, and earthward urge.

13

Thou seest the eternal twilight where we dwell,
This atmosphere of dim and striving things!
But me the glimmering dusk that lifts not ever
Distresses most, for from the South I came.

14

Ah! God, for glowing Italy again!
And all the glory wherein I was born!
But here we have not yet attained to day,
But grope amid the glimmer we create.”

H

15

So passed he on. Then to my guide I said,
“Is it so true that lust and thirst incurred
On earth can to the spirit reach and scar
And brand the dead with all the sin of life?”

16

“Alas, most true,” replied he, “since the shape
He weareth now was in the body hid,
When to corruption has that body turned,
He stood apparent, visible at last.

17

“Here the immortal body but reflects
And registers too faithfully all stain ;
Here none deceives at last: beauty and
strength
Lie in the grave, the spirit standeth clear.”

18

“Then shall these scars for ever cling to him?”

I questioned, “must he live for ever on

So marked, so dwindled, in such hideous guise?

Is there no healing of the wounds of earth?”

19

“Even as he said,” my guide replied, “can he

Slowly by ministering aid and love

Grow beautiful and yet more beautiful,

Emerge at last in glory grander far.

20

“His face shall take a light from his own deeds,

His body a splendour from a mighty love,

And he shall dazzle all who look on him

With radiance from his own redemption caught.”

21

He finished. And there came a rushing sound
As of a multitude of furious wings,
And a great host of spirits past us flew
With yearning faces and remembering arms.

22

Earthward they swept as in a sudden blast.
And as in autumn woods the crispéd leaves
On some still day all motionless recline
Yellowing the ground beneath some aged tree ;

23

Sudden a wind will whirl them afar off,
Filling the air with flying forms : so these
Were on a sudden past us earthward whirled
By some compelling blast of old desire.

24

“Some shall return,” my guide said, “some
remain

To haunt the violent pleasure of the earth,
And as thou sawest, living bodies use
To gratify their unsubdued desires.”

25

Thence issuing one accosted us who seemed
In doubtful mind to wander to and fro.
Now right, now left he looked uncertainly.
Then in bewildered voice he thus addressed us :

26

“Sirs, can ye point me whither I am bound ?
I am but late from earth, and lived content.
No crime have I committed, and no shame
Incurred, then wherefore do I wander thus ?

27

“ In the respect of all my neighbours I
A husband faithful, and a father true,
To business and to duty gave my time
Punctual ever and of scandal clear.

28

“ And yet I cannot rest. The lower worlds
Beneath the earth no mansion have for me.
Unto the higher spheres I am not called ;
Here to and fro I drift uncertainly.

29

“ And yet more lucky I account myself
Than many suffering souls that pass me by.
I have no scar on me nor gloomy stain,
Nor no revealing mark of earthly sin.

30

“ If I in this uncertainty am plunged,
There is no agony upon my face ;
No furious lust impels me to the earth
No passion of love or hate my soul disturbs.”

31

He passed from us. Then to my guide I said
“ He, he at least of all whom I have seen,
Maintains a tranquil, if not happy, life,
Unscorched, unlured, and by no anguish touched.

32

“ He, he alone the lesson of the earth
Hath truly learned, to clip the soaring mind,
To damp and cow and cool the aspiring spirit,
To bow to all conditions that are set.

33

“Unfired he lived and in a slow content ;
Here too hath he escaped the enthralling pang.
Here even he boasts of his security,
And sees a million sufferings pass him by.”

34

“Envy him not,” replied he : “though he roam
Hither and thither in security.
None hath a harder upward way than he,
None longer to attain the final light.”

35

“He was of that untempted average,
Who daily to and fro through London pass,
For ever hurrying in spotless dress,
In solemn grey respectability.

36

“ Yet think you that this colourless pale soul
Shall always claim immunity from pain ?
Not yet entitled to the tears of Hell ?
Many a murderer faster soars than he.

37

“ Crime not to have committed, sin not sinned,
These open not the gate ; but the drawn face,
The wild remembering eyes, the imploring hands,
The deed done and repented turns the key.

38

“ If without hope the souls of any here,
His were most hopeless, and all like to his.
For what appeal of angel or of God,
Can stir a quiver in that deep content ?

