

# Inferno Canto 24

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## Canto XXIV

### Argument

Under the escort of his faithful master, Dante not without difficulty makes his way out of the sixth gulf; and in the seventh, sees the robbers tormented by venomous and pestilent serpents. The soul of Vanni Fucci, who had pillaged the sacristy of St. James in Pistoia, predicts some calamities that impended over that city, and over the Florentines.

In the year's early nonage,[1] when the sun  
Tempers his tresses in Aquarius' urn,  
And now toward equal day the nights recede;  
Whenas the rime upon the earth puts on  
Her dazzling sister's image, but not long  
Her milder sway endures; then riseth up  
The village hind, whom fails his wintry store,  
And looking out beholds the plain around  
All whiten'd; whence impatiently he smites  
His thighs, and to his hut returning in,  
There paces to and fro, wailing his lot,  
As a discomfited and helpless man;  
Then comes he forth again, and feels new hope  
Spring in his bosom, finding e'en thus soon  
The world hath changed its countenance, grasps his crook,  
And forth to pasture drives his little flock:  
So me my guide dishearten'd, when I saw  
His troubled forehead; and so speedily  
That ill was cured; for at the fallen bridge  
Arriving, toward me with a look as sweet,  
He turn'd him back, as that I first beheld  
At the steep mountain's foot. Regarding well  
The ruin, and some counsel first maintain'd  
With his own thought, he opened wide his arm  
And took me up. As one, who, while he works,  
Computes his labor's issue, that he seems  
Still to foresee the effect; so lifting me  
Up to the summit of one peak, he fix'd  
His eye upon another. "Grapple that,"  
Said he, "but first make proof, if it be such  
As will sustain thee." For one capt with lead

[1: At the latter part of January, when the sun enters Aquarius, and the equinox draws near, when the hoar - frosts in the morning often wear the appearance of snow, but are melted by the rising sun."]

This were no journey. Scarcely he, though light,  
And I, though onward push'd from crag to crag,  
Could mount. And if the precinct of this coast  
Were not less ample than the last, for him  
I know not, but my strength had surely fail'd.  
But Malebolge all toward the mouth  
Inclining of the nethermost abyss,  
The site of every valley hence requires,  
That one side upward slope, the other fall.

At length the point from whence the utmost stone  
Juts down, we reach'd; soon as to that arrived,  
So was the breath exhausted from my lungs  
I could no further, but did seat me there.

"Now needs thy best of man;" so spake my guide:  
"For not on downy plumes, nor under shade  
Of canopy reposing, fame is won;  
Without which whosoe'r consumes his days,  
Leaveth such vestige of himself on earth,  
As smoke in air or foam upon the wave.  
Thou therefore rise: vanquish thy weariness  
By the mind's effort, in each struggle form'd  
To vanquish, if she suffer not the weight  
Of her corporeal frame to crush her down.  
A longer ladder yet remains to scale.  
From these to have escaped sufficeth not,  
If well thou note me, profit by my words."

I straightway rose, and show'd myself less spent  
That I in truth did feel me. "On," I cried,  
"For I am stout and fearless." Up the rock  
Our way we held, more rugged than before,  
Narrower, and steeper far to climb. From talk  
I ceased not, as we journey'd, so to seem  
Least faint; whereat a voice from the other foss  
Did issue forth, for utterance suited ill.  
Though on the arch that crosses there I stood,  
What were the words I knew not, but who spake  
Seem'd moved in anger. Down I stoop'd to look;  
But my quick eye might reach not to the depth  
For shrouding darkness; wherefore thus I spake:  
"To the next circle, teacher, bend thy steps,  
And from the wall dismount we; for as hence  
I hear and understand not, so I see

Beneath, and naught discern." "I answer not,"  
Said he, "but by the deed. To fair request  
Silent performance maketh best return."

We from the bridge's head descended, where  
To the eighth mound it joins; and then, the chasm  
Opening to view, I saw a crowd within  
Of serpents terrible, so strange of shape  
And hideous, that remembrance in my veins  
Yet shrinks the vital current. Of her sands  
Let Libya vaunt no more: if Jaculus,  
Pareas and Chelyder be her brood,  
Cenchrus and Amphisbaena, plagues so dire  
Or in such numbers swarming ne'er she show'd,  
Not with all Ethiopia, and whate'er  
Above the Erythraean sea is spawn'd.

