

Inferno Canto 27

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Canto XXVII

Argument

The Poet, treating of the same punishment as in the last Canto, relates that he turned toward a flame in which was the Count Guido da Montefeltro, whose inquiries respecting the state of Romagna he answers; and Guido is thereby induced to declare who he is, and why condemned to that torment.

Now upward rose the flame, and still'd its light
To speak no more, and now pass'd on with leave
From the mild poet gain'd; when following came
Another, from whose top a sound confused,
Forth issuing, drew our eyes that way to look.

As the Sicilian bull,[1] that rightfully
His cries first echoed who had shaped its mould,
Did so rebellow, with the voice of him
Tormented, that the brazen monster seem'd
Pierced through with pain; thus, while no way they found,
Nor avenue immediate through the flame,
Into its language turn'd the dismal words:
But soon as they had won their passage forth,
Up from the point, which vibrating obey'd
Their motion at the tongue, these sounds were heard:
"O thou! to whom I now direct my voice,
That lately didst exclaim in Lombard phrase,
'Depart thou; I solicit thee no more;'
Though somewhat tardy I perchance arrive,
Let it not irk thee here to pause awhile,

[1: The engine of torture invented by Perillus, for the tyrant Phalaris.]

And with me parley: lo! it irks not me,
And yet I burn. If but e'en now thou fall
Into this blind world, from that pleasant land
Of Latium, whence I draw my sum of guilt,
Tell me if those who in Romagna dwell
Have peace or war. For of the mountains there[2]
Was I, betwixt Urbino and the height
Whence Tiber first unlocks his mighty flood."

[2: Montefeltro.]

Leaning I listen'd yet with heedful ear,
When, as he touch'd my side, the leader thus:
"Speak thou: he is a Latian." My reply
Was ready, and I spake without delay:
"O spirit! who art hidden here below,
Never was thy Romagna without war
In her proud tyrants' bosoms, nor is now:
But open war there left I none. The state,
Ravenna hath maintain'd this many a year,
Is steadfast. There Polenta's eagle^[3] broods;
And in his broad circumference of plume
O'ershadows Cervia. The green talons grasp
The land,^[4] that stood erewhile the proof so long
And piled in bloody heap the host of France.

[3: Polenta's eagle." Guido Novello da Polenta, who bore an eagle for his coat - of - arms. The name of Polenta was derived from a castle so called in the neighborhood of Brittonoro. Cervia is a small maritime city, about fifteen miles to the south of Ravenna. Guido was the son of Ostasio da Polenta, and made himself master of Ravenna in 1265. In 1322 he was deprived of his sovereignty, and died at Bologna in 1323. This last and most munificent patron of Dante is enumerated among the poets of his time.]

[4: The territory of Forli, the inhabitants of which, in 1282, were enabled, by the stratagem of Guido da Montefeltro, the governor, to defeat the French army by which it had been besieged. See G. Villani, lib. vii. c. lxxxii. The Poet informs Guido, its former ruler, that it is now in the possession of Sinibaldo Ordolaffi, whom he designates by his coat - of - arms, a lion vert.]

"The old mastiff of Verrucchio and the young,^[5]
That tore Montagna^[6] in their wrath, still make,
Where they are wont, an augre of their fangs.

[5: Malatesta and Malatestino his son, lords of Rimini, called from their ferocity, the mastiffs of Verrucchio, which was the name of their castle. Malatestino was, perhaps, the husband of Francesca, daughter of Guido da Polenta. See notes to Canto v. 113.]

[6: Montagna de' Parcitati, a noble and leader of the Ghibelline party at Rimini, murdered by Malatestino.]

"Lamone's city, and Santerno's,^[7] range

[7: Lamone is the river at Faenza, and Santerno at Imola.]

Under the lion of the snowy lair,^[8]
Inconstant partisan, that changeth sides,
Or ever summer yields to winter's frost.
And she, whose flank is wash'd of Savio's wave,^[9]
As 'twixt the level and the steep she lies,
Lives so 'twixt tyrant power and liberty.

