

Inferno Canto 21

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Canto XXI

Argument

Still in the eighth circle, which bears the name of Malebolge, they look down from the bridge that passes over its fifth gulf, upon the barterers or public peculators. These are plunged in a lake of boiling pitch, and guarded by Demons, to whom Virgil, leaving Dante apart, presents himself; and license being obtained to pass onward, both pursue their way.

Thus we from bridge to bridge, with other talk,
The which my drama cares not to rehearse,
Pass'd on; and to the summit reaching, stood
To view another gap, within the round
Of Malebolge, other bootless pangs.

Marvellous darkness shadow'd o'er the place.

In the Venetians' arsenal as boils
Through wintry months tenacious pitch, to smear
Their unsound vessels; for the inclement time
Seafaring men restrains, and in that while
His bark one builds anew, another stops
The ribs of his that hath made many a voyage,
One hammers at the prow, one at the poop,
This shapeth oars, that other cables twirls,
The mizzen one repairs, and main - sail rent;
So, not by force of fire but art divine,
Boil'd here a glutinous thick mass, that round
Limed all the shore beneath. I that beheld,
But therein naught distinguish'd, save the bubbles
Raised by the boiling, and one mighty swell
Heave, and by turns subsiding fall. While there
I fix'd my ken below, "Mark! mark!" my guide
Exclaiming, drew me toward him from the place
Wherein I stood. I turn'd myself, as one
Impatient to behold that which beheld
He needs must shun, whom sudden fear unmans,
That he his flight delays not for the view.
Behind me I discern'd a devil black,
That running up advanced along the rock.
Ah! what fierce cruelty his look bespake.
In act how bitter did he seem, with wings

Buoyant outstretch'd and feet of nimblest tread.
His shoulder, proudly eminent and sharp,
Was with a sinner charged; by either haunch
He held him, the foot's sinew griping fast.

"Ye of our bridge!" he cried. "keen - talon'd fiends!
Lo! one of Santa Zita's elders. Him
Whelm ye beneath, while I return for more.
That land hath store of such. All men are there,
Except Bonturo, barterers: of 'no'
For lucre there an 'ay' is quickly made."

Him dashing down, o'er the rough rock he turn'd;
Nor ever after thief a mastiff loosed
Sped with like eager haste. That other sank,
And forthwith writing to the surface rose.
But those dark demons, shrouded by the bridge,
Cried, "Here the hallow'd visage saves not: here
Is other swimming than in Serchio's wave,
Wherefore, if thou desire we rend thee not,
Take heed thou mount not o'er the pitch." This said,
They grappled him with more than hundred hooks,
And shouted: "Cover'd thou must sport thee here;
So, if thou canst, in secret mayst thou filch."
E'en thus the cook bestirs him, with his grooms,
To thrust the flesh into the caldron down
With flesh - hooks, that it float not on the top.

Me then my guide bespake: "Lest they descry
That thou art here, behind a craggy rock
Bend low and screen thee: and whate'er of force
Be offer'd me, or insult, fear thou not;
For I am well advised, who have been erst
In the like fray." Beyond the bridge's head
Therewith he pass'd; and reaching the sixth pier,
Behoved him then a forehead terror - proof.

With storm and fury, as when dogs rush forth
Upon the poor man's back, who suddenly
From whence he standeth makes his suit; so rush'd
Those from beneath the arch, and against him
Their weapons all they pointed. He, aloud:
"Be none of you outrageous: ere your time
Dare seize me, come forth from amongst you one,
Who having heard my words, decide he then
If he shall tear these limbs." They shouted loud,
"Go, Malacoda!" Whereat one advanced,
The others standing firm, and as he came,
"What may this turn avail him?" he exclaim'd.

"Believest thou, Malacoda! I had come
Thus far from all your skirmishing secure,"
My teacher answer'd, "without will divine
And destiny propitious? Pass we then;
For so Heaven's pleasure is, that I should lead
Another through this savage wilderness."

Forthwith so fell his pride, that he let drop
The instrument of torture at his feet,
And to the rest exclaim'd: "We have no power
To strike him." Then to me my guide: "O thou!
Who on the bridge among the crags dost sit
Low crouching, safely now to me return."

I rose, and toward him moved with speed; the fiends
Meantime all forward drew: me terror seized,
Lest they should break the compact they had made.
Thus issuing from Caprona,[1] once I saw
Th' infantry, dreading lest his covenant
The foe should break; so close he hemm'd them round.

[1: "From Caprona." The surrender of the castle of Caprona to the
combined forces of Florence and Lucca, on condition that the garrison should
march out in safety, to which event Dante was a witness, took place in 1290.
See G. Villani, Hist. lib. vii. c. cxxxvi.]

I to my leader's side adhered, mine eyes
With fixt and motionless observance bent
On their unkindly visage. They their hooks
Protruding, one the other thus bespake:
"Wilt thou I touch him on the hip?" To whom
Was answer'd: "Even so; nor miss thy aim."

But he, who was in conference with my guide,
Turn'd rapid round; and thus the demon spake:
"Stay, stay thee, Scarmiglione!" Then to us
He added: "Further footing to your step
This rock affords not, shiver'd to the base
Of the sixth arch. But would ye still proceed,
Up by this cavern go: not distant far,
Another rock will yield you passage safe.

Yesterday,[2] later by five hours than now,
Twelve hundred threescore years and six had fill'd
The circuit of their course, since here the way
Was broken. Thitherward I straight despatch
Certain of these my scouts, who shall espy
If any on the surface bask. With them
Go ye: for ye shall find them nothing fell.
Come, Alichino, forth," with that he cried,

"And Calcabrina, and Cagnozzo thou!
The troop of ten let Barbariccia lead.
With Libicocco, Draghinazzo haste,
Fang'd Ciriatta, Graffiacane fierce,
And Farfarello, and mad Rubicant.
Search ye around the bubbling tar. For these,
In safety lead them, where the other crag
Uninterrupted traverses the dens."

[2: "Yesterday." This passage fixes the era of Dante's descent at Good Friday, in the year 1300 (thirty - four years from our blessed Lord's incarnation being added to 1266), and at the thirty - fifth year of our Poet's age. See Canto i. v. I. The awful event alluded to, the Evangelists inform us, happened "at the ninth hour," that is, our sixth, when "the rocks were rent," and the convulsion, according to Dante, was felt even in the depths of Hell. See Canto xii. v. 38.]

I then: "O master! what a sight is there.
Ah! without escort, journey we alone,
Which, if thou know the way, I covet not.
Unless thy prudence fail thee, dost not mark
How they do gnarl upon us, and their scowl
Threatens us present tortures?" He replied:
"I charge thee, fear not: let them, as they will,
Gnarl on: 'tis but in token of their spite
Against the souls who mourn in torment steep'd."

To leftward o'er the pier they turn'd; but each
Had first between his teeth prest close the tongue,
Toward their leader for a signal looking,
Which he with sound obscene triumphant gave.