Amid this dread exuberance of woe  
Ran naked spirits wing'd with horrid fear,  
Nor hope had they of crevice where to hide,  
Or heliotrope to charm them out of view.  
With serpents were their hands behind them bound,  
Which through their reins infix'd the tail and head,  
Twisted in folds before. And lo! on one  
Near to our side, darted an adder up,  
And, where the neck is on the shoulders tied,  
Transpierced him. Far more quickly than e'er pen  
Wrote O or I, he kindled, burn'd, and changed  
To ashes all, pour'd out upon the earth.  
When there dissolved he lay, the dust again  
Uproll'd spontaneous, and the self - same form  
Instant resumed. So mighty sages tell,  
The Arabian Phoenix, when five hundred years  
Have well - nigh circled, dies, and springs forthwith  
Renascent: blade nor herb throughout his life  
He tastes, but tears of frankincense alone  
And odorous amomum: swaths of nard  
And myrrh his funeral shroud. As one that falls,  
He knows not how, by force demoniac dragg'd  
To earth, or through obstruction fettering up  
In chains invisible the powers of man,  
Who, risen from his trance, gazeth around,  
Bewilder'd with the monstrous agony  
He hath endured, and wildly staring sighs;  
So stood aghast the sinner when he rose.

Oh! how severe God's judgment, that deals out  
Such blows in stormy vengeance. Who he was,

My teacher next inquired; and thus in few  
He answer'd: "Vanni Fucci<sup>[2]</sup> am I call'd,  
Not long since rained down from Tuscany  
To this dire gullet. Me the bestial life  
And not the human pleased, mule that I was,  
Who in Pistoia found my worthy den."

[2: Said to have been an illegitimate offspring of the family of Lazari in Pistoia, to have robbed the sacristy of the church of St. James in that city, and to have charged Vanni della Nona with the sacrilege; in consequence of which the latter suffered death.]

I then to Virgil: "Bid him stir not hence;  
And ask what crime did thrust him thither: once  
A man I knew him, choleric and bloody."

The sinner heard and feign'd not, but toward me  
His mind directing and his face, wherein  
Was dismal shame depicted, thus he spake:  
"It grieves me more to have been caught by thee  
In this sad plight, which thou beholdest, than  
When I was taken from the other life.  
I have no power permitted to deny  
What thou inquirest. I am doom'd thus low  
To dwell, for that the sacristy by me  
Was rifled of its goodly ornaments,  
And with the guilt another falsely charged.  
But that thou mayst not joy to see me thus,  
So as thou e'er shalt 'scape this darksome realm,  
Open thine ears and hear what I forebode.  
Reft of the Neri first Pistoia<sup>[3]</sup> pines;  
Then Florence<sup>[4]</sup> changeth citizens and laws;

[3: "In May, 1301, the Bianchi party of Pistoia, with the help of the Bianchi who ruled Florence, drove out the party of the Neri from the former place, destroying their houses, palaces, and farms."]

[4: "Then Florence." "Soon after the Bianchi wbl be expelled from Florence, the Neri will prevail, and the laws and people will be changed."]

From Valdimagra,<sup>[5]</sup> drawn by wrathful Mars,  
A vapor rises, wrapt in turbid mists,  
And sharp and eager driveth on the storm  
With Arrowy hurtling o'er Piceno's field,  
Whence suddenly the cloud shall burst, and strike  
Each helpless Bianco prostrate to the ground.  
This have I told, that grief may rend thy heart."

[5: Alluding to the victory obtained by the Marquis Morello Malaspina of Valdimagra, who put himself at the head of the Neri, and defeated their

opponents the Bianchi, in the Campo Piceno near Pistoia, soon after the occurrence related in the preceding note on v. 142. Currado Malaspina is introduced in the eighth Canto of the Purgatory; where it appears, that although on the present occasion they espoused contrary sides, most important favors were nevertheless conferred by that family on our Poet, at a subsequent period of his exile, in 1307.]

— Inferno Canto 24