

Purgatory Canto 20

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Canto XX

Argument

Among those of the fifth cornice, Hugh Capet records illustrious examples of voluntary poverty and of bounty; then tells who himself is, and speaks of his descendants on the French throne; and, lastly, adds some noted instances of avarice. When he has ended, the mountain shakes, and all the spirits sing "Glory to God."

Ill strives the will, 'gainst will more wise that strives:
His pleasure therefore to mine own preferr'd,
I drew the sponge yet thirsty from the wave.
Onward I moved: he also onward moved,
Who led me, coasting still, wherever place
Along the rock was vacant; as a man
Walks near the battlements on narrow wall.
For those on the other part, who drop by drop
Wring out their all - infecting malady,
Too closely press the verge. Accurst be thou,
Inveterate wolf![1] whose gorge ingluts more prey,
Than every beast beside, yet is not fill'd;
So bottomless thy maw. Ye spheres of Heaven!
To whom there are, as seems, who attribute
All change in mortal state, when is the day
Of his appearing,[2] for whom fate reserves
To chase her hence? With wary steps and slow
We pass'd; and I attentive to the shades,
Whom piteously I heard lament and wail;
And, 'midst the wailing, one before us heard
Cry out "O blessed Virgin!" as a dame
In the sharp pangs of childbed; and "How poor
Thou wast," it added, "witness that low roof
Where thou didst lay thy sacred burden down.
O good Fabricius! thou didst virtue choose
With poverty, before great wealth with vice."

[1: "Wolf." Avarice.]

[2: He is thought to allude to Can Grande della Scala. See Hell, Canto i. 98.]

The words so pleased me, that desire to know

The spirit, from whose lip they seem'd to come,
Did draw me onward. Yet it spake the gift
Of Nicholas,[3] which on the maidens he

[3: An angel having revealed to him that the father of a family was so impoverished as to resolve on exposing the chastity of his three daughters to sale, Nicholas threw in at the window of their house three bags of money, containing a sufficient portion for each of them.]

Bounteous bestow'd, to save their youthful prime
Unblemish'd. "Spirit! who dost speak of deeds
So worthy, tell me who thou wast," I said,
"And why thou dost with single voice renew
Memorial of such praise. That boon vouchsafed
Haply shall meet reward; if I return
To finish the short pilgrimage of life,
Still speeding to its close on restless wing."

"I," answer'd he, "will tell thee; not for help,
Which thence I look for; but that in thyself
Grace so exceeding shines, before thy time
Of mortal dissolution. I was root[4]
Of that ill plant, whose shade such poison sheds
O'er all the Christian land, that seldom thence
Good fruit is gather'd. Vengeance soon should come,
Had Ghent and Douay, Lille and Bruges power,[5]
And vengeance I of Heaven's great Judge implore.
Hugh Capet was I hight: from me descend
The Philips and the Louis, of whom France
Newly is govern'd: born of one, who plied
The slaughterer's trade[6] at Paris. When the race
Of ancient kings had vanish'd (all save one[7]
Wrapt up in sable weeds) within my gripe
I found the reins of empire, and such powers
Of new acquirement, with full store of friends,
That soon the widow'd circlet of the crown
Was girt upon the temples of my son,[8]
He, from whose bones the anointed race begins.

[4: "Root." Hugh Capet, ancestor of Philip IV.]

[5: These cities had lately been seized by Philip IV. The spirit intimates the approaching defeat of the French army by the Flemings, in the battle of Courtrai, which happened in 1302.]

[6: "The slaughterer's trade." This reflection on the birth of his ancestor induced Francis I to forbid the reading of Dante in his dominions. Hugh Capet, who came to the throne of France in 987, was, however, the grandson of Robert, who was the brother of Eudes, King of France in 888; and it may, therefore, well be questioned whether by Beccaio di Parigi is meant

literally one who carried on the trade of a butcher, at Paris, and whether the sanguinary disposition of Hugh Capet's father is not stigmatized by this opprobrious appellation.]

[7: The posterity of Charlemain, the second race of French monarchs, had failed, with the exception of Charles of Lorraine, who is said, on account of the melancholy temper of his mind, to have always clothed himself in black. Venturi suggests that Dante may have confounded him with Childeric III, the last of the Merovingian, or first, race, who was deposed and made a monk in 751.]

[8: Hugh Capet caused his son Robert to be crowned at Orleans.]

Till the great dower of Provence[9] had removed
The stains, that yet obscured our lowly blood,
Its sway indeed was narrow; but howe'er
It wrought no evil: there, with force and lies,
Began its rapine: after, for amends,
Poitou it seized, Navarre and Gascony.
To Italy came Charles; and for amends,
Young Conradine,[10] an innocent victim, slew;
And sent the angelic teacher[11] back to Heaven,
Still for amends. I see the time at hand,
That forth from France invites another Charles[12]
To make himself and kindred better known.
Unarm'd he issues, saving with that lance,
Which the arch - traitor tilted with,[13] and that
He carries with so home a thrust, as rives
The bowels of poor Florence. No increase
Of territory hence, but sin and shame
Shall be his guerdon; and so much the more
As he more lightly deems of such foul wrong.
I see the other[14] (who a prisoner late

[9: "The great dower of Provence." Louis IX and his brother Charles of Anjou married two of the four daughters of Raymond Berenger, Count of Provence. See Paradise, c. vi. 135.]

[10: "Young Conradine." Charles of Anjou put Conradino to death in 1268, and became King of Naples.]

