

Purgatory Canto 32

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Canto XXXII

Argument

Dante is warned not to gaze too fixedly on Beatrice. The procession moves on, accompanied by Matilda, Statius, and Dante, till they reach an exceeding lofty tree, where divers strange chances befall.

Mine eyes with such an eager coveting
Were bent to rid them of their ten years' thirst,[1]
Not other sense was waking: and e'en they
Were fenced on either side from heed of aught;
So tangled, in its custom'd toils, that smile
Of saintly brightness drew me to itself:
When forcibly, toward the left, my sight
The sacred virgins turn'd; for from their lips
I heard the warning sounds: "Too fix'd a gaze!"

[1: "Their ten years' thirst." Beatrice had been dead ten years.]

A while my vision labour'd; as when late
Upon the o'erstrained eyes the sun hath smote:
But soon, to lesser object, as the view
Was now recover'd, (lesser in respect
To that excess of sensible, whence late
I had perforce been sunder'd), on their right
I mark'd that glorious army wheel, and turn,
Against the sun and sevenfold lights, their front.
As when, their bucklers for protection raised,
A well - ranged troop, with portly banners curl'd,
Wheel circling, ere the whole can change their ground;
E'en thus the goodly regiment of Heaven
Proceeding, all did pass us, ere the car
Had sloped his beam. Attendant at the wheels
The damsels turn'd; and on the Gryphon moved
The sacred burden, with a pace so smooth,
No feather on him trembled. The fair dame,
Who through the wave had drawn me, companied
By Statius and myself, pursued the wheel,
Whose orbit, rolling, mark'd a lesser arch.

Through the high wood, now void, (the more her blame,
Who by the serpent was beguiled), I pass'd,

With step in cadence to the harmony
Angelic. Onward had we moved, as far,
Perchance, as arrow at three several flights
Full wing'd had sped, when from her station down
Descended Beatrice. With one voice
All murmur'd "Adam"; circling next a plant
Despoil'd of flowers and leaf, on every bough,
Its tresses, spreading more as more they rose,
Were such, as 'midst their forest wilds, for height,
The Indians might have gazed at. "Blessed thou,
Gryphon![2] whose beak hath never pluck'd that tree
Pleasant to taste: for hence the appetite
Was warp'd to evil." Round the stately trunk
Thus shouted forth the rest, to whom return'd
The animal twice - gender'd: "Yea! for so
The generation of the just are saved."
And turning to the chariot - pole, to foot
He drew it of the widow'd branch, and bound
There, left unto the stock whereon it grew.

[2: "Gryphon." Our Saviour's submission to the Roman Empire appears to be intended, and particularly his injunction to "render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's."]

As when large floods of radiance from above
Stream, with that radiance mingled, which ascends
Next after setting of the scaly sign,
Our plants then burgeon, and each wears anew
His wonted colours, ere the sun have yoked
Beneath another star his flamy steeds;
Thus putting forth a hue more faint than rose,
And deeper than the violet, was renew'd
The plant, erewhile in all its branches bare.
Unearthly was the hymn, which then arose.
I understood it not, nor to the end
Endured the harmony. Had I the skill
To pencil forth how closed the un pitying eyes
Slumbering, when Syrinx warbled, (eyes that paid
So dearly for their watching), then, like painter,
That with a model paints, I might design

The manner of my falling into sleep.
But feign who will the slumber cunningly,
I pass it by to when I waked; and tell,
How suddenly a flash of splendour rent
The curtain of my sleep, and one cries out,
"Arise; what dost thou?" As the chosen three,
On Tabor's mount, admitted to behold

The blossoming of that fair tree,[3] whose fruit
Is coveted of Angels, and doth make
Perpetual feast in Heaven; to themselves
Returning, at the word whence deeper sleeps[4]
Were broken, they their tribe diminish'd saw;
Both Moses and Elias gone, and changed
The stole their Master wore; thus to myself
Returning, over me beheld I stand
The piteous one,[5] who, cross the stream, had brought
My steps. "And where," all doubting, I exclaim'd,
"Is Beatrice?" - "See her," she replied,
"Beneath the fresh leaf, seated on its root.
Behold the associate choir that circles her.
The others, with a melody more sweet
And more profound, journeying to higher realms,
Upon the Gryphon tend." If there her words
Were closed, I know not; but mine eyes had now
Ta'en view of her, by whom all other thoughts
Were barr'd admittance. On the very ground
Alone she sat, as she had there been left
A guard upon the wain, which I beheld
Bound to the twoform beast. The seven nymphs
Did make themselves a cloister round about her;
And, in their hands, upheld those lights[6] secure
From blast septentrion and the gusty south.