39

“ So those whom ye call wicked, shut in prison,
Or hanged ; their fury faded, have in them
Some blinder truer impulse to the stars,
Than he in all that sad security.

40

“ Come ! and no more the earth-plane to revisit,
But the dark fury of ungoverned souls
These will I show thee next ” : and now a sound
As of a storm upon the wind I heard.

CANTO VIII

CANTO VIII

I

“BEWARE thee now!” said then my guide, “for
thou
Must voyage through the sea of lawless
thoughts,
Sent up from spirits in these darker spheres,
But I am by thy side ; then fear thou not.”

2

Now roaming apprehensions caught my soul,
And chilled me in mid-space ; then voices sweet,
Wooing me unto wild tempestuous lusts,
Then was I blown by mad ungoverned minds.

3

At times a cold doubt stayed me as a cloud,
And now a wandering despair delayed,
That floated on the soul like endless ice,
No longer I believed, nor hoped, yet lived.

4

From these emerging as a swimmer, still
Horrible drifted thoughts assailed my brain,
Old schemes of murder and of wild revenge,
Besieged me, loitering in the gloomy void.

5

And were it not for him that guided me,
I had been swept into infinity
By mind-created winds of furious hate,
Or hurried hell-ward by some blast of rage.

6

"This is the stormy atmosphere of souls,
Who the dark spheres inhabit," said my guide,
"And were it not for special help of heaven,
Thou hadst been seized by tumult of these minds.

7

"For the dark thoughts in lowest gloom re-
volved,
Take on a furious life, and fly through space,
Infesting in material shape the soul,
And now like wind or cloud or sea assail.

8

"And so from that reared wave of human souls,
That breaks for ever hoarse upon Hell-beach,
So from that breaking sea, whose shore is hearts,
Those winds arise, and all these tempests blow.

9

“ And some not guarded by this starry aid,
Have by such dark ungovernable souls
Been whirled for ages to and fro the void,
Or prisoned in some glacial still despair.

10

“ Think not the murderer when the act is o'er,
That act hath ended : but a dreadful life
The thought takes on, and wings begets in
space,
The violent mind still violently lives.

11

“ And he who lusts, a living lust creates,
Able to seize on others and impel,
A being human with inhuman power,
Wrapping like flame or whirlwind the weak soul.

12

“But now in deepest night we needs must
plunge,
Night from the spirit shed without a star,
A midnight emanating from the soul,
The self-created darkness of the mind.

13

“For as Napoleon reared those icy spires,
Or as that soul in twilight wandering,
So these the murk of their own thought enwraps,
They rage and hate in darkness for a time.”

14

Then said my guide, for night enwrapped us,
“Ere
To the dark orbs of fury we descend,
First to the pleasant hell of deep content
We will repair and speak with those therein.”

15

Much wondering at his words, with him I went,
And now into a flowery valley came,
Like to that land of lotus and low-moon,
By Homer and our English minstrel sung.

16

For all therein were lying in deep peace,
Plucking sweet fruit, and music in their ears
And distant rivers like to slumber flowed,
A noise of flowing waters afar off.

17

And all therein were lying without thought,
In utter ease without a hope or wish,
None turned to greet us, so at peace were they,
But indolently murmured, each to each.

18

Then to my guide I said, " If this be Hell,
What fear to die or whither to repair?
Many a wretch upon the bank of Thames,
Nightly endures the cold and sleety fall ;

19

" They starve, and if they sleep with hunger
drowse,
Their river is a water of the dead,
The plunge of the unhappy and the mad,
But these who are they, and how came they here?"

20

" Those whom thou seest, here, have no desire,"
Answered he, " and no sail to any wind
Have ever spread ; in dreadful deep content
Here they repose, it seems, for evermore.

21

“But worse than the fierce fires of memory,
More hopeless than the fury we shall view,
Of those whom passion or vengeance still
 enthralls,
This silent acquiescence and content.”

22

Then toward us, indolently turning, one
Addressed us in soft accent : “ Friends,” he said,
“ On the far earth with fear were we baptised,
And sprinkled with the water of despair.

23

“ They told us of an everlasting fire,
Of weeping souls and the undying worm,
But I, and those about me, have not lived,
Unstained, and yet a deep security

24

“ Here we possess ; no wish have we, no hope ;
But purple flowers and ever gliding streams
Amuse and the soft language of the dead,
How strange those furious memories to recall !

