

Inferno Canto 16

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Canto XVI

Argument

Journeying along the pier, which crosses the sand, they are now so near the end of it as to hear the noise of the stream falling into the eighth circle, when they meet the spirits of three military men; who judging Dante, from his dress, to be a countryman of theirs, entreat him to stop. He complies and speaks with them. The two Poets then reach the place where the water descends, being the termination of this third compartment in the seventh circle; and here Virgil, having thrown down into the hollow a cord, wherewith Dante was girt, they behold at that signal a monstrous and horrible figure come swimming up to them.

Now came I where the water's din was heard
As down it fell into the other round,
Resounding like the hum of swarming bees:
When forth together issued from a troop,
That pass'd beneath the fierce tormenting storm,
Three spirits, running swift. They toward us came,
And each one cried aloud, "Oh! do thou stay,
Whom, by the fashion of thy garb, we deem
To be some inmate of our evil land."

Ah me! what wounds I mark'd upon their limbs,
Recent and old, inflicted by the flames.
E'en the remembrance of them grieves me yet.

Attentive to their cry, my teacher paused,
And turned to me his visage, and then spake:
"Wait now: our courtesy these merit well:
And were't not for the nature of the place,
Whence glide the fiery darts, I should have said,
That haste had better suited thee than them."

They, when we stopp'd, resumed their ancient wail,
And, soon as they had reach'd us, all the three
Whirl'd round together in one restless wheel.
As naked champions, smear'd with slippery oil
Are wont, intent, to watch their place of hold
And vantage, ere in closer strife they meet;
Thus each one, as he wheel'd, his countenance
At me directed, so that opposite

The neck moved ever to the twinkling feet.

"If woe of this unsound and dreary waste,"
Thus one began, "added to our sad cheer
Thus peel'd with flame, do call forth scorn on us
And our entreaties, let our great renown
Incline thee to inform us who thou art,
That dost imprint, with living feet unharm'd,
The soil of Hell. He, in whose track thou seest
My steps pursuing, naked though he be
And reft of all, was of more high estate
Than thou believest; grandchild of the chaste
Gualdrada,[1] him they Guidoguerra call'd,
Who in his lifetime many a noble act
Achieved, both by his wisdom and his sword.
The other, next to me that beats the sand,
Is Aldobrandi,[2] name deserving well,
In the upper world, of honor; and myself,
Who in this torment do partake with them,
Am Rusticucci,[3] whom, past doubt, my wife,
Of savage temper, more than aught beside
Hath to this evil brought." If from the fire
I had been shelter'd, down amidst them straight
I then had cast me; nor my guide, I deem,
Would have restrain'd my going: but that fear
Of the dire burning vanquish'd the desire,
Which made me eager of their wish'd embrace.

[1: Gualdrada." Gualdrada was the daughter of Bellincione Berti, of whom mention is made in the Paradise, Cantos xv and xvi. He was of the family of Ravnani, a branch of the Adimari. The Emperor Otho IV being at a festival in Florence, where Gualdrada was present, was struck with her beauty; and inquiring who she was, was answered by Bellincione, that she was the daughter of one who, if it was his Majesty's pleasure, would make her admit the honor of his salute. On overhearing this, she arose from her seat, and blushing, desired her father that he would not be so liberal in his offers. The Emperor was delighted by her resolute modesty, and calling to him Guido, one of his barons, gave her to him in marriage; at the same time raising him to the rank of a count, and bestowing on her the whole of Casentino, and a part of the territory of Romagna, as her portion. Two sons were the offspring of this union, Guglielmo and Ruggieri; the latter was father of Guidoguerra, who, at the head of four hundred Florentines of the Guelf party, was signally instrumental to the victory of Charles of Anjou at Benevento, over Manfredi, King of Naples, in 1265. One consequence of this was the expulsion of the Ghibellini and the re - establishment of the Guelfi at Florence.]

[2: Tegghiaio Aldobrandi endeavored to dissuade the Florentines from the attack which they meditated against the Siennese; the rejection of his

counsel occasioned the defeat which the former sustained at Montaperto, and the consequent banishment of the Guelfi from Florence.]

[3: Giacomo Rusticucci, a Florentine, remarkable for his opulence and generosity of spirit.]