[3: "The blossoming of that fair tree." Our Saviour's
transfiguration. "As the apple - tree among the trees of the wood, so is my
beloved among the sons." - Solomon's Song, ii. 3.]

[4: "Deeper sleeps." The sleep of death, in the instance of the ruler
of the synagogue's daughter and of Lazarus.]"

[5: "The piteous one." Matilda.]

[6: "Those lights." The tapers of gold.]

"A little while thou shalt be forester here;
And citizen shalt be, forever with me,
Of that true Rome,[7] wherein Christ dwells a Roman,

[7: "Of that true Rome." Of Heaven.]

To profit the misguided world, keep now
Thine eyes upon the car; and what thou seest,
Take heed thou write, returning to that place." [8]

[8: "To that place." To the earth.]

Thus Beatrice: at whose feet inclined
Devout, at her behest, my thought and eyes

I, as she bade, directed. Never fire,
With so swift motion, forth a stormy cloud
Leap'd downward from the welkin's farthest bound,
As I beheld the bird of Jove,[9] descen
Down through the tree; and, as he rush'd, the rind
Disparting crush beneath him; buds much more,
And leaflets. On the car, with all his might
He struck; whence, staggering, like a ship it reel'd,
At random driven, to starboard now, o'ercome,
And now to larboard, by the vaulting waves.

[9: "The bird of Jove." This, which is imitated from Ezekiel, xvii.
3, 4, is typical of the persecutions which the Church sustained from the Roman
emperors.]

Next, springing up into the chariot's womb,
A fox[10] I saw, with hunger seeming pined
Of all good food. But, for his ugly sins
The saintly maid rebuking him, away
Scampering he turn'd, fast as his hide - bound corpse
Would bear him. Next, from whence before he came,
I saw the eagle dart into the hull
O' the car, and leave it with his feathers lined:[11]
And then a voice, like that which issues forth
From heart with sorrow rived, did issue forth
From Heaven, and "O poor bark of mine!" it cried,
"How badly art thou freighted." Then it seem'd
That the earth open'd, between either wheel;
And I beheld a dragon[12] issue thence,
That through the chariot fix'd his forked train;
And like a wasp, that draggeth back the sting,
So drawing forth his baleful train, he dragg'd
Part of the bottom forth; and went his way,
Exulting. What remain'd, as lively turf

[10: "A fox." By the fox probably is represented the treachery of the
heretics.]

[11: "With his feathers lined." In allusion to the donations made by
Constantine to the Church.]

[12: "A dragon." Probably Mohammed; for what Lombardi offers to the
contrary is far from satisfactory.]

With green herb, so did clothe itself with plumes,[13]
Which haply had, with purpose chaste and kind,
Been offer'd; and therewith were clothed the wheels,
Both one and other, and the beam, so quickly,
A sigh were not breathed sooner. Thus transform'd,
The holy structure, through its several parts,

Did put forth heads;[14] three on the beam, and one
On every side: the first like oxen horn'd;
But with a single horn upon their front,
The four. Like monster, sight hath never seen.
O'er it[15] methought there sat, secure as rock
On mountain's lofty top, a shameless whore,
Whose ken roved loosely round her. At her side,
As 't were that none might bear her off, I saw
A giant stand; and ever and anon
They mingled kisses. But, her lustful eyes
Chancing on me to wander, that fell minion
Scourged her from head to foot all o'er; then full
Of jealousy, and fierce with rage, unloosed
The monster, and dragg'd on,[16] so far across
The forest, that from me its shades alone
Shielded the harlot and the new - form'd brute.

[13: "With plumes." The increase of wealth and temporal dominion, which followed the supposed gift of Constantine.]

[14: "Heads." By the seven heads, it is supposed with sufficient probability, are meant the seven capital sins: by the three with two horns, pride, anger, and avarice, injurious both to man himself and to his neighbor: by the four with one horn, gluttony, gloominess, concupiscence, and envy, hurtful, at least in their primary effects, chiefly to him who is guilty of them.]

[15: "O'er it." The harlot is thought to represent the state of the Church under Boniface VIII, and the giant to figure Philip IV of France.]

[16: "Dragg'd on." The removal of the Pope's residence from Rome to Avignon is pointed at.]