

Purgatory Canto 16

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Canto XVI

Argument

As they proceed through the mist, they hear the voices of spirits praying. Marco Lombardo, one of these, points out to Dante the error of such as impute our actions to necessity; explains to him that man is endued with free will; and shows that much of human depravity results from the undue mixture of spiritual and temporal authority in rulers.

Hell's dunnest gloom, or night unlustrous, dark,
Of every planet 'reft, and pall'd in clouds,
Did never spread before the sight a veil
In thickness like that fog, nor to the sense
So palpable and gross. Entering its shade,
Mine eye endured not with unclosed lids;
Which marking, near me drew the faithful guide,
Offering me his shoulder for a stay.

As the blind man behind his leader walks,
Lest he should err, or stumble unawares
On what might harm him or perhaps destroy;
I journey'd through that bitter air and foul,
Still listening to my escort's warning voice,
"Look that from me thou part not." Straight I heard
Voices, and each one seem'd to pray for peace,
And for compassion, to the Lamb of God
That taketh sins away. Their prelude still
Was "Agnus Dei"; and through all the choir,
One voice, one measure ran, that perfect seem'd
The concord of their song. "Are these I hear
Spirits, O master?" I exclaim'd; and he,
"Thou aim'st aright: these loose the bonds of wrath."

"Now who art thou, that through our smoke dost cleave,
And speak'st of us, as thou thyself e'en yet
Dividedst time by calends?" So one voice
Bespake me; whence my master said. "Reply;
And ask, if upward hence the passage lead."

"O being! who dost make thee pure, to stand
Beautiful once more in thy Maker's sight;
Along with me: and thou shalt hear and wonder."

Thus, I whereto the spirit answering spake:
"Long as 'tis lawful for me, shall my steps
Follow on thine; and since the cloudy smoke
Forbids the seeing, hearing in its stead
Shall keep us join'd." I then forthwith began:
"Yet in my mortal swathing, I ascend
To higher regions; and am hither come
Thorough the fearful agony of Hell.
And, if so largely God hath doled His grace,
That, clean beside all modern precedent,
He wills me to behold His kingly state;
From me conceal not who thou wast, ere death
Had loosed thee; but instruct me: and instruct
If rightly to the pass I tend; thy words
The way directing, as a safe escort."

"I was of Lombardy, and Marco call'd:[1]
Not inexperienced of the world, that worth
I still affected, from which all have turn'd
The nerveless bow aside. Thy course tends right
Unto the summit:" and, replying thus,
He added, "I beseech thee pray for me,
When thou shalt come aloft." And I to him:
"Accept my faith for pledge I will perform
What thou requirest. Yet one doubt remains,
That wrings me sorely, if I solve it not.
Singly before it urged me, doubled now
By thine opinion, when I couple that
With one elsewhere declared; each strengthening other.
The world indeed is even so forlorn
Of all good, as thou speak'st it, and so swarms
With every evil. Yet, beseech thee, point
The cause out to me, that myself may see,
And unto others show it: for in Heaven
One places it, and one on earth below."

[1: Venetian gentleman. "Lombardo" both was his surname and denoted the country to which he belonged. G. Villani, lib. vii. cap. cxx., terms him "a wise and worthy courtier." Benvenuto da Imola, says Landino, relates of him, that being imprisoned and not able to pay his ransom, he wrote to his friend Riccardo da Camino, lord of Trevigi, who raised a contribution among the nobles of Lombardy; of which when Marco was informed, he wrote back with much indignation to Riccardo, that he had rather die than remain under obligations to so many benefactors. Riccardo then paid the whole out of his own purse.]

Then heaving forth a deep and audible sigh,
"Brother!" he thus began, "the world is blind;

And thou in truth comest from it. Ye, who live,
Do so each cause refer to Heaven above,
E'en as its motion, of necessity,
Drew with it all that moves, If this were so,
Free choice in you were none; nor justice would
There should be joy for virtue, woe for ill.
Your movements have their primal bent from Heaven;
Not all: yet said I all; what then ensues?
Light have ye still to follow evil or good,
And of the will free power, which, if it stand
Firm and unwearied in Heaven's first assay,
Conquers at last, so it be cherish'd well,
Triumphant over all. To mightier force,
To better nature subject, ye abide
Free, not constrain'd by that which forms in you
The reasoning mind uninfluenced of the stars.
If then the present race of mankind err,
Seek in yourselves the cause, and find it there;
Herein thou shalt confess me no false spy.

