

Inferno Canto 29

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Canto XXIX

Argument

Dante, at the desire of Virgil, proceeds onward to the bridge that crosses the tenth gulf, from whence he hears the cries of the alchemists and forgers, who are tormented therein; but not being able to discern anything on account of the darkness, they descend the rock, that bounds this, the last of the compartments in which the eighth circle is divided, and then behold the spirits who are afflicted by divers plagues and diseases. Two of them, namely, Grifolino of Arezzo, and Capocchio of Siena, are introduced speaking.

So were mine eyes inebriate with the view
Of the vast multitude, whom various wounds
Disfigured, that they long'd to stay and weep.
But Virgil roused me: "What yet gazest on?
Wherefore doth fasten yet thy sight below
Among the maim'd and miserable shades?
Thou hast not shown in any chasm beside
This weakness. Know, if thou wouldst number them,
That two and twenty miles the valley winds
Its circuit, and already is the moon
Beneath our feet: the time permitted now
Is short; and more, not seen, remains to see."

"If thou," I straight replied, "hadst weigh'd the cause,
For which I look'd, thou hadst perchance excused
The tarrying still." My leader part pursued
His way, the while I follow'd, answering him,
And adding thus: "Within that cave I deem,
Whereon so fixedly I held my ken,
There is a spirit dwells, one of my blood,
Wailing the crime that costs him now so dear."

Then spake my master: "Let thy soul no more
Afflict itself for him. Direct elsewhere
Its thought, and leave him. At the bridge's foot
I mark'd how he did point with menacing look
At thee, and heard him by the others named
Geri of Bello.[1] Thou so wholly then
Wert busied with his spirit, who once ruled
The towers of Hautefort, that thou lookedst not
That way, ere he was gone." "O guide beloved!

[1: "Geri of Bello." A kinsman of the Poet's, who was murdered by one of the Sacchetti family. His being placed here, may be considered as a proof that Dante was more impartial in the allotment of his punishments than has generally been supposed.]

His violent death yet unavenged," said I,
"By any, who are partners in his shame,
Made him contemptuous; therefore, as I think,
He pass'd me speechless by; and, doing so,
Hath made me more compassionate his fate."

So we discoursed to where the rock first show'd
The other valley, had more light been there,
E'en to the lowest depth. Soon as we came
O'er the last cloister in the dismal rounds
Of Malebolge, and the brotherhood
Were to our view exposed, then many a dart
Of sore lament assail'd me, headed all
With points of thrilling pity, that I closed
Both ears against the volley with mine hands.

As were the torment, if each lazar - house
Of Valdichiana,[2] in the sultry time
'Twixt July and September, with the isle
Sardinia and Maremma's pestilent fen,[3]
Had heap'd their maladies all in one foss
Together; such was here the torment: dire
The stench, as issuing streams from fester'd limbs.

[2: The valley through which passes the river Chiana, bounded by Arezzo, Cortona, Montepulciano, and Chiusi. In the autumn it was formerly rendered unwholesome by the stagnation of the water, but has since been drained by the Emperor Leopold II. The Chiana is mentioned as a remarkably sluggish stream, in the Paradise, Canto xiii. 21.]

[3: See note to Canto xxv, v. 18.]

We on the utmost shore of the long rock
Descended still to leftward. Then my sight
Was livelier to explore the depth, wherein
The minister of the most mighty Lord,
All - searching Justice, dooms to punishment
The forgers noted on her dread record.

More rueful was it not methinks to see
The nation in Aegina[4] droop, what time
Each living thing, e'en to the little worm,
All fell, so full of malice was the air
(And afterward, as bards of yore have told,
The ancient people were restored anew

From seed of emmets), than was here to see

[4: "In Aegina." He alludes to the fable of the ants changed into Myrmidons. - Ovid, Met. lib. vii.]

