

Inferno Canto 19

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Canto XIX

Argument

They come to the third gulf, wherein are punished those who have been guilty of simony. These are fixed with the head downward in certain apertures, so that no more of them than the legs appears without, and on the soles of their feet are seen burning flames. Dante is taken down by his guide into the bottom of the gulf; and there finds Pope Nicholas V, whose evil deeds, together with those of other pontiffs, are bitterly reprehended. Virgil then carries him up again to the arch, which affords them a passage over the following gulf.

Woe to thee, Simon Magus! woe to you,
His wretched followers! who the things of God,
Which should be wedded unto goodness, them,
Rapacious as ye are, do prostitute
For gold and silver in adultery.
Now must the trumpet sound for you, since yours
Is the third chasm. Upon the following vault
We now had mounted, where the rock impends
Directly o'er the centre of the foss.

Wisdom Supreme! ow wonderful the art,
Which Thou dost manifest in Heaven, in earth,
And in the evil world, how just a meed
Allotting by Thy virtue unto all.

I saw the livid stone, throughout the sides
And in its bottom full of apertures,
All equal in their width, and circular each.
Nor ample less nor larger they appear'd
Than, in Saint John's fair dome[1] of me beloved,
Those framed to hold the pure baptismal streams,
One of the which I brake, some few years past,
To save a whelming infant: and be this
A seal to undeceive whoever doubts
The motive of my deed. From out the mouth
Of every one emerged a sinner's feet,
And of the legs high upward as the calf.
The rest beneath was hid. On either foot
The soles were burning; whence the flexile joints
Glanced with such violent motion, as had snapt

[1: The apertures in the rock were of the same dimensions as the fonts of St. John the Baptist at Florence, one of which Dante had broken to rescue a child that was playing near and fell in. He intimates that his motive for breaking the font had been maliciously represented by his enemies.]

Asunder cords or twisted withes. As flame,
Feeding on unctuous matter, glides along
The surface, scarcely touching where it moves;
So here, from heel to point, glided the flames.

"Master! say who is he, than all the rest
Glancing in fiercer agony, on whom
A ruddier flame doth prey?" I thus inquired.

"If thou be willing," he replied. "that I
Carry thee down, where least the slope bank falls,
He of himself shall tell thee, and his wrongs."

I then: "As pleases thee, to me is best.
Thou art my lord; and know'st that ne'er I quit
Thy will: what silence hides, that knowest thou."

Thereat on the fourth pier we came, we turn'd
And on our left descended to the depth,
A narrow strait, and perforated close.
Nor from his side my leader set me down,
Till to his orifice he brought, whose limb
Quivering express'd his pang. "Whoe'er thou art,
Sad spirit! thus reversed, and as a stake
Driven in the soil," - I in these words began;
"If thou be able, utter forth thy voice."

There stood I like the friar, that doth shrive
A wretch for murder doom'd, who, e'en when fix'd,
Calleth him back, whence death awhile delays.

He shouted: "Ha! already standest there?
Already standest there, O Boniface![2]
By many a year the writing play'd me false.
So early dost thou surfeit with the wealth,
For which thou fearedst not in guile to take
The lovely lady, and then mangle her?"

[2: The spirit mistakes Dante for Boniface VIII (who was then alive, and not expected to arrive so soon, a prophecy predicting the death of that pope at a later period. Boniface died in 1303.)

I felt as those who, piercing not the drift
Of answer made them, stand as if exposed
In mockery, nor know what to reply;
When Virgil thus admonish'd: "Tell him quick,

"I am not he, not he whom thou believest."

And I, as was enjoin'd me, straight replied.

That heard, the spirit all did wrench his feet,
And, sighing, next in woeful accent spake:
"What then of me requirest? If to know
So much imports thee, who I am, that thou
Hast therefore down the bank descended, learn
That in the mighty mantle I was robed,[3]
And of a she - bear was indeed the son,
So eager to advance my whelps, that there
My having in my purse above I stow'd,
And here myself. Under my head are dragg'd
The rest, my predecessors in the guilt
Of simony. Stretch'd at their length, they lie
Along an opening in the rock. 'Midst them
I also low shall fall, soon as he comes,
For whom I took thee, when so hastily
I question'd. But already longer time
Hath past, since my soles kindled, and I thus
Upturn'd have stood, than is his doom to stand
Planted with fiery feet. For after him,
One yet of deeds more ugly shall arrive,
From forth the west, a shepherd without law,[4]
Fated a cover both his form and mine.
He a new Jason[5] shall be call'd, of whom
In Maccabees we read; and favor such
As to that priest his King indulgent show'd,
Shall be of France's monarch[6] shown to him."

[3: Nicholas III of the Orsini family, whom the Poet therefore calls "figliuol dell' orsa," "son of the she - bear." He died in 1281.]

[4: Bertrand de Got, Archbishop of Bordeaux, who succeeded to the pontificate in 1305, as Clement V. He transferred the Holy See to Avignon in 1308 (where it remained till 1376), and died in 1314.]

[5: "But after the death of Seleucus, when Antiochus, called Epiphanes, took the kingdom, Jason, the brother of Onias, labored to be high - priest, promising unto the king, by intercession, three hundred and threescore talents of silver, and of another revenue eighty talents." - Maccab. b. ii. ch. iv, 7,8.]

[6: Philip IV. See G. Villani, lib. viii. c. lxxx.]

I know not if I here too far presumed,
But in this strain I answer'd: "Tell me now
What treasures from Saint Peter at the first
Our Lord demanded, when he put the keys

Into his charge? Surely he ask'd no more
But 'Follow me!' Nor Peter,[7] nor the rest,

[7: Acts of the Apostles, ch. i. 26.]

Or gold or silver of Matthias took,
When lots were cast upon the forfeit place
Of the condemned soul.[8] Abide thou then;
Thy punishment of right is merited:
And look thou well to that ill - gotten coin,
Which against Charles[9] thy hardihood inspired.
If reverence of the keys restrain'd me not,
Which thou in happier time didst hold, I yet
Severer speech might use. Your avarice
O'ercasts the world with mourning, under foot
Treading the good, and raising bad men up.
Of shepherds like to you, the Evangelist
Was ware, when her, who sits upon the waves,
With kings in filthy whoredom he beheld;
She who with seven heads tower'd at her birth,
And from ten horns her proof of glory drew,
Long as her spouse in virtue took delight.
Of gold and silver ye have made your god,
Differing wherein from the idolater,
But that he worships one, a hundred ye?
Ah, Constantine![10] to how much ill gave birth,
Not thy conversion, but that plenteous dower,
Which the first wealthy Father gain'd from thee."

[8: "The condemned soul." Judas.]

[9: Nicholas III was enraged against Charles I, King of Sicily,
because he rejected with scorn his proposition for an alliance between their
families. See G. Villani, Hist., lib. iii.]

[10: He alludes to the pretended gift of the Lateran by Constantine
to Sylvester, of which Dante himself seems to imply a doubt, in his treatise
"De Monarchia."]

Meanwhile, as thus I sung, he, whether wrath
Or conscience smote him, violent upsprang
Spinning on either sole. I do believe
My teacher well was pleased, with so composed
A lip he listen'd ever to the sound
Of the true words I utter'd. In both arms
He caught, and, to his bosom lifting me,
Upward retraced the way of his descent.

Nor weary of his weight, he press'd me close,
Till to the summit of the rock we came,

Our passage from the fourth to the fifth pier.
His cherish'd burden there gently he placed

Upon the rugged rock and steep, a path
Not easy for the clambering goat to mount.

Thence to my view another vale appear'd.

— Inferno Canto 19