

Inferno Canto 33

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Canto XXXIII

Argument

The Poet is told by Count Ugolino de' Gherardeschi of the cruel manner in which he and his children were famished in the tower at Pisa, by command of the Archbishop Ruggieri. He next discourses of the third round, called Ptolomea, wherein those are punished who have betrayed others under the semblance of kindness; and among these he finds the Friar Alberigo de' Manfredi, who tells him of one whose soul was already tormented in that place, though his body appeared still to be alive upon the earth, being yielded up to the governance of a fiend.

His jaws uplifting from their fell repast,
That sinner wiped them on the hairs o' the head,
Which he behind had mangled, then began:
"Thy will obeying, I call up afresh
Sorrow past cure; which, but to think of, wrings
My heart, or ere I tell on 't. But if words,
That I may utter, shall prove seed to bear
Fruit of eternal infamy to him,
The traitor whom I gnaw at, thou at once
Shalt see me speak and weep. Who thou mayst be
I know not, nor how here below art come:
But Florentine thou seemest of a truth,
When I do hear thee. Know, I was on earth
Count Ugolino,[1] and the Archbishop he

[1: "Count Ugolino." - "In the year 1288, in the month of July, Pisa was much divided by competitors for the sovereignty; one party, composed of certain of the Guelfi, being headed by the Judge Nino di Gallura de' Visconti; another, consisting of others of the same faction, by the Count Ugolino de' Gherardeschi; and a third by the Archbishop Ruggieri degli Ubaldini, with the Lanfranchi, Sismondi, Gualandi, and other Ghibelline houses. The Count Ugolino, to effect his purpose, united with the archbishop and his party, and having betrayed Nino, his sister's son, they contrived that he and his followers should either be driven out of Pisa, or their persons seized. Nino hearing this, and not seeing any means of defending himself, retired to Calci, his castle, and formed an alliance with the Florentines and the people of Lucca, against the Pisans. The count, before Nino was gone, in order to cover his treachery, when everything was settled for his expulsion, quitted Pisa, and repaired to a manor of his called Settimo; whence, as soon as he was

informed of Nino's departure, he returned to Pisa with great rejoicing and festivity, and was elevated to the supreme power with every demonstration of triumph and honor. But his greatness was not of long continuance. It pleased the Almighty that a total reverse of fortune should ensue, as a punishment for his acts of treachery and guilt; for he was said to have poisoned the Count Anselmo da Capraia, his sister's son, on account of the envy and fear excited in his mind by the high's esteem in which the gracious manners of Anselmo were held by the Pisans. The power of the Guelfi being so much diminished, the archbishop devised means to betray the Count Ugolino, and caused him to be suddenly attacked in his palace by the fury of the people, whom he had exasperated, by telling them that Ugolino had betrayed Pisa, and given up their castles to the citizens of Florence and of Lucca. He was immediately compelled to surrender; his bastard son and his grandson fell in the assault; and two of his sons, with their two sons also, were conveyed to prison. . . . In the following March, the Pisans, who had imprisoned the Count Ugolino, with two of his sons and two of his grandchildren, the offspring of his son the Count Guelfo, in a tower on the Piazza of the Anziani, caused the tower to be locked, the key thrown into the Arno, and all food to be withheld from them. In a few days they died of hunger; but the Count first with loud cries declared his penitence, and yet neither priest nor friar was allowed to shrive him. All the five, when dead, were dragged out of the prison, and meanly interred; and from thenceforward the tower was called the Tower of Famine, and so shall ever be." G. Villani, lib. vii.]

Ruggieri. Why I neighbor him so close,
Now list. That through effect of his ill thoughts
In him my trust reposing, I was ta'en
And after murder'd, need is not I tell.
What therefore thou canst not have heard, that is,
How cruel was the murder, shalt thou hear,
And know if he have wrong'd me. A small grate
Within that mew, which for my sake the name
Of Famine bears, where others yet must pine,
Already through its opening several moons
Had shown me, when I slept the evil sleep
That from the future tore the curtain off.
This one, methought, as master of the sport,
Rode forth to chase the gaunt wolf, and his whelps,
Unto the mountain[2] which forbids the sight
Of Lucca to the Pisan. With lean brachs
Inquisitive and keen, before him ranged

[2: The mountain S. Giuliano between Pisa and Lucca.]

Lanfranchi with Sismondi and Gualandi.
After short course the father and the sons
Seem'd tired and lagging, and methought I saw
The sharp tusks gore their sides. When I awoke,

