

# Inferno Canto 34

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Canto XXXIV

Argument

In the fourth and last round of the ninth circle, those who have betrayed their benefactors are wholly covered with ice. And in the midst is Lucifer, at whose back Dante and Virgil ascend, till by a secret path they reach the surface of the other hemisphere of the earth, and once more obtain sight of the stars.

"The banners of Hell's Monarch do come forth  
Toward us; therefore look," so spake my guide,  
"If thou discern him." As, when breathes a cloud  
Heavy and dense, or when the shades of night  
Fall on our hemisphere, seems view'd from far  
A windmill, which the blast stirs briskly round;  
Such was the fabric then methought I saw.

To shield me from the wind, forthwith I drew  
Behind my guide: no covert else was there.

Now came I (and with fear I bid my strain  
Record the marvel) where the souls were all  
Whelm'd underneath, transparent, as through glass  
Pellucid the frail stem. Some prone were laid;  
Others stood upright, this upon the soles,  
That on his head, a third with face to feet  
Arch'd like a bow. When to the point we came,  
Whereat my guide was pleased that I should see

The creature eminent in beauty once,  
He from before me stepp'd and made me pause.

"Lo!" he exclaim'd, "lo! Dis; and lo! the place,  
Where thou hast need to arm thy heart with strength."

How frozen and how faint I then became,  
Ask me not, reader! for I write it not;  
Since words would fail to tell thee of my state.  
I was not dead nor living. Think thyself,  
If quick conception work in thee at all,  
How I did feel. That emperor, who sways  
The realm of sorrow, at mid breast from the ice  
Stood forth; and I in stature am more like

A giant, than the giants are his arms.  
Mark now how great that whole must be, which suits  
With such a part. If he were beautiful  
As he is hideous now, and yet did dare  
To scowl upon his Maker, well from him  
May all our misery flow. Oh what a sight!  
How passing strange it seem'd, when I did spy  
Upon his head three faces: one in front  
Of hue vermilion, the other two with this  
Midway each shoulder join'd and at the crest;  
The right 'twixt wan and yellow seem'd; the left  
To look on, such as come from whence old Nile  
Stoops to the lowlands. Under each shot forth  
Two mighty wings, enormous as became  
A bird so vast. Sails never such I saw  
Outstretch'd on the wide sea. No plumes had they,  
But were in texture like a bat; and these  
He flapp'd i' th' air, that from him issued still  
Three winds, wherewith Cocytus to its depth  
Was frozen. At six eyes he wept: the tears  
Adown three chins distill'd with bloody foam.  
At every mouth his teeth a sinner champ'd,  
Bruised as with ponderous engine; so that three  
Were in this guise tormented. But far more  
Than from that gnawing, was the foremost pang'd  
By the fierce rending, whence oft - times the back  
Was stript of all its skin. "That upper spirit,  
Who hath worst punishment," so spake my guide,  
"Is Judas, he that hath his head within  
And plies the feet without. Of th' other two,  
Whose heads are under, from the murky jaw  
Who hangs, is Brutus:[1] lo! how he doth writhe  
And speaks not. The other, Cassius, that appears  
So large of limb. But night now reascends;  
And it is time for parting. All is seen."

[1: "Brutus." Landino struggles to extricate Brutus from the unworthy lot which is here assigned him. He maintains that by Brutus and Cassius are not meant the individuals known by those names, but any who put a lawful monarch to death. Yet if Caesar was such, the conspirators might be regarded as deserving of their doom. If Dante, however, believed Brutus to have been actuated by evil motives in putting Caesar to death, the excellence of the patriot's character in other respects would only have aggravated his guilt in that particular.]

I clipp'd him round the neck; for so he bade:  
And noting time and place, he, when the wings  
Enough were oped, caught fast the shaggy sides,

And down from pile to pile descending stepp'd  
Between the thick fell and the jagged ice.

Soon as he reach'd the point, whereat the thigh  
Upon the swelling of the haunches turns,  
My leader there, with pain and struggling hard,  
Turn'd round his head where his feet stood before,  
And grappled at the fell as one who mounts;  
That into Hell methought we turn'd again.

"Expect that by such stairs as these," thus spake  
The teacher, panting like a man forespent,  
"We must depart from evil so extreme:"  
Then at a rocky opening issued forth,  
And placed me on the brink to sit, next join'd  
With wary step my side. I raised mine eyes,  
Believing that I Lucifer should see  
Where he was lately left, but saw him now  
With legs help upward. Let the grosser sort,