

# Purgatory Canto 23

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[Christianity Index](#) [Divine Comedy Index](#) [Previous: Purgatory Canto 22](#) [Next: Purgatory Canto 24](#)

## Canto XXIII

### Argument

They are overtaken by the spirit of Forese, who had been a friend of our Poet's on earth, and who now inveighs bitterly against the immodest dress of their countrywomen at Florence.

On the green leaf mine eyes were fix'd, like his  
Who throws away his days in idle chase  
Of the diminutive birds, when thus I heard  
The more than father warn me: "Son! our time  
Asks thriftier using. Linger not: away!"  
Thereat my face and steps at once I turn'd  
Toward the sages, by whose converse cheer'd  
I journey'd on, and felt no toil: and lo!  
A sound of weeping, and a song: "My lips,[1]  
O Lord!" and these so mingled, it gave birth  
To pleasure and to pain. "O Sire beloved!  
Say what is this I hear." Thus I inquired.

[1: "O Lord, open thou my lips; and my mouth shall show forth thy praise." - Psalm li. 15.]

"Spirits," said he, "who, as they go, perchance,  
Their debt of duty pay." As on their road  
The thoughtful pilgrims, overtaking some  
Not known unto them, turn to them, and look,  
But stay not; thus, approaching from behind  
With speedier motion, eyed us, as they pass'd,  
A crowd of spirits, silent and devout.

The eyes of each were dark and hollow; pale  
Their visage, and so lean withal, the bones  
Stood staring through the skin. I do not think  
Thus dry and meagre Erisichthon show'd,  
When pinch'd by sharp - set famine to the quick.

"Lo!" to myself I mused, "the race, who lost  
Jerusalem, when Mary with dire beak  
Prey'd on her child." The sockets seem'd as rings,  
From which the gems were dropt. Who reads the name[2]  
Of man upon his forehead, there the M  
Had traced most plainly. Who would deem, that scent

Of water and an apple could have proved  
 Powerful to generate such pining want,  
 Not knowing how it wrought? While now I stood,  
 Wondering what thus could waste them, (for the cause  
 Of their gaunt hollowness and scaly rind  
 Appear'd not,) lo! a spirit turn'd his eyes  
 In their deep - sunken cells, and fasten'd them  
 On me, then cried with vehemence aloud:  
 "What grace is this vouchsafed me?" By his looks  
 I ne'er had recognized him: but the voice  
 Brought to my knowledge what his cheer conceal'd.  
 Remembrance of his alter'd lineaments  
 Was kindled from that spark; and I agnized  
 The visage of Forese.[3]. "Ah! respect  
 This wan and leprous - wither'd skin," thus he  
 Suppliant implored, "this macerated flesh.  
 Speak to me truly of thyself. And who  
 Are those twain spirits, that escort thee there?  
 Be it not said thou scorn'st to talk with me."

[2: The temples, nose, and forehead are supposed to represent this letter [of the Latin word (H)OMO - man], and the eyes the two O's.]

[3: A brother of Piccarda. See also Canto xxiv. and Paradise, Canto iii. Cionacci is referred to by Lombardi, in order to show that Forese was also the brother of Corso Donati, our author's political enemy.]

"That face of thine," I answer'd him, "which dead  
 I once bewail'd, disposes me not less  
 For weeping, when I see it thus transform'd.  
 Say then, by Heaven, what blasts ye thus? The whilst  
 I wonder, ask not speech from me: unapt  
 Is he to speak, whom other will employs."

He thus: "The water and the plant, we pass'd  
 With power are gifted, by the eternal will  
 Infused; the which so pines me. Every spirit,  
 Whose song bewails his gluttony indulged  
 Too grossly, here in hunger and in thirst  
 Is purified. The odour, which the fruit,  
 And spray that showers upon the verdure, breathe,  
 Inflames us with desire to feed and drink.  
 Nor once alone, encompassing our route,  
 We come to add fresh fuel to the pain:  
 Pain, said I? solace rather: for that will,  
 To the tree, leads us, by which Christ was led  
 To call on Eli, joyful, when he paid  
 Our ransom from his vein." I answering thus:  
 "Forese! from that day, in which the world

For better life thou changedst, not five years  
Have circled. If the power of sinning more  
Were first concluded in thee, ere thou knew'st  
That kindly grief which re - espouses us  
To God, how hither art thou, come so soon?  
I thought to find thee lower,[4] there, where time  
Is recompense for time." He straight replied:  
"To drink up the sweet wormwood of affliction  
I have been brought thus early, by the tears  
Stream'd down my Nella's cheeks. Her prayers devout,  
Her sighs have drawn me from the coast,[5] where oft  
Expectance lingers; and have set me free  
From the other circles. In the sight of God  
So much the dearer is my widow prized,  
She whom I loved so fondly, as she ranks  
More singly eminent for virtuous deeds.  
The tract, most barbarous of Sardinia's isle,[6]  
Hath dames more chaste, and modester by far,  
Than that wherein I left her. O sweet brother!  
What wouldst thou have me say? A time to come  
Stands full within my view, to which this hour  
Shall not be counted of an ancient date,

[4: In the Ante - Purgatory. See Canto ii.]

[5: The wife of Forese.]

[6: The Barbagia is a part of Sardinia, to which that name was given,  
on account of the uncivilized state of its inhabitants, who are said to have  
gone nearly naked.]

When from the pulpit shall be loudly warn'd  
The unblushing dames of Florence, lest they bare  
Unkerchief'd bosoms to the common gaze.  
What savage women hath the world e'er seen,  
What Saracens,[7] for whom there needed scourge  
Of spiritual or other discipline,  
To force them walk with covering on their limbs?  
But did they see, the shameless ones, what Heaven  
Wafts on swift wing toward them while I speak,  
Their mouths were oped for howling: they shall taste  
Of sorrow (unless foresight cheat me here),  
Or e'er the cheek of him be clothed with down,  
Who is now rock'd with lullaby asleep.  
Ah! now, my brother, hide thyself no more:  
Thou seest how not I alone, but all,  
Gaze, where thou veil'st the intercepted sun."  
Whence I replied: "If thou recall to mind  
What we were once together, even yet

Remembrance of those days may grieve thee sore.  
That I forsook that life, was due to him  
Who there precedes me, some few evenings past,  
When she was round, who shines with sister lamp  
To his that glisters yonder," and I show'd  
The sun. "'Tis he, who through profoundest night  
Of the true dead has brought me, with this flesh  
As true, that follows. From that gloom the aid  
Of his sure comfort drew me on to climb,  
And, climbing, wind along this mountain - steep,  
Which rectifies in you whate'er the world  
Made crooked and depraved. I have his word,  
That he will bear me company as far  
As till I come where Beatrice dwells:  
But there must leave me. Virgil is that spirit,  
Who thus hath promised," and I pointed to him;  
"The other is that shade, for whom so late  
Your realm, as he arose, exulting, shook  
Through every pendent cliff and rocky bound."

[7: "Saracens." This word, during the Middle Ages, was applied to all nations (except the Jews) who did not profess Christianity.]