

Paradise Canto 16

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Canto XVI

Argument

Cacciaguida relates the time of his birth; and, describing the extent of Florence when he lived there, recounts the names of the chief families who then inhabited it. Its degeneracy, and subsequent disgrace, he attributes to the introduction of families from the neighboring country and villages, and to their mixture with the primitive citizens.

O slight respect of man's nobility!
I never shall account it marvellous,
That our infirm affection here below
Thou movest to boasting; when I could not chuse,
E'en in that region of unwarp'd desire,
In Heaven itself, but make my vaunt in thee.
Yet cloak thou art soon shorten'd; for that Time,
Unless thou be eked out from day to day,
Goes round thee with his shears. Resuming then,
With greeting[1] such as Rome was first to bear,
But since hath disaccustom'd, I began:
And Beatrice, that a little space
Was sever'd, smiled; reminding me of her,
Whose cough embolden'd (as the story holds)
To first offence the doubting Guenever.[2]

[1: "With greeting." The Poet, who had addressed the spirit, not knowing him to be his ancestor, with a plain "Thou," now uses more ceremony, and calls him "You," according to a custom of the Romans in the latter times of the empire.]

[2: Beatrice's smile reminded him of the female servant who, by her coughing, emboldened Queen Guenever to encourage Lancelot. See Hell, Canto v. 124.]

"You are my sire," said I: "you give me heart
Freely to speak my thought: above myself
You raise me. Through so many streams with joy
My soul is fill'd, that gladness wells from it;
So that it bears the mighty tide, and bursts not.
Say then, my honour'd stem! what ancestors
Were those you sprang from, and what years were mark'd
In your first childhood? Tell me of the fold,[3]

That hath Saint John for guardian, what was then
Its state, and who in it were highest seated!"

[3: Florence, of which John the Baptist was the patron saint.]

As embers, at the breathing of the wind,
Their flame enliven; so that light I saw
Shine at my blandishments; and, as it grew
More fair to look on, so with voice more sweet,
Yet not in this our modern phrase, forthwith
It answer'd: "From the day,[4] when it was said
'Hail Virgin!' to the throes by which my mother,
Who now is sainted, lighten'd her of me
Whom she was heavy with, this fire had come
Five hundred times and fourscore, to relume
Its radiance underneath the burning foot
Of its own lion. They, of whom I sprang,
And I, had there our birth - place, where the last[5]
Partition of our city first if reach'd
By him that runs her annual game. Thus much
Suffice of my forefathers: who they were,
And whence they hither came, more honourable
It is to pass in silence than to tell.
All those, who at that time were there, betwixt
Mars and the Baptist, fit to carry arms,
Were but the fifth of them this day alive.
But then the citizen's blood, that now is mix'd
From Campi and Certaldo and Figline,[6]
Ran purely through the last mechanic's veins.
O how much better were it, that these people[7]
Were neighbours to you; and that at Galluzzo
And at Trespiano ye should have your boundary;
Than to have them within, and bear the stench
Of Aguglione's hind, and Signa's,[8] him,
That hath his eye already keen for bartering.
Had not the people,[9] which of all the world

[4: From the incarnation of our Lord to the birth of Cacciaguida, the planet Mars had returned 580 times to the constellation of Leo, with which it is supposed to have a congenial influence. As Mars then completed his revolution in a period of forty - three days short of two years, Cacciaguida was born about 1090.]

[5: The city was divided into four compartments. The Elisei, the ancestors of Dante, resided near the entrance of that named from the Porta S. Piero, which was the last reached by the competitor in the annual race at Florence.]

[6: Country places near Florence.]

[7: "That the inhabitants of the above - mentioned places had not been mixed with the citizens; nor the limits of Florence extended beyond Galluzzo and Trespiano."]

[8: Baldo of Aguglione, and Bonifazio of Signa.]

[9: If Rome had continued in her allegiance to the Emperor, and the Guelfi - Ghibelline factions had thus been prevented, Florence would not have been polluted by a race of upstarts, nor lost her best element.]

Degenerates most, been stepdame unto Caesar,
But, as a mother to her son, been kind,
Such one, as hath become a Florentine,
And trades and traffics, hath been turn'd adrift
To Simifonte,[10] where his grandsire plied
The beggar's craft: the Conti were possest
Of Montemurlo[11] still: the Cerchi still
Were in Acone's parish: nor had haply
From Valdigrève passed the Buondelmonti.
The city's malady hath ever source
In the confusion of its persons, as
The body's, in variety of food:
And the blind bull falls with a steeper plunge,
Than the blind lamb: and oftentimes one sword
Doth more and better execution,
Than five. Mark Luni; Urbisaglia[12] mark;
How they are gone; and after them how go
Chiusi and Sinigaglia![13] and't will seem
No longer new, or strange to thee, to hear
That families fail, when cities have their end.
All things that appertain to ye, like yourselves,
Are mortal: but mortality in some
Ye mark not; they endure so long, and you
Pass by so suddenly. And as the moon
Doth, by the rolling of her heavenly sphere,
Hide and reveal the strand unceasingly;
So fortune deals with Florence. Hence admire not
At what of them I tell thee, whose renown
Time covers, the first Florentines. I saw
The Ughi, Catilini, and Filippi,
The Alberichi, Greci, and Ormanni,
Now in their wane, illustrious citizens;
And great as ancient, of Sannella him,
With him of Arca saw, and Soldanieri,

[10: A castle dismantled by the Florentines. The person here alluded to is not known.]