The spirits, that languish'd through the murky vale,
Up - piled on many a stack. Confused they lay,
One o'er the belly, o'er the shoulders one
Roll'd of another; sideling crawl'd a third
Along the dismal pathway. Step by step
We journey'd on, in silence looking round,
And listening those diseased, who strove in vain
To lift their forms. Then two I mark'd, that sat
Propt 'gainst each other, as two brazen pans
Set to retain the heat. From head to foot,
A tetter bark'd them round. Nor saw I e'er
Groom currying so fast, for whom his lord
Impatient waited, or himself perchance
Tired with long watching, as of these each one
Plied quickly his keen nails, through furiousness
Of ne'er abated pruriency. The crust
Came down from underneath, in flakes, like scales
Scraped from the bream, or fish of broader mail.

"O thou! who with thy fingers rendest off
Thy coat of proof," thus spake my guide to one,
"And sometimes makest tearing pincers of them,
Tell me if any born of Latian land
Be among these within: so may thy nails
Serve thee for everlasting to this toil."

"Both are of Latium," weeping he replied,
"Whom tortured thus thou seest: but who art thou
That hast inquired of us?" To whom my guide:
"One that descend with this man, who yet lives,
From rock to rock, and show him Hell's abyss."

Then started they asunder, and each turn'd
Trembling toward us, with the rest, whose ear
Those words redounding struck. To me my liege
Address'd him: "Speak to them whate'er thou list."

And I therewith began: "So may no time
Filch your remembrance from the thoughts of men
In the upper world, but after many suns
Survive it, as ye tell me, who ye are,
And of what race ye come. Your punishment,
Unseemly and disgustful in its kind,
Deter you not from opening thus much to me."

"Arezzo was my dwelling,"[5] answer'd one,
"And me Albero of Siena brought
To die by fire: but that, for which I died,
Leads me not here. True is, in sport I told him,
That I had learn'd to wing my flight in air;
And he, admiring much, as he was void
Of wisdom, will'd me to declare to him
The secret of mine art: and only hence,
Because I made him not a Daedalus,
Prevail'd on one supposed his sire to burn me.
But Minos to this chasm, last of the ten,
For that I practised alchemy on earth,
Has doom'd me. Him no subterfuge eludes."

[5: Grifolino of Arezzo, who promised Albero, son of the Bishop of Siena, that he would teach him the art of flying; and, because he did not keep his promise, Albero prevailed on his father to have him burnt for a necromancer.]

Then to the bard I spake: "Was ever race
Light as Siena's?[6] Sure not France herself
Can show a tribe so frivolous and vain."

[6: The same imputation is again cast on the Sienese, Purgatory, Canto xiii, 141.]

The other leprous spirit heard my words,
And thus return'd: "Be Stricca[7] from this charge
Exempted, he who knew so temperately
To lay out fortune's gifts; and Niccolo,
Who first the spice's costly luxury
Discover'd in that garden,[8] where such seed
Roots deepest in the soil; and be that troop
Exempted, with whom Caccia of Asciano
Lavish'd his vineyards and wide - spreading woods,
And his rare wisdom Abbagliato show'd
A spectacle for all. That thou mayst know
Who seconds thee against the Sienese
Thus gladly, bend this way thy sharpen'd sight,
That well my face may answer to thy ken;
So shalt thou see I am Capocchio's ghost,[9]
Who forged transmuted metals by the power

[7: This is said ironically, Stricca, Niccolo Salimbeni, Caccia of Asciano, and Abbagliato, or Meo de' Folcacchieri, belonged to a company of prodigal and luxurious youth in Siena, called the "brigata godereccia."
Niccolo was the inventor of a new manner of using cloves in cookery, and which was termed the "costuma ricca."]

[8: "In that garden." Siena.]

[9: Capocchio of Siena who is said to have been a fellow - student of Dante's, in natural philosophy.]

Of alchemy; and if I scan thee right,
Thou needs must well remember how I aped
Creative nature by my subtle art."

— Inferno Canto 29