25

“ If this be hell, in hell who would not be ?
And yet at times we are disturbed, and glance
Fearfully on each other ; storms of hope,
Tempests of truth that thunder to the soul.

26

“ Yet rare are these ; and dying leave us still
Untroubled ; for the Almighty vexes us
Not long : and these sweet skies resume their
blue,
Cloudless, and perfect noon returns again.

27

“ Sudden unrest these rolling storms impart,
Passing discomfort from those thunderous
winds,
But less and less we heed them as we lie
And sweeter after this repose appears.”

28

“ At last the lurid country we approach,”
Said then my guide, “ ringed with a wall of fire,
Emitted from the furious minds therein,
Which serves them as a bastion or a screen.

29

“ Else all is dark, save on the rolling cloud
Behold a brighter light that comes and goes !
Thrown by the mighty Intellects of Hell,
Who reign despotic, and by love unreached.”

30

Passing that wall of fire, we entered now
Into what seemed a city of old Spain ;
Here street and bridge and wall and market
place
Solid arose as on the plane of earth.

31

“ Is this a city reflected on the air,
The ghost of some old city of the Earth,
Have buildings then a soul that still endures,”
I asked ; “ do very walls immortal prove ? ”

32

“ This city which thou seest,” answered he,
Is builded by the thoughts and loves of those,
Who on the earth inhabited therein,
Stone upon stone it rises, wall on wall.”

33

On passing, to an open space we came,
Where flared a raging fire, and one within
Burned, and in flickering flame writhed to and
fro.

Around him spirits danced in furious glee.

34

“This soul, whom here thou seest,” said my
guide,

“Was upon earth that Grand Inquisitor,
Whose name were best forgotten, save by those,
Who round his torment dance in furious joy.

35

“These did he in his day commit to fire,
And having tortured, burned them here alive,
Here on this open space where now we stand,
Here now he burns and they his anguish watch.”

36

“Then true the tale of everlasting fire,”
I said ; “which we on earth interpret now
The flame but of repentance and remorse.
But see this fire consumes as erst on earth.”

37

“This flame,” he answered, “is the flame awaked
By the still living fury of the dead,
Remembrance here consumes and vengeance
hot
Wraps him from those whom on earth he slew.

38

“Here must he burn until this very fire
Himself has wakened in the minds of these,
Shall slowly burn out, and release his soul,
Not till their vengeance dies can he depart.”

39

Then from that furnace came a rending cry,
“ God, is this just ? These whom to flame I sent,
Could die at least, and ashes, could escape,
But I can never die for evermore.

40

“ For now I feel this is a spirit fire,
That wraps me, kindled by the vengeful
thought,
Of those who round me dance and mock and
jeer,
Is any limit to their vengeance set ?

41

“ What water of tears, or river of remorse
Can quench the raging flames myself have lit ?
They never shall forget ; but evermore
Slake with perpetual flame the thirst of hate.”

42

“Thou seest,” said my guide, “how he that
burns,

Believes this fire to be unquenchable,
Whereas his own mind hath enkindled it,
And must, with time expiring, leave him free.

43

“Each furious thought or act on earth begun
Hath here its vent in ice or flame or wind
As where we saw Napoleon hemmed in frost
Of his own mind, or here this soul that burns.”

44

And now I marked that one, now two, of those,
Who had in furious glee about him danced,
Withdrew away, their vengeance sated quite,
And their withdrawal paled and dimmed the fire.

45

As still we watched, one coming cried aloud,
"Ye two, who even as I are ever urged
Through this dark region without hope of rest,
Who are not suffered to slumber or to pause ;

46

"Is there no way out of eternal life?
Nor no escape from immortality?
For I who slew myself in hope to cease,
But plunged again in this more furious life.

47

"Did I or thou or he crave to be born?
When did we clamour for the grievous womb?
Did I entreat the burden of the sun?
Or all the sorrow falling from the moon?

48

“ Did That which made us say ‘ Choose ! wilt
thou live ?

I show thee all ! be now the choice with thee !’
But hurled from darkness to an endless life,
We grope and stumble amid laws unknown !

49

“ Could I prevent the sudden kiss, the clasp
Which hurled me all unconscious into light,
Even as she that bore me had been hurled
Herself headlong into that fray of earth. ?