I then began: "Nor scorn, but grief much more,
Such as long time alone can cure, your doom
Fix'd deep within me, soon as this my lord
Spake words, whose tenor taught me to expect
That such a race, as ye are, was at hand.
I am a countryman of yours, who still
Affectionate have utter'd, and have heard
Your deeds and names renown'd. Leaving the gall,
For the sweet fruit I go, that a sure guide
Hath promised to me. But behoves, that far
As to the centre first I downward tend."

"So may long space thy spirit guide thy limbs,"
He answer straight return'd; "and so thy fame
Shine bright when thou art gone, as thou shalt tell,
If courtesy and valor, as they wont,
Dwell in our city, or have vanish'd clean:
For one amidst us late condemn'd to wail,
Borsiere,[4] yonder walking with his peers,
Grieves us no little by the news he brings."

[4: Guglielmo Borsiere, a Florentine, whom Boccaccio terms " a man of courteous and elegant manners, and of great readiness in conversation."]

"An upstart multitude and sudden gains,
Pride and excess, O Florence! have in thee
Engender'd, so that now in tears thou mourn'st!"

Thus cried I, with my face upraised, and they
All three, who for an answer took my words,
Look'd at each other, as men look when truth
Comes to their ear. "If at so little cost,"
They all at once rejoin'd, "thou satisfy
Others who question thee, O happy thou!
Gifted with words so apt to speak thy thought.
Wherefore, if thou escape this darksome clime,
Returning to behold the radiant stars,
When thou with pleasure shalt retrace the past,[5]
See that of us thou speak among mankind."
This said, they broke the circle, and so swift
Fled, that as pinions seem'd their nimble feet.

[5: "Quando ti giovera dicere io fui." So Tasso, "G.L." c. xv. st.

38: "Quando mi giovera narrar altrui Le novita vedute, e dire; io fui."]

Not in so short a time might one have said
"Amen," as they had vanish'd. Straight my guide
Pursued his track. I follow'd: and small space
Had we past onward, when the water's sound
Was now so near at hand, that we had scarce
Heard one another's speech for the loud din.

E'en as the river,[6] that first holds its course
Unmingled from the Mount of Vesulo,
On the left side of Apennine, toward
The east, which Acquacheta higher up
They call, ere it descend into the vale,
At Forli,[7] by that name no longer known,
Rebellows o'er Saint Benedict, roll'd on
From the Alpine summit down a precipice,
Where space[8] enough to lodge a thousand spreads;
Thus downward from a craggy steep we found
That this dark wave resounded, roaring loud,
So that the ear its clamour soon had stunn'd.

[6: He compares the fall of Phlegethon to that of the Montone (a river in Romagna) from the Apennines above the Abbey of St. Benedict. All the other streams that rise between the sources of the Po and the Montone, and fall from the left side of the Apennines, join the Po and accompany it to the sea.]

[7: There it loses the name of Acquacheta, and takes that of Montone.]

[8: Either because the abbey was capable of containing more than those who occupied it, or because (says Landino) the lords of that territory had intended to build a castle near the water - fall, and to collect within its walls the population of the neighboring villages.]

I had a cord[9] that braced my girdle round,
Wherewith I erst had thought fast bound to take
The painted leopard. This when I had all
Unloosen'd from me (so my master bade)
I gather'd up, and stretch'd it forth to him.
Then to the right he turn'd, and from the brink
Standing few paces distant, cast it down
Into the deep abyss. "And somewhat strange,"
Thus to myself I spake, "signal so strange
Betokens, which my guide with earnest eye
Thus follows." Ah! what caution must men use
With those who look not at the deed alone,
But spy into the thoughts with subtle skill.

[9: "A cord." It is believed that our poet in early life, had entered into the order of St. Francis. By observing the rules of that profession he

had designed "to take the painted leopard" (that animal represented Pleasure)
"with this cord."}]

"Quickly shall come," he said, "what I expect;
Thine eye discover quickly that, whereof
Thy thought is dreaming." Ever to that truth,
Which but the semblance of a falsehood wears,
A man, if possible, should bar his lip;
Since, although blameless, he incurs reproach.
But silence here were vain; and by these notes,
Which now I sing, reader, I swear to thee,
So may they favor find to latest times!
That through the gross and murky air I spied
A shape come swimming up, that might have quell'd
The stoutest heart with wonder; in such guise
As one returns, who hath been down to loose
An anchor grappled fast against some rock,
Or to aught else that in the salt wave lies,
Who, upward springing, close draws in his feet.