[8: Machinarado Pagano, whose arms were a lion azure on a field argent. See also Purgatory, Canto xiv. 122]

[9: Cesena, situated at the foot of a mountain, and washed by the river Savio, that often descends with a swollen and rapid stream from the Apennines.]

"Now tell us, I entreat thee, who art thou:
Be not more hard than others. In the world,
So may thy name still rear its forehead high."

Then roar'd awhile the fire, its sharpen'd point
On either side waved, and thus breathed at last:
"If I did think my answer were to one
Who ever could return unto the world,
This flame should rest unshaken. But since ne'er,
If true be told me, any from this depth
Has found his upward way, I answer thee,
Nor fear lest infamy record the words.

"A man of arms[10] at first, I clothed me then
In good Saint Francis' girdle, hoping so
To have made amends. And certainly my hope
Had fail'd not, but that he, whom curses light on,
The high priest,[11] again seduced me into sin.
And how, and wherefore, listen while I tell.
Long as this spirit moved the bones and pulp
My mother gave me, less my deeds bespake
The nature of the lion than the fox.
All ways of winding subtlety I knew,
And with such art conducted, that the sound
Reach'd the world's limit. Soon as to that part
Of life I found me come, and when each behoves
To lower sails and gather in the lines;
That, which before had pleased me, then I rued,
And to repentance and confession turn'd,
Wretch that I was; and well it had bestead me.

[10: Guido da Montefeltro.]

[11: Boniface VIII.]

The chief of the new Pharisees[12] meantime,
Waging his warfare near the Lateran,
Not with the Saracens or Jews (his foes
All Christians were, nor against Acre one
Had fought,[13] nor traffick'd in the Soldan's land),
He, his great charge nor sacred ministry,
In himself revered, nor in me that cord
Whsch used to mark with leanness whom it girded.

As in Soracte, Constantine besought,
To cure his leprosy, Sylvester's aid;
So me, to cure the fever of his pride,
This man besought: my counsel to that end
He ask'd; and I was silent; for his words
Seem'd drunken: but forthwith he thus resumed:
'From thy heart banish fear: of all offence
I hitherto absolve thee. In return,
Teach me my purpose so to execute,
That Penestrino cumber earth no more.
Heaven, as thou knowest, I have power to shut
And open: and the keys are therefore twain,
The which my predecessor[14] meanly prized.'

[12: Boniface, VIII, whose enmity to the family of Colonna prompted him to destroy their houses near the Lateran. Wishing to obtain possession of their other seat, Penestrino, he consulted with Guido da Montefeltro, offering him absolution for his past sins, as well as for that which he was then tempting him to commit. Guido's advice was that kind words and fair promises would put his enemies into his power; and they accordingly soon afterward fell into the snare laid for them, 1298.]

[13: Alluding to the renegade Christians, by whom the Saracens, in April, 1291, were assisted to recover St. John d'Acre, the last possession of the Christians in the Holy Land.]

[14: Celestine V. See notes to Canto iii]

"Then, yielding to the forceful arguments,
Of silence, as more perilous I deem'd,
And answer'd: 'Father! since thou washest me
Clear of that guilt wherein I now must fall,
Large promise with performance scant, be sure,
Shall make thee triumph in thy lofty seat.'

"When I was number'd with the dead, then came
Saint Francis for me; but a cherub dark
He met, who cried, 'Wrong me not; he is mine,
And must below to join the wretched crew,

For the deceitful counsel which he gave.
E'er since I watch'd him, hovering at his hair.
No power can the impenitent absolve;
Nor to repent, and will, at once consist,
By contradiction absolute forbid.'
Oh misery! how I shook myself, when he
Seized me, and cried, "Thou haply thought'st me not
A disputant in logic so exact!"
To Minos down he bore me; and the judge
Twined eight times round his callous back the tail,

Which biting with excess of rage, he spake:
'This is a guilty soul, that in the fire
Must vanish.' Hence, perdition - doom'd, I rove
A prey to rankling sorrow, in this garb."

When he had thus fulfill'd his words, the flame
In dolour parted, beating to and fro,
And writhing its sharp horn. We onward went,
I and my leader, up along the rock,
Far as another arch, that overhangs
The foss, wherein the penalty is paid
Of those who load them with committed sin.