

Purgatory Canto 6

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Canto VI

Argument

Many besides, who are in like case with those spoken of in the last Canto, beseech our Poet to obtain for them the prayers of their friends, when he shall be returned to this world. This moves him to express a doubt to his guide, how the dead can be profited by the prayers of the living; for the solution of which doubt he is referred to Beatrice. Afterward he meets with Sordello the Mantuan, whose affection, shown to Virgil his countryman, leads Dante to break forth into an invective against the unnatural divisions with which Italy, and more especially Florence, was distracted.

When from their game of dice men separate,
He who hath lost remains in sadness fix'd,
Revolving in his mind what luckless throws
He cast: but, meanwhile, all the company
Go with the other; one before him runs,
And one behind his mantle twitches, one
Fast by his side bids him remember him.
He stops not; and each one, to whom his hand
Is stretch'd, well knows he bids him stand aside;
And thus[1] he from the press defends himself.
E'en such was I in that close - crowding throng;

[1: "And thus." It was usual for money to be given to bystanders at play by winners.]

And turning so my face around to all,
And promising, I 'scaped from it with pains.

Here of Arezzo him[2] I saw, who fell
By Ghino's cruel arm; and him beside,[3]
Who in his chase was swallow'd by the stream.
Here Frederic Novello,[4] with his hand
Stretch'd forth, entreated; and of Pisa he,[5]
Who put the good Marzucco to such proof
Of constancy. Count Orso[6] I beheld;
And from its frame a soul dismiss'd for spite
And envy, as it said, but for no crime;
I speak of Peter de la Brosse:[7] and here,
While she yet lives, that Lady of Brabant,
Let her beware; lest for so false a deed

She herd with worse than these. When I was freed
From all those spirits, who pray'd for others' prayers
To hasten on their state of blessedness;
Straight I began: "O thou, my luminary!
It seems expressly in thy text denied,
That Heaven's supreme decree can ever bend
To supplication; yet with this design
Do these entreat. Can then their hope be vain?"

[2: Benincasa of Arezzo, eminent for his skill in jurisprudence, who having condemned to death Turrino da Turrita, brother of Ghino di Tacco, for his robberies in Maremma, was murdered by Ghino, in an apartment of his own house, in the presence of many witnesses. Ghino was not only suffered to escape in safety, but obtained so high a reputation by the liberality with which he dispensed the fruits of his plunder, and treated those who fell into his hands with so much courtesy, that he was afterward invited to Rome, and knighted by Boniface VIII.]

[3: Cione, or Ciacco de' Tarlatti of Arezzo, carried by his horse into the Arno, and there drowned, while in pursuit of enemies.]

[4: "Frederic Novello." Son of the Conte Guido da Battifolle, and slain by one of the family of Bostoli.]

[5: Farinata de' Scornigiani, of Pisa. His father, Marzucco, who had entered the order of the Frati Minori, so entirely overcame his resentment, that he even kissed the hands of the slayer of his son, and as he was following the funeral, exhorted his kinsmen to reconciliation.]

[6: "Count Orso." Son of Napoleone da Cerbaia, slain by Alberto da Mangona, his uncle.]

[7: Secretary of Philip III of France. The courtiers envying the high place which he held in the King's favor, prevailed on Mary of Brabant to charge him falsely with an attempt upon her person; for which supposed crime he suffered death. So say the Italian commentators. Henault represents the matter very differently: "Pierre de la Brosse, formerly barber to St. Louis, afterward the favorite of Philip, fearing the too great attachment of the King for his wife Mary, accuses this princess of having poisoned Louis, eldest son of Philip, by his first marriage. This calumny is discovered by a nun of Nivelles, in Flanders. La Brosse is hanged."]

Or is thy saying not to me reveal'd?"

He thus to me: "Both what I write is plain,
And these deceived not in their hope; if well
Thy mind consider, that the sacred height
Of judgment doth not stoop, because love's flame
In a short moment all fulfills, which he,
Who sojourns here, in right should satisfy.
Besides, when I this point concluded thus,

By praying no defect could be supplied;
Because the prayer had none access to God.
Yet in this deep suspicion rest thou not
Contented, unless she assure thee so,
Who betwixt truth and mind infuses light:
I know not if thou take me right; I mean
Beatrice. Her thou shalt behold above,
Upon this mountain's crown, fair seat of joy."

Then I: "Sir! let us mend our speed; for now
I tire not as before: and lo! the hill[8]
Stretches its shadow far." He answer'd thus:
"Our progress with this day shall be as much
As we may now despatch; but otherwise
Than thou supposest is the truth. For there
Thou canst not be, ere thou once more behold
Him back returning, who behind the steep
Is now so hidden, that, as erst, his beam
Thou dost not break. But lo! a spirit there
Stands solitary, and toward us looks:
It will instruct us in the speediest way."

