Paradise Lost: The Second Book

THE ARGUMENT.—The consultation begun, Satan debates whether another battle is to be hazarded for the recovery of Heaven: some advise it, others dissuade. A third proposal is preferred, mentioned before by Satan—to search the truth of that prophecy or tradition in Heaven concerning another world, and another kind of creature, equal, or not much inferior, to themselves, about this time to be created. Their doubt who shall be sent on this difficult search: Satan, their chief, undertakes alone the voyage; is honoured and applauded. The council thus ended, the rest betake them several ways and to several imployments, as their inclinations lead them, to entertain the time till Satan return. He passes on his journey to Hell-gates; finds them shut, and who sat there to guard them; by whom at length they are opened, and discover to him the great gulf between Hell and Heaven. With what difficulty he passes through, directed by Chaos, the Power of that place, to the sight of this new World which he sought.

HIGH on a throne of royal state, which far

Outshon the wealth of Ormus and of Ind,

Or where the gorgeous East with richest hand

Showers on her kings barbaric pearl and gold,

Satan exalted sat, by merit raised 5

To that bad eminence; and, from despair

Thus high uplifted beyond hope, aspires

Beyond thus high, insatiate to pursue

Vain war with Heaven; and, by success untaught,

His proud imaginations thus displayed:— 10

“Powers and Dominions, Deities of Heaven!—

For, since no deep within her gulf can hold

Immortal vigour, though oppressed and fallen,

I give not Heaven for lost: from this descent

Celestial Virtues rising will appear 15

More glorious and more dread than from no fall,

And trust themselves to fear no second fate!—

Me though just right, and the fixed laws of Heaven,

Did first create your leader—next, free choice,

With what besides in council or in fight 20

Hath been achieved of merit—yet this loss,

Thus far at least recovered, hath much more

Established in a safe, unenvied throne,

Yielded with full consent. The happier state

In Heaven, which follows dignity, might draw 25

Envy from each inferior; but who here

Will envy whom the highest place exposes

Foremost to stand against the Thunderer’s aim

Your bulwark, and condemns to greatest share

Of endless pain? Where there is, then, no good 30

For which to strive, no strife can grow up there

From faction: for none sure will claim in Hell

Precedence; none whose portion is so small

Of present pain that with ambitious mind

Will covet more! With this advantage, then, 35

To union, and firm faith, and firm accord,

More than can be in Heaven, we now return

To claim our just inheritance of old,

Surer to prosper than prosperity

Could have assured us; and by what best way, 40

Whether of open war or covert guile,

We now debate. Who can advise may speak.”

He ceased; and next him Moloch, sceptred king,

Stood up—the strongest and the fiercest Spirit

That fought in Heaven, now fiercer by despair. 45

His trust was with the Eternal to be deemed

Equal in strength, and rather than be less

Cared not to be at all; with that care lost

Went all his fear: of God, or Hell, or worse,

He recked not, and these words thereafter spake:— 50

“My sentence is for open war. Of wiles,

More unexpert, I boast not: them let those

Contrive who need, or when they need; not now.

For, while they sit contriving, shall the rest—

Millions that stand in arms, and longing wait 55

The signal to ascend—sit lingering here,

Heaven’s fugitives, and for their dwelling-place

Accept this dark opprobrious den of shame,

The prison of His tyranny who reigns

By our delay? No! let us rather choose, 60

Armed with Hell-flames and fury, all at once

O’er Heaven’s high towers to force resistless way,

Turning our tortures into horrid arms

Against the torturer;…

… On the other side up rose

Belial, in act more graceful and humane.

A fairer person lost not Heaven; he seemed 110

For dignity composed, and high exploit.

But all was false and hollow, though his tongue

Dropt manna, and could make the worse appear

The better reason, to perplex and dash

Maturest counsels: for his thoughts were low— 115

To vice industrious, but to nobler deeds

Timorous and slothful. Yet he pleased the ear,

And with persuasive accent thus began:—

“I should be much for open war, O Peers,

As not behind in hate, if what was urged 120

Main reason to persuade immediate war

Did not dissuade me most, and seem to cast

Ominous conjecture on the whole success;

When he who most excels in fact of arms,

In what he counsels and in what excels 125

Mistrustful, grounds his courage on despair

And utter dissolution, as the scope

Of all his aim, after some dire revenge.

First, what revenge? The towers of Heaven are filled

With armèd watch, that render all access 130

Impregnable: oft on the bordering Deep

Encamp their legions, or with obscure wing

Scout far and wide into the realm of Night,

Scorning surprise…

…Thus trampled, thus expelled, to suffer here 195

Chains and these torments? Better these than worse

By my advice; since fate inevitable

Subdues us, and omnipotent decree,

The Victor’s will….

…I laugh when those who at the spear are bold

And ventrous, if that fail them, shrink, and fear 205

What yet they know must follow—to endure

Exile, or ignominy, or bonds, or pain,

The sentence of their conqueror. This is now

Our doom; which if we can sustain and bear,

Our Supreme Foe in time may such remit 210

His anger, and perhaps, thus far removed,

Not mind us not offending, satisfied

With what is punished; whence these raging fires

Will slacken, if his breath stir not their flames.

