

Inferno Canto 15

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Canto XV

Argument

Taking their way upon one of the mounds by which the streamlet, spoken of in the last Canto, was embanked, and having gone so far that they could no longer have discerned the forest if they had turned round to look for it, they meet a troop of spirits that come along the sand by the side of the pier. These are they who have done violence to Nature; and among them Dante distinguishes Brunetto Latini, who had been formerly his master; with whom, turning a little backward, he holds a discourse which occupies the remainder of this Canto.

One of the solid margins bears us now
Envelop'd in the mist, that, from the stream
Arising, hovers o'er, and saves from fire
Both piers and water. As the Flemings rear
Their mound, 'twixt Ghent and Bruges, to chase back
The ocean, fearing his tumultuous tide
That drives toward them; or the Paduans theirs
Along the Brenta, to defend their towns
And castles, ere the genial warmth be felt
On Chiarentana's^[1] top; such were the mounds,
So framed, though not in height or bulk to these
Made equal, by the master, whosoe'er
He was, that raised them here. We from the wood
Were now so far removed, that turning round
I might not have discern'd it, when we met
A troop of spirits, who came beside the pier.

[1: A part of the Alps where the Brenta rises, swollen by melting snows.]

They each one eyed us, as at eventide
One eyes another under a new moon;
And toward us sharpen'd their sight, as keen
As an old tailor at his needle's eye.

Thus narrowly explored by all the tribe,
I was agnized of one, who by the skirt
Caught me, and cried, "What wonder have we here?"

And I, when he to me outstretch'd his arm,
Intently fix'd my ken on his parch'd looks,

That, although smirch'd with fire, they hinder'd not
But I remember'd him; and toward his face
My hand inclining, answer'd: "Ser Brunetto![2]
And are ye here?" He thus to me: "My son!
Oh let it not displease thee, if Brunetto
Latini but a little space with thee
Turn back, and leave his fellows to proceed."

[2: "Ser Brunetto, a Florentine, the secretary or chancellor of the city, and Dante's preceptor, hath left us a work so little read, that both the subject of it and the language of it have been mistaken. It is in the French spoken in the reign of St. Louis, under the title of 'Tresor'; and contains a species of philosophical lectures."]

I thus to him replied: "Much as I can,
I thereto pray thee; and if thou be willing
That I here seat me with thee, I consent;
His leave, with whom I journey, first obtain'd."

"O son!" said he, "whoever of this throng
One instant stops, lies then a hundred years,
No fan to ventilate him, when the fire
Smitest sorest. Pass thou therefore on. I close
Will at thy garments walk, and then rejoin
My troop, who go mourning their endless doom."

I dared not from the path descend to tread
On equal ground with him, but held my head
Bent down, as one who walks in reverent guise.

"What chance or destiny," thus he began,
"Ere the last day, conducts thee here below?
And who is this that shows to thee the way?"
"There up aloft," I answer'd, "in the life
Serene, I wander'd in a valley lost,
Before mine age had to its fullness reach'd.
But yester - morn I left it: then once more
Into that vale returning, him I met;
And by this path homeward he leads me back."

"If thou," he answer'd, "follow but thy star,
Thou canst not miss at last a glorious haven;
Unless in fairer days my judgment err'd.
And if my fate so early had not chanced,
Seeing the heavens thus bounteous to thee, I
Had gladly given thee comfort in thy work.
But that ungrateful and malignant race,
Who in old times came down from Fesole,
Ay and still smack of their rough mountain flint,
Will for thy good deeds show thee enmity.

Nor wonder; for amongst ill - savor'd crabs
It suits not the sweet fig - tree lay her fruit.
Old fame reports them in the world for blind,
Covetous, envious, proud. Look to it well:
Take heed thou cleanse thee of their ways. For thee,
Thy fortune hath such honor in reserve,
That thou by either party shalt be craved
With hunger keen: but be the fresh herb far
From the goat's tooth. The herd of Fesole
May of themselves make litter, not touch the plant,
If any such yet spring on their rank bed,
In which the holy seed revives, transmitted
From those true Romans, who still there remain'd,
When it was made the nest of so much ill."

"Were all my wish fulfill'd," I straight replied,
"Thou from the confines of man's nature yet
Hadst not been driven forth; for in my mind
Is fix'd, and now strikes full upon my heart,
The dear, benign, paternal image, such
As thine was, when so lately thou didst teach me
The way for man to win eternity:
And how I prized the lesson, it behoves,
That, long as life endures, my tongue should speak.
What of my fate thou tell'st, that write I down;
And, with another text^[3] to comment on,
For her I keep it, the celestial dame,
Who will know all, if I to her arrive.
This only would I have thee clearly note:
That, so my conscience have no plea against me,
Do Fortune as she list, I stand prepared.
Not new or strange such earnest to mine ear.
Speed Fortune then her wheel, as likes her best;
The clown his mattock; all things have their course."

[3: "With another text." He refers to the predictions of Farinata, in Canto x.]

Thereat my sapient guide upon his right
Turn'd himself back, then looked at me, and spake:
"He listens to good purpose who takes note."

I not the less still on my way proceed,
Discoursing with Brunetto, and inquire
Who are most known and chief among his tribe.

"To know of some is well;" he thus replied,
"But of the rest silence may best beseem.
Time would not serve us for report so long.

In brief I tell thee, that all these were clerks,
Men of great learning and no less renown,
By one same sin polluted in the world.
With them is Priscian; and Accorso's son,
Francesco,[4] herds among the wretched throng:
And, if the wish of so impure a blotch
Possess'd thee, him[5] thou also mightst have seen,
Who by the servants' servant was transferr'd
From Arno's seat to Bacchiglione, where
His ill - strain'd nerves he left. I more would add,
But must from further speech and onward way
Alike desist; for yonder I behold
A mist new - risen on the sandy plain.
A company, with whom I may not sort,
Approaches, I commend my Treasure to thee,
Wherein I yet survive; my sole request."

[4: "Francesco." Accorso, a Florentine, interpreted the Roman law at Bologna, and died in 1229, at the age of 78. His authority was so great as to exceed that of all the other interpreters, so that Cino da Pistoia termed him the Idol of Advocates. His sepulchre, and that of his son Francesco here spoken of, is at Bologna, with this short epitaph: "Sepulcrum Accursii Glossatoris et Francisci eius Filii."]

[5: "Him." Andrea de' Mozzi, who, that his scandalous life might be less exposed to observation, was translated either by Nicholas III or Boniface VIII from the see of Florence to that of Vicenza, through which passes the river Bacchiglione. He died at Vicenza.]

This said, he turn'd, and seem'd as one of those
Who o'er Verona's champaign try their speed
For the green mantle; and of them he seem'd,
Not he who loses but who gains the prize.