[11: "The angelic teacher." Thomas Aquinas. He was reported to have been poisoned by a physician, who wished to ingratiate himself with Charles of Anjou. "In the year 1323, at the end of July, by the said Pope John and by his cardinals, was canonized at Avignon, Thomas Aquinas, of the order of Saint Dominic, a master in divinity and philosophy. A man most excellent in all science, and who expounded the sense of Scripture better than anyone since the time of Augustin. He lived in the time of Charles I, King of Sicily; and going to the council at Lyons, it is said that he was killed by a physician of the said king, who put poison for him into some sweetmeats, thinking to ingratiate

himself with King Charles, because he was of the lineage of the Lords of Aquino, who had rebelled against the king, and doubting lest he should be made cardinal; whence the Church of God received great damage. He died at the abbey of Fossanova, in Campagna." G. Villani, lib. ix.]

[12: "Another Charles." Charles of Valois, brother of Philip IV, was sent by Pope Boniface VIII to settle the disturbed state of Florence. In consequence of the measures he adopted for that purpose, our Poet and his friends were condemned to exile and death.]

[13: "_____ with that lance." If I remember right, in one of the old romances, Judas is represented tilting with our Saviour.]

[14: "The other." Charles, King of Naples, the eldest son of Charles of Anjou, having, contrary to the directions of his father, engaged with Ruggieri de Lauria, the admiral of Peter of Arragon, was made prisoner, and carried into Sicily, June, 1284. He afterward, in consideration of a large sum of money, married his daughter to Azzo VIII, Marquis of Ferrara.]

Had stept on shore) exposing to the mart
His daughter, whom he bargains for, as do
The Corsairs for their slaves. O avarice!
What canst thou more, who hast subdued our blood
So wholly to thyself, they feel no care
Of their own flesh? To hide with direr guilt
Past ill and future, lo! the flower - de - luce[15]
Enters Alagna; in his Vicar Christ
Himself a captive, and his mockery
Acted again. Lo! to his holy lip
The vinegar and gall once more applied;
And he 'twixt living robbers doom'd to bleed.
Lo! the new Pilate, of whose cruelty
Such violence cannot fill the measure up,
With no decree to sanction, pushes on
Into the temple[16] his yet eager sails.

[15: "The flower-de-luce." Boniface VIII was seized at Alagna in Campagna, by the order of Philip IV, in the year 1303, and soon after died of grief. G. Villani, lib. viii. cap. lxxiii. "As it pleased God, the heart of Boniface being petrified with grief, through the injury he had sustained, when he came to Rome, he fell into a strange malady, for he gnawed himself as one frantic, and in this state expired." His character is strongly drawn by the annalist in the next chapter. Thus, says Landino, was verified the prophecy of Celestine respecting him, that he should enter on the popedom like a fox, reign like a lion, and die like a dog.]

[16: It is uncertain whether our Poet alludes still to the event mentioned in the preceding note, or to the destruction of the order of the Templars in 1310, but the latter appears more probable.]

"O sovran Master! when shall I rejoice
To see the vengeance, which Thy wrath, well - pleased,
In secret silence broods? - While daylight lasts,
So long what thou didst hear of her, sole spouse
Of the Great Spirit, and on which thou turn'dst
To me for comment, is the general theme
Of all our prayers; but, when it darkens, then
A different strain we utter; then record
Pygmalion, whom his gluttonous thirst of gold
Made traitor, robber, parricide: the woes
Of Midas, which his greedy wish ensued,
Mark'd for derision to all future times:
And the fond Achan,[17] how he stole the prey,
That yet he seems by Joshua's ire pursued.
Sapphira with her husband next we blame;
And praise the forefeet, that with furious ramp

[17: "Achan." Joshua vii.]

Spurn'd Heliodorus.[18] All the mountain round
Rings with the infamy of Thracia's king,[19]
Who slew his Phrygian charge: and last a shout
Ascends: 'Declare, O Crassus![20] for thou know'st,
The flavour of thy gold.' The voice of each
Now high, now low, as each his impulse prompts,
Is led through many a pitch, acute or grave.
Therefore, not singly, I erewhile rehearsed
That blessedness we tell of in the day:
But near me, none, beside, his accent raised."

[18: "Heliodorus." "For there appeared unto them an horse, with a terrible rider upon him, and adorned with a very fair covering, and he ran fiercely and smote at Heliodorus with his fore feet." 2 Maccabees iii. 25.]

[19: "Thracia's king." Polymnestor, the murderer of Polydorus. Hell, Canto xxx. 19.]

[20: "Crassus." Marcus Crassus, who fell miserably in the Parthian war.]

From him we now had parted, and essay'd
With utmost efforts to surmount the way;
When I did feel, as nodding to its fall,
The mountain tremble; whence an icy chill
Seized on me, as on one to death convey'd.
So shook not Delos, when Latona there
Couch'd to bring forth the twin - born eyes of Heaven.

Forthwith from every side a shout arose
So vehement, that suddenly my guide

Drew near, and cried: "Doubt not, while I conduct thee."
"Glory!" all shouted (such the sounds mine ear
Gather'd from those, who near me swell'd the sounds),
"Glory in the highest be to God." We stood
Immovably suspended, like to those,
The shepherds, who first heard in Bethlehem's field
That song: till ceased the trembling, and the song
Was ended: then our hallow'd path resumed,
Eying the prostrate shadows, who renew'd
Their custom'd mourning. Never in my breast
Did ignorance so struggle with desire
Of knowledge, if my memory do not err,
As in that moment; nor through haste dared I
To question, nor myself could aught discern.
So on I fared, in thoughtfulness and dread.

— Purgatory Canto 20