Our purer essence then will overcome…. 215

… Thus Belial, with words clothed in reason’s garb,

Counselled ignoble ease and peaceful sloth,

Not peace; and after him thus Mammon spake:—

“Either to disinthrone the King of Heaven

We war, if war be best, or to regain 230

Our own right lost. Him to unthrone we then

May hope, when everlasting Fate shall yield

To fickle Chance, and Chaos judge the strife.

The former, vain to hope, argues as vain

The latter; for what place can be for us 235

Within Heaven’s bound, unless Heaven’s Lord Supreme

We overpower? Suppose he should relent,

And publish grace to all, on promise made

Of new subjection; with what eyes could we

Stand in his presence humble, and receive 240

Strict laws imposed, to celebrate his throne

With warbled hymns, and to his Godhead sing

Forced Halleluiahs, while he lordly sits

Our envied sovran, and his altar breathes

Ambrosial odours and ambrosial flowers, 245

Our servile offerings? This must be our task

In Heaven, this our delight. How wearisome

Eternity so spent in worship paid

To whom we hate! Let us not then pursue,

By force impossible, by leave obtained 250

Unacceptable, though in Heaven, our state

Of splendid vassalage; but rather seek

Our own good from ourselves, and from our own

Live to ourselves, though in this vast recess,

Free and none accountable, preferring 255

Hard liberty before the easy yoke

Of servile pomp. Our greatness will appear

Then most conspicuous when great things of small,

Useful of hurtful, prosperous of adverse,

We can create, and in what place soe’er 260

Thrive under evil, and work ease out of pain

Through labour and indurance. This deep world

Of darkness do we dread? How oft amidst

Thick clouds and dark doth Heaven’s all-ruling Sire

Choose to reside, his glory unobscured, 265

And with the majesty of darkness round

Covers his throne, from whence deep thunders roar,

Mustering their rage, and Heaven resembles Hell!

As He our darkness, cannot we His light

Imitate when we please? This desart soil 270

Wants not her hidden lustre, gems and gold;

Nor want we skill or art from whence to raise

Magnificence; and what can Heaven shew more?

Our torments also may, in length of time,

Become our elements, these piercing fires 275

As soft as now severe, our temper changed

Into their temper; which must needs remove

The sensible of pain. All things invite

To peaceful counsels, and the settled state

Of order, how in safety best we may 280

Compose our present evils, with regard

Of what we are and where, dismissing quite

All thoughts of war. Ye have what I advise.”

He scarce had finished, when such murmur filled

The assembly as when hollow rocks retain 285

The sound of blustering winds, which all night long

Had roused the sea, now with hoarse cadence lull

Seafaring men o’erwatched, whose bark by chance,

Or pinnace, anchors in a craggy bay

After the tempest. Such applause was heard 290

As Mammon ended, and his sentence pleased,

Advising peace: for such another field

They dreaded worse than Hell; so much the fear

Of thunder and the sword of Michaël

Wrought still within them; and no less desire 295

To found this nether empire, which might rise,

By policy and long process’ of time,

In emulation opposite to Heaven.

Which when Beëlzebub perceived—than whom,

Satan except, none higher sat—with grave 300

Aspect he rose, and in his rising seemed

A pillar of state. Deep on his front engraven

Deliberation sat, and public care;

And princely counsel in his face yet shon,

Majestic, though in ruin. Sage he stood, 305

With Atlantean shoulders, fit to bear

The weight of mightiest monarchies; his look

Drew audience and attention still as night

Or summer’s noontide air, while thus he spake:—…

… Thus Beëlzebub,

Pleaded his devilish counsel—first devised

By Satan, and in part proposed: for whence, 380

But from the author of all ill, could spring

So deep a malice, to confound the race

Of mankind in one root, and Earth with Hell

To mingle and involve, done all to spite

The great Creator? But their spite still serves 385

His glory to augment. The bold design

Pleased highly those Infernal States, and joy

Sparkled in all their eyes: with full assent

They vote: whereat his speech he thus renews:—

“Well have ye judged, well ended long debate, 390

Synod of Gods and, like to what ye are,

Great things resolved, which from the lowest deep

Will once more lift us up, in spite of Fate,

Nearer our ancient Seat—perhaps in view

Of those bright confines, whence, with neighbouring arms, 395

And opportune excursion, we may chance

Re-enter Heaven; or else in some mild zone

Dwell, not unvisited of Heaven’s fair light,

Secure, and at the brightening orient beam

Purge off this gloom: the soft delicious air, 400

To heal the scar of these corrosive fires,

Shall breathe her balm. But, first, whom shall we send

In search of this new World? whom shall we find

Sufficient? who shall tempt with wandering feet

The dark, unbottomed, infinite Abyss, 405…

… This said, he sat; and expectation held

His look suspense, awaiting who appeared

To second, or oppose, or undertake

The perilous attempt. But all sat mute, 420

Pondering the danger with deep thoughts; and each

In other’s countenance read his own dismay,

Astonished. None among the choice and prime

Of those Heaven-warring champions could be found

So hardy as to proffer or accept, 425

Alone, the dreadful voyage; till, at last,

Satan, whom now transcendent glory raised

Above his fellows, with monarchal pride