[8: "The hill." It was now past the moon.]

We soon approach'd it. O thou Lombard spirit!
How didst thou stand, in high abstracted mood,
Scarce moving with slow dignity thine eyes.
It spoke not aught, but let us onward pass,
Eying us as a lion on his watch.
But Virgil, with entreaty mild, advanced,
Requesting it to show the best ascent.
It answer to his question none return'd;
But of our country and our kind of life
Demanded. When my courteous guide began,
"Mantua," the shadow, in itself absorb'd,

Rose toward us from the place in which it stood,
And cried, "Mantuan! I am thy countryman,
Sordello." [9] Each the other then embraced.

[9: Sordello's life is wrapt in obscurity. He distinguished himself
by his skill in Provençal poetry and many feats of military prowess have been
attributed to him. It is probable that he was born at the end of the twelfth,
and died about the middle of the succeeding, century.]

Ah, slavish Italy! thou inn of grief!
Vessel without a pilot in loud storm!
Lady no longer of fair provinces,
But brothel - house impure! this gentle spirit,
Even from the pleasant sound of his dear land

Was prompt to greet a fellow citizen
With such glad cheer: while now thy living ones
In thee abide not without war; and one
Malicious gnaws another; ay, of those
Whom the same wall and the same moat contains.
Seek, wretched one! around the sea - coasts wide;
Then homeward to thy bosom turn; and mark,
If any part of thee sweet peace enjoy.
What boots it, that thy reins Justinian's hand
Refitted, if thy saddle be unprest?
Naught doth he now but aggravate thy shame.
Ah, people! thou obedient still should'st live,
And in the saddle let thy Caesar sit,
If well thou marked'st that which God commands.

Look how that beast to fellness hath relapsed,
From having lost correction of the spur,
Since to the bridle thou hast set thine hand,
O German Albert![10] who abandon'st her
That is grown savage and unmanageable,
When thou shouldst clasp her flanks with forked heels.
Just judgment from the stars fall on thy blood;
And be it strange and manifest to all;
Such as may strike thy successor[11] with dread;
For that thy sire[12] and thou have suffer'd thus,

[10: The Emperor Albert I succeeded Adolphus in 1298, and was murdered in 1308. See Paradise, Canto xix. 114.]

[11: Henry of Luxemburg, by whose interposition in the affairs of Italy our Poet hoped to have been reinstated in his native city.]

[12: The Emperor Rodolph, too intent on increasing his power in Germany to give much of his thoughts to Italy, "the garden of the empire."]

Through greediness of yonder realms detain'd,
The garden of the empire to run waste.
Come, see the Capulets and Montagues,[13]
The Filippeschi and Monaldi,[14] man
Who carest for naught! those sunk in grief, and these
With dire suspicion rack'd. Come, cruel one!
Come, and behold the oppression of the nobles,
And mark their injuries; and thou mayst see
What safety Santafiore can supply.[15]
Come and behold thy Rome, who calls on thee,
Desolate widow, day and night with moans,
"My Caesar, why dost thou desert my side?"
Come, and behold what love among thy people:
And if no pity touches thee for us,

Come, and blush for thine own report. For me,
If it be lawful, O Almighty Power!
Who wast on earth for our sakes crucified,
Are thy just eyes turn'd elsewhere? or is this
A preparation, in the wondrous depth
Of thy sage counsel made, for some good end,
Entirely from our reach of thought cut off?
So are the Italian cities all o'erthron'd
With tyrants, and a great Marcellus made
Of every petty factious villager.

[13: Two powerful Ghibelline families of Verona.]

[14: Two rival families in Orvieto.]

[15: A place between Pisa and Siena.]

My Florence! thou mayst well remain unmoved
At this digression, which affects not thee:
Thanks to thy people, who so wisely speed.
Many have justice in their heart, that long
Waiteth for counsel to direct the bow,
Or ere it dart unto its aim: but thine
Have it on their lips' edge. Many refuse
To bear the common burdens: readier thine
Answer uncall'd, and cry, "Behold I stoop!"

Make thyself glad, for thou hast reason now,
Thou wealthy! thou at peace! thou wisdom - fraught!
Facts best will witness if I speak the truth.
Athens and Lacedaemon, who of old
Enacted laws, for civil arts renown'd,

Made little progress in improving life
Toward thee, who usest such nice subtlety,
That to the middle of November scarce
Reaches the thread thou in October weavest.
How many times within thy memory,
Customs, and laws, and coins, and offices
Have been by thee renew'd, and people changed.

If thou remember'st well and canst see clear,
Thou wilt perceive thyself like a sick wretch,
Who finds no rest upon her down, but oft
Shifting her side, short respite seeks from pain.