Before the dawn, amid their sleep I heard
My sons (for they were with me) weep and ask
For bread. Right cruel art thou, if no pang
Thou feel at thinking what my heart foretold;
And if not now, why use thy tears to flow?
Now had they waken'd; and the hour drew near
When they were wont to bring us food; the mind
Of each misgave him through his dream, and I
Heard, at its outlet underneath, lock'd up
The horrible tower: whence, uttering not a word,
I look'd upon the visage of my sons.
I wept not: so all stone I felt within.
They wept: and one, my little Anselmo, cried,
'Thou lookest so! Father, what ails thee?' Yet
I shed no tear, nor answer'd all that day
Nor the next night, until another sun
Came out upon the world. When a faint beam
Had to our doleful prison made its way,
And in four countenances I described
The image of my own, on either hand
Through agony I bit; and they, who thought
I did it through desire of feeding, rose
O' the sudden, and cried, 'Father, we should grieve
Far less if thou wouldst eat of us: thou gavest
These weeds of miserable flesh we wear;
And do thou strip them off from us again.'
Then, not to make them sadder, I kept down
My spirit in stillness. That day and the next
We all were silent. Ah, obdurate earth!
Why open'dst not upon us? When we came
To the fourth day, then Gaddo at my feet
Outstretch'd did fling him, crying, 'Hast no help
For me, my father!' There he died; and e'en
Plainly as thou seest me, saw I the three
Fall one by one 'twixt the fifth day and sixth:
Whence I betook me, now grown blind, to grope
Over them all, and for three days aloud
Call'd on them who were dead. Then, fasting got
The mastery of grief." Thus having spoke,
Once more upon the wretched skull his teeth
He fasten'd like a mastiff's 'gainst the bone,
Firm and unyielding. O thou Pisa! shame
Of all the people, who their dwelling make
In that fair region, where the Italian voice
Is heard; since that thy neighbors are so slack
To punish, from their deep foundations rise
Capraia and Gorgona,[3] and dam up

The mouth of Arno; that each soul in thee
May perish in the waters. What if fame
Reported that thy castles were betray'd
By Ugolino, yet no right hadst thou
To stretch his children on the rack. For them,
Brigata, Uguccione, and the pair
Of gentle ones, of whom my song hath told,
Their tender years, thou modern Thebes, did make
Uncapable of guilt. Onward we pass'd,
Where others, skarf'd in rugged folds of ice,
Not on their feet were turn'd, but each reversed.

[3: Small islands, near the mouth of the Arno.]

There, very weeping suffers not to weep;
For, at their eyes, grief, seeking passage, finds
Impediment, and rolling inward turns
For increase of sharp anguish: the first tears
Hang cluster'd, and like crystal vizors show,
Under the socket brimming all the cup.

Now though the cold had from my face dislodged
each feeling, as 't were callous, yet me seem'd
Some breath of wind I felt. "Whence cometh this,"
Said I, "my Master? Is not here below
All vapor quench'd?" - "Thou shalt be speedily,"
He answer'd, "where thine eyes shall tell thee whence,
The cause descrying of this airy shower."

Then cried out one, in the chill crust who mourn'd:
"O souls! so cruel, that the farthest post
Hath been assign'd you, from this face remove
The harden'd veil; that I may vent the grief
Impregnate at my heart, some little space,

Ere it congeal again." I thus replied:
"Say who thou wast, if thou wouldst have mine aid;
And if I extricate thee not, far down
As to the lowest ice may I descend."

"The friar Alberigo,"[4] answer'd he,
"Am I, who from the evil garden pluck'd
Its fruitage, and am here repaid, the date
More luscious for my fig." - "Hah!" I exclaim'd,
"Art thou, too, dead?" "How in the world aloft
It fareth with my body," answer'd he,
"I am right ignorant. Such privilege
Hath Ptolomea,[5] that oft - times the soul
Drops hither, ere by Atropos divorced.
And that thou mayst wipe out more willingly

The glazed tear - drops that o'erlay mine eyes,
Know that the soul, that moment she betrays,
As I did, yields her body to
a fiend
Who after moves and governs it at will,
Till all its time be rounded: headlong she
Falls to this cistern. And perchance above
Doth yet appear the body of a ghost,
Who here behind me winters. Him thou know'st,
If thou but newly art arrived below.
The years are many that have passed away,
Since to this fastness Branca Doria[6] came."

[4: The friar Alberigo, " Alberigo de' Manfredi, of Faenza, one of the Frati Godenti (Joyous Friars), who having quarrelled with some of his brotherhood, under pretence of wishing to be reconciled, invited them to a banquet, at the conclusion of which he called for the fruit, a signal for the assassins to rush in and despatch those whom he had marked for destruction. Hence, adds Landino, it is said proverbially of one who has been stabbed, that he had had some of the friar Alberigo's fruit.]

[5: "Ptolomea." This circle is named Ptolomea from Ptolemy the son of Abubus, by whom Simon and his sons were murdered, at a great banquet he had made for them. See I Maccabees, ch. xvi. Or from Ptolemy, King of Egypt, the betrayer of Pompey the Great.]

[6: "Branca Doria." The family of Doria was possessed of great influence in Genoa. Branca is said to have murdered his father - in - law, Michel Zanche. See Canto xxii.]

"Now," answer'd I, "methinks thou mockest me;
For Branca Doria never yet hath died,
But doth all natural functions of a man,
Eats, drinks, and sleeps, and putteth raiment on."

He thus: "Not yet unto that upper foss
By th' evil talons guarded, where the pitch
Tenacious boils, had Michel Zanche reach'd,
When this one left a demon in his stead
In his own body, and of one his kin,
Who with him treachery wrought. But now put forth
Thy hand, and ope mine eyes." I oped them not.
Ill manners were best courtesy to him.

Ah Genoese! men perverse in every way
With every foulness stain'd why from the earth
Are ye not cancel'd? Such an one of yours
I with Romagna's darkest spirit[7] found,
As, for his doings, even now in soul
Is in Cocytus plunged, and yet doth seem

In body still alive upon the earth.

[7: The friar Alberigo.]

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