[11: The Conti Guidi, unable to defend their castle from the

Pistoians, sold it to the state of Florence.]

[12: Cities formerly of importance, but then fallen to decay.]

[13: The same.]

And Ardinghi, and Bostichi. At the poop[14]
That now is laden with new felony
So cumbrous it may speedily sink the bark,
The Ravignani sat, or whom is sprung
The County Guido, and whoso hath since
His title from the famed Bellincion ta'en.
Fair governance was yet an art well prized
By him of Pressa: Galigaio show'd
The gilded hilt and pommel,[15] in his house;
The column, clothed with verrey,[16] still was seen
Unshaken; the Sacchetti still were great,
Giuochi, Fifanti, Galli, and Barucci,
With them[17] who blush to hear the bushel named.
Of the Calfucci still the branchy trunk
Was in its strength: and, to the curule chairs,
Sizii and Arrigucci[18] yet were drawn.
How mighty them[19] I saw, whom, since, their pride
Hath undone! And in all their goodly deeds
Florence was, by the bullets of bright gold,[20]
O'erflourish'd. Such the sires of those,[21] who now,
As surely as your church is vacant, flock
Into her consistory, and at leisure
There stall them and grow fat. The o'erweening broad,[22]
That plays the dragon after him that flees,
But unto such as turn and show the tooth,
Ay or the purse, is gentle as a lamb,
Was on its rise, but yet so slight esteem'd,
That Ubertino of Donati grudged
His father - in - law should yoke him to its tribe.

[14: The Cerchi, Dante's enemies, had succeeded to the houses over the gate of St. Peter.]

[15: The symbols of knighthood.]

[16: The arms of the Pigli, or as some wrote it, the Billi.]

[17: Either the Chiaramontesi, or the Tosinghi; one of which had committed a fraud in measuring out the wheat from the public granary. See Purgatory, Canto xii. 99.]

[18: "These families still obtained the magistracies."]

[19: "Them." The Uberti.]

[20: The arms of the Abbati, or of the Lamberti.]

[21: Of the Visdomini, the Tosinghi, and the Cortigiani, who, being sprung from the founders of the bishopric of Florence, are the curators of its revenues, which they do not spare, whenever it becomes vacant.]

[22: This family was so little esteemed that Ubertino Donato, of the same stock as his wife, was offended with his father - in - law, Bellincion Berti, for giving another daughter to one of them.]

Already Caponsacco[23] had descended
Into the mart from Fesole: and Giuda
And Infangato[24] were good citizens.
A thing incredible I tell, though true:
The gateway, named from those of Pera, led
Into the narrow circuit of your wells.
Each one, who bears the slightly quarterings
Of the great Baron,[25] (he whose name and worth
The festival of Thomas still revives,
His knighthood and his privilege retain'd;
Albeit one,[26] who borders them with gold,
This day is mingled with the common herd.
In Borgo yet the Gualterotti dwelt,
And Importuni,[27] well for its repose,
Had it still lack'd of newer neighbourhood.[28]
The house,[29] from whence your tears have had their spring,
Through the just anger, that hath murder'd ye
And put a period to your gladsome days,
Was honour'd; it, and those consorted with it.
O Buondelmonte! what ill counselling
Prevail'd on thee to break the plighted bond?
Many, who now are weeping, would rejoice,
Had God to Ema[30] given thee, the first time
Thou near our city camest. But so was doom'd:

[23: The Caponsacchi, who had removed from Fiesole.]

[24: Guida Guidi and the family of Infangati.]

[25: The Marchese Ugo, who resided at Florence as lieutenant of the Emperor Otho III, gave many of the chief families license to bear his arms. A vision is related, in consequence of which he sold all his possessions in Germany, and founded seven abbeys, in one whereof his memory was celebrated at Florence on St. Thomas' day. "The marquis, when hunting, strayed away from his people, and, wandering through a forest, came to a smithy, where he saw black and deformed men tormenting others with fire and hammers; and, asking the meaning of this, he was told that they were condemned souls, who suffered this punishment, and that the soul of the Marchese Ugo was doomed to suffer the same, if he did not repent. Struck with horror, he commended himself to the Virgin Mary; and soon after founded the seven religious houses."]

[26: Giano della Bella, of one of the families thus distinguished,

who no longer retained his place among the nobility, and had yet added to his arms a bordure or.]

[27: Two families in the compartment of the city called Borgo.]

[28: Some understand this of the Bardi; and others, of the Buondelmonti.]

[29: "The house." Of Amidei.]

[30: "To Ema." "It had been well for the city if thy ancestor had been drowned in the Ema when he crossed that stream on his way from Montebuono to Florence."]

Florence! on that maim'd stone[31] which guards the bridge
The victim, when thy peace departed, fell.

[31: Near the remains of the statute of Mars, Buondelmonti was slain, as if he had been a victim to the god; and Florence had not since known the blessing of peace.]

"With these and others like to them, I saw
Florence in such assured tranquillity,
She had no cause at which to grieve: with these
Saw her so glorious and so just, that ne'er
The lily[32] from the lance had hung reverse,
Or through division been with vermeil dyed."

[32: The arms of Florence had never hung reversed on the spear of her enemies; nor been changed from argent to gules; as they afterward were, when the Guelfi gained the predominance.]