50

“ How sweet to cease ! how beautiful to die !
What bliss to be beyond the reach of bliss,
How many sheer extinction do implore,
Soliciting eternal apathy.

51

“ If but this ‘ I,’ this personality,
Might be resolved upon a thousand winds,
Dispersed, distributed, in dark dissolved,
And I could shelve this entity at last !”

CANTO IX

CANTO IX

I

THEN said I to the spirit that near us paused,
Sorely lamenting immortality :
“How cam'st thou hither ? By sad slow degrees,
Or instantly at death to darkness hurled ?”

2

“In riches was I born, in riches reared,”
He answered ; “and of every pleasure drank.
When all my heritage was thieved from me,
I through my desperate brain the bullet sped,

3

“ Thinking that thus should be an end of life,
An iron pellet kill the immortal soul ;
Vain hope ! for from some deep unconscious-
ness
I waked and lo by my own body lay.

4

“ A few feet under Earth my flesh decayed,
A few feet under Earth my spirit pined.
Then all disintegrating pangs I shared,
My very spirit rotted with the flesh.

5

“ Too soon, too suddenly, I burst the bonds
That held my soul ; and like a fruit-stone torn
From the unripe fruit, I, ere my time, was bared,
And, though a spirit, felt the worm at work.

6

“ At last my spirit tore itself apart,
And on a dreadful freedom entered now,
Unwelcomed, unexpected, with no place
Prepared, unripe and sullen wandering.

7

“ But that which drew me hither, here to dwell,
With furious spirits and with raging winds,
Was the desire of vengeance in me lit,
On those who robbed and drove me to that death.

8

“ This passion of revenge and burning hate,
This maketh immortality seem rich ;
So can infinity be put to use,
And through Eternity a purpose run.

9

“ For arts in this dark region I have learned,
Expounded by dark spirits of the place,
By which the dead can on the living work,
Tempt and confound, and madden and destroy.

10

“ And one have I at last to murder driven,
And one into a house of madness sent ;
The others wait my time ; this wall detains not,
But my own fury whirls me back to Earth.

11

“ There can I plan and spoil, persuade, and mar
Invisibly to evil there impelling,
They feel no presence near them, hear no voice,
Ah God, they are not 'ware how close am I !”

12

So saying, earthward through the wall of fire,
Easily he departed, safe in hate,
What cause had he to fear that bound of flame,
Who bore within him that which fiercer burned ?

13

“ So long as this desire of vengeance holds,
So long as this deep hate his soul inspires,
So long the darkness is to him as light,
So long shall Hell his home be,” said my guide.

14

Passing, we stole into a ruined room,
Where a sick moon through rotting rafters
 peered ;
And one in torment chained unto the wall
I saw ; who writhed, and yet might ne'er be freed.

15

Then was I 'ware how one beside him stood
With folded arms and mortal gaze of hate,
Which seemed to feed upon the other's pain;
Motionless he beheld the writhing form.

16

Then said my guide, "Regard the man who
stands
So fixed, so motionless, by vengeance held.
That other, who so writhes against the wall,
Robbed him in life of all that he held dear.

17

"His wife he stole, and to such misery brought,
That she in madness ended her dark life.
The only pleasure in eternity
Left to that other is to watch his pain.

•

18

“ There standing, as he stands, and moving not,
For nigh two centuries his rage endures,
Meantime his wife repenting her wild act,
For evermore is calling him in vain.”

19

So saying, toward the rapt and gloating form
Moving, my guide soft touched him that he
turned.

“ Knowest thou not,” he said, “ thy wife and
child

Implore thee to forgive and leave this man ?

20

“ For ever are they murmuring in thine ear,
Forgive, forget, and hither come to us
And join us in felicity at last.’
How long this fixedness of barren hate ? ”

•

21

Suddenly then he trembled, and was changed,
And seemed to listen to some voice unheard,
Then shone a glory on that spirit dark,
He passed us and vanished into some great light.

22

And as he passed, that other writhing form
No more detained by that immortal hate,
Broke free and fled away—whither who knows?
Now faded all the chamber and sick moon.

23

“Once more thou seest,” said my guide, “how
thought,
Passion or action on the earth begun,
Here still endures as through eternity,
Till the fire fade, the poison lose its sting.

24

“ That moment that the fixed figure changed,
Melting to other voices from above,
That moment might the writhing form escape;
Fled is he ; and the room no more remains.

25

“ Now hast thou what may for a time suffice
To set down in such melody as flows
Easily from the theme, and grave, and pure,
Consoling her above thee in high pain.

26

“ Here but a vast suggestion for mankind !
A shadowing prophecy of what shall be,
And is ; a prospect for the mind to weigh.
Later a fuller light shall be vouchsafed.

27

“ Here hast thou learned at least enough to know
There is no region of eternal fire,
No fixed city of torment for the bad,
No red metropolis of misery.

28

“ For thou hast seen the Conqueror in the ice,
And snow, and bitter peaks of his own mind
Engaged ; and thou didst fear that thrilling
world
And glittering plains of intellectual might.

29

“ Then him whom the old thirst infested still,
Though spirit, in fury whirled back to the Earth,
To enjoy through others still of flesh and blood.
What star could call him from the terrene
draught ?

30

“Thou sawest all that crowd of the Earth-bound
Whose hell was not in space, but on the Earth,
Haunters of taverns, and of brothels still,
Sucking existence out of breathing things.

31

“These didst thou see ; and a far different woe,
That mother who for ever close pursues
The still beloved child from worse to worst,
All undistracted by Elysium.

32

“And his more cruel lot thou didst perceive,
Striving in spirit to redeem the flesh,
And with a tearless agony distraught,
Vain-whispering to undo what once was done.

33

“So with a calmer soul thou didst have speech
Who the old trees and lawn revisited,
Content to float round the familiar form
Invisible, unheard, yet satisfied.

34

“Then with that other who might neither
heaven
Nor hell attain ; but grateful to escape
The deep scar, and the torment of those souls,
Who in their mightier woe did pass him by.

35

“The vale of acquiescence we espied
Broken by dreadful thunder of a hope,
And heavenly storms that to the spirit called.
These the inhabitants unheeding heard.

36

“ Him too thou sawest in that darker night
By fire impaled from those whom he had
 wronged,
Like flame their vengeance seemed to leap and
 dance
About him, and their ire to lick him up.

37

“ Him too thou sawest bound against the wall
By the fixed fury of his enemy,
Who motionless regarded him in hate
And by immortal memory detained.

38

“ And yet now wooed out of the upper air,
By voices of his wife and of his child
He left a dead hate for a living joy
And sprung in glory to æthereal spheres.

39

“ This much at least thou canst discern and tell ;
That hate, on earth begotten, here is hate ;
That vengeance there conceived, consumes us
here ;
That here the soul lives as on earth it lived.

40

“ That the discarding of the body of Earth,
Sends not to sudden pain, or sudden joy,
But the loosed spirit the lone journey takes,
Perhaps for æons to work out its fate.

41

“ Fear then no more the dread avenging God !
The judgment morn with souls to answer risen,
The trumpet summoning the entombed dead,
The scroll unrolled and endless doom pro-
nounced.

42

“ Fear then no more the eternal fields of fire,
The wailing and gnashing of teeth in outer dark ;
Nor thrilling flocs of ice by Shakspeare feared,
Nor any doom inflicted from without.

43

“ Since each of us hurries hither carrying
Within him his own doom, a seed to break,
And flower for more æthereal bliss or woe,
But never for eternity of woe.

44

“ And though the ancient hell we fear no more,
More worthy of boys or fools to be believed,
Still a more dreadful hell is it to haunt
Invisible the tavern of old days.

45

“There through the living only to exist,
Though dead, yet with insatiable thirst,
Or ever, invisible to seek to foil
The deeds that we ourselves on Earth set on.

46

“Aye, or to carry far beyond the grave
A lighted vengeance that ne'er smoulders out;
Or smouldering, too slowly smoulders out,
A worser hell than by the priests designed.

47

“Yet ever is there hope, tho' long delayed,
Even for spirits, who for æons shun
A vast immensity of bliss prepared,
Some star above the desperate risen red.”

48

So saying, he vanished ; and I earthward
passed

As in a dream through all the gleaming orbs
Until emerging, as from a deep sleep,
I saw the earthly sunrise pale the stars.

L