"Forth from His plastic hand, who charm'd beholds
Her image ere she yet exist, the soul
Comes like a babe, that wantons sportively,
Weeping and laughing in its wayward moods;
As artless, and as ignorant of aught,
Save that her Maker being one who dwells
With gladness ever, willingly she turns
To whate'er yields her joy. Of some slight good
The flavour soon she tastes; and, snared by that,
With fondness she pursues it; if no guide
Recall, no rein direct her wandering course.
Hence it behoved, the law should be a curb;
A sovereign hence behoved, whose piercing view
Might mark at least the fortress^[2] and main tower
Of the true city. Laws indeed there are:
But who is he observes them? None; not he,
Who goes before, the shepherd of the flock,

[2: Justice, the most necessary virtue in the chief magistrate, as the commentators for the most part explain it. See also Dante's *De Monarchia*, book I. Yet Lombardi understands the law here spoken of to be the law of God; "the sovereign," a spiritual ruler, and "the true city," the society of true believers; so that "the fortress," according to him, denotes the principal parts of Christian duty.]

Who^[3] chews the cud but doth not cleave the hoof.
Therefore the multitude, who see their guide
Strike at the very good they covet most,

Feed there and look no further. Thus the cause
 Is not corrupted nature in yourselves,
 But ill - conducting, that hath turn'd the world
 To evil. Rome, that turn'd it unto good,
 Was wont to boast two suns,[4] whose several beams
 Cast light on either way, the world's and God's.
 One since hath quench'd the other; and the sword
 Is grafted on the crook; and, so conjoin'd,
 Each must perforce decline to worse, unawed
 By fear of other. If thou doubt me, mark
 The blade: each herb is judged of by its seed.
 That land,[5] through which Adice and the Po
 Their waters roll, was once the residence
 Of courtesy and valour, ere the day[6]
 That frown'd on Frederick; now secure may pass
 Those limits, whosoe'er hath left, for shame,
 To talk with good men, or come near their haunts.
 Three aged ones are still found there, in whom
 The old time chides the new: these deem it long
 Ere God restore them to a better world:
 The good Gherardo,[7] of Palazzo he,
 Conrad,[8] and Guido of Castello,[9] named
 In Gallic phrase more fitly the plain Lombard.
 On this at last conclude. The Church of Rome,
 Mixing two governments that ill assort,
 Hath miss'd her footing, fallen into the mire,
 And there herself and burden much defiled."

[3: "Who." He compares the Pope, on account of the union of the temporal with the spiritual power in his person, to an unclean beast in the Levitical law. "The camel, because he cheweth the cud, but divideth not the hoof." Levit. vi. 4.]

[4: The Emperor and Bishop of Rome.]

[5: "The land." Lombardy.]

[6: Before the Emperor Frederick II was defeated at Parma, in 1248.]

[7: Gherardo da Camino, of Trevigi. He is honorably mentioned in our Poet's Convito, p. 173. "Let us suppose that Gherardo da Camino had been the grandson of the meanest hind that ever drank of the Sile or the Cagnano, and that his grandfather was not yet forgotten; who will dare to say that Gherardo da Camino was a mean man, and who will not agree with me in calling him noble?"]

[8: Currado da Palazzo of Brescia.]

[9: Of Reggio. All the Italians were called Lombards by the French.]

"O Marco!" I replied, "thine arguments

Convince me: and the cause I now discern,
Why of the heritage no portion came
To Levi's offspring. But resolve me this:
Who that Gherardo is, that as thou say'st
Is left a sample of the perish'd race,
And for rebuke to this untoward age?"

"Either thy words," said he, "deceive, or else
Are meant to try me; that thou, speaking Tuscan,
Appear'st not to have heard of good Gherardo;
The sole addition that, by which I know him;
Unless I borrow'd from his daughter Gaia[10]
Another name to grace him. God be with you.
I bear you company no more. Behold
The dawn with white ray glimmering through the mist.
I must away - the angel comes - ere he
Appear." He said, and would not hear me more.

[10: "His daughter Gaia." A lady equally admired for her modesty, the beauty of her person, and the excellency of her talents. Gaia may perhaps lay claim to the praise of having been the first among the Italian ladies, by whom the vernacular poetry was cultivated.]