

Paradise Canto 3

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Canto III

Argument

In the moon Dante meets with Piccarda, the sister of Forese, who tells him that this planet is allotted to those, who, after having made profession of chastity and a religious life, had been compelled to violate their vows; and she then points out to him the spirit of the Empress Costanza.

That sun,[1] which erst with love my bosom warmed,
Had of fair truth unveil'd the sweet aspect,
By proof of right, and of the false reproof;
And I, to own myself convinced and free
Of doubt, as much as needed, raised my head
Erect for speech. But soon a sight appear'd,
Which, so intent to mark it, held me fix'd
That of confession I no longer thought.

[1: "That sun." Beatrice.]

As through translucent and smooth glass, or wave
Clear and unmoved, and flowing not so deep
As that its bed is dark, the shape returns
So faint of our impictured lineaments,
That, on white forehead set, a pearl as strong
Comes to the eye; such saw I many a face,
All stretch'd to speak; from whence I straight conceived,
Delusion[2] opposite to that, which raised,
Between the man and fountain, amorous flame.

[2: "Delusion." "An error the contrary to that of Narcissus; because he mistook a shadow for a substance; I, a substance for a shadow."]

Sudden, as I perceived them, deeming these
Reflected semblances, to see of whom
They were, I turn'd mine eyes, and nothing saw;
Then turn'd them back, directed on the light
Of my sweet guide, who, smiling, shot forth beams
From her celestial eyes. "Wonder not thou,"

She cried, "at this my smiling, when I see
Thy childish judgment; since not yet on truth
It rests the foot, but, as it still is wont,
Makes thee fall back in unsound vacancy.

True substances are these, which thou behold'st,
Hither through failure of their vow exiled.
But speak thou with them; listen, and believe,
That the true light, which fills them with desire,
Permits not from its beams their feet to stray."

Straight to the shadow, which for converse seem'd
Most earnest, I address'd me; and began
As one by over - eagerness perplex'd:
"O spirit, born of joy! who in the rays
Of life eternal, of that sweetness know'st
The flavour, which, not tasted, passes far
All apprehension; me it well would please,
If thou wouldst tell me of thy name, and this
Your station here." Whence she with kindness prompt
And eyes glist'ring with smiles: "Our charity,
To any wish by justice introduced,
Bars not the door; no more than She above,
Who would have all her court be like herself.
I was a virgin sister in the earth;
And if thy mind observe me well, this form,
With such addition graced of loveliness,
Will not conceal me long; but thou wilt know
Piccarda,[3] in the tardiest sphere thus placed,
Here 'mid these other blessed also blest.
Our hearts, whose high affections burn alone
With pleasure from the Holy Spirit conceived,
Admitted to His order, dwell in joy.
And this condition, which appears so low,
Is for this cause assign'd us, that our vows
Were, in some part, neglected and made void."

[3: "Piccarda." The sister of Corso Donati, and of Forese, whom we have seen in the Purgatory, Canto xxiv. Petrarch has been supposed to allude to this lady in his "Triumph of Chastity," v. 160, etc.]

Whence I to her replied: "Something divine
Beams in your countenances wondrous fair;
From former knowledge quite transmitting you.

Therefore to recollect was I so slow.
But what thou say'st hath to my memory
Given now such aid, that to retrace your forms
Is easier. Yet inform me, ye, who here
Are happy; long ye for a higher place,
More to behold, and more in love to dwell?"

She with those other spirits gently smiled;
Then answer'd with such gladness, that she seem'd

With love's first flame to glow: "Brother! our will
Is, in composure, settled by the power
Of charity, who makes us will alone
What we possess, and naught beyond desire:
If we should wish to be exalted more,
Then must our wishes jar with the high will
Of Him, who sets us here; which in these orbs
Thou wilt confess not possible, if here
To be in charity must needs befall,
And if her nature well thou contemplate.
Rather it is inherent in this state
Of blessedness, to keep ourselves within
The Divine Will, by which our wills with His
Are one. So that as we, from step to step,
Are placed throughout this kingdom, pleases all,
Even as our King, who in us plants His will;
And in His will is our tranquillity:
It is the mighty ocean, whither tends
Whatever it creates and Nature makes."

Then saw I clearly how each spot in Heaven
Is Paradise, though with like gracious dew
The supreme virtue shower not over all.

But as it chanced, if one sort of food
Hath satiated, and of another still
The appetite remains, that this is ask'd,
And thanks for that return'd; e'en so did I,
In word and motion, bent from her to learn
What web it was,[4] through which she had not drawn
The shuttle to its point. She thus began:
"Exalted worth and perfectness of life

[4: "What vow of religious life it was that she had been hindered
from completing, had been compelled to break."]

The Lady[5] higher up in shrine in Heaven,
By whose pure laws upon your nether earth
The robe and veil they wear; to that intent,
That e'en till death they may keep watch, or sleep,
With their great Bridegroom, who accepts each vow,
Which to His gracious pleasure love conforms.
I from the world, to follow her, when young
Escaped; and, in her vesture mantling me,
Made promise of the way her sect enjoins.
Thereafter men, for ill than good more apt,
Forth snatch'd me from the pleasant cloister's pale.
God knows[6] how, after that, my life was framed.
This other splendid shape, which thou behold'st

At my right side, burning with all the light
Of this our orb, what of myself I tell
May to herself apply. From her, like me
A sister, with like violence were torn
The saintly folds, that shaded her fair brows.
E'en when she to the world again was brought
In spite of her own will and better wont,
Yet not for that the bosom's inward veil
Did she renounce. This is the luminary
Of mighty Constance,[7] who from that loud blast,
Which blew the second[8] over Suabia's realm,
That power produced, which was the third and last."

[5: St. Clare, the foundress of the order called after her. She was born at Assisi, in 1193, and died in 1253.]

[6: Rodolfo da Tossignano, Hist. Seraph. Relig., relates the following legend of Piccarda: "Her brother Corso, inflamed with rage against his virgin sister, having joined with him Farinata, an infamous assassin, and twelve other abandoned ruffians, entered the monastery by a ladder, and carried away his sister forcibly to his own house; and then tearing off her religious habit, compelled her to go in a secular garment to her nuptials. Before the spouse of Christ came together with her new husband, she knelt down before a crucifix and recommended her virginity to Christ. Soon after her whole body was smitten with leprosy; in a few days, through the divine disposal, she passed with a palm of virginity to the Lord.]

[7: Daughter of Ruggieri, King of Sicily, who being taken by force out of a monastery was married to the Emperor Henry VI and by him was mother of Frederick II. She was fifty years old or more at the time, and "because it was not credited that she could have a child at that age, she was delivered in a pavilion, and it was given out that any lady, who pleased, was at liberty to see her."]

[8: Henry VI, son of Frederick I, was the second emperor of the house of Suabia; and his son Frederick II "the third and last."]

She ceased from further talk, and then began
"Ave Maria" singing; and with that song
Vanish'd, as heavy substance through deep wave.

Mine eye, that, far as it was capable,
Pursued her, when in dimness she was lost,
Turn'd to the mark where greater want impell'd
And bent on Beatrice all its gaze.
But she, as lightning, beam'd upon my looks;
So that the sight sustain'd it not at first.
Whence I to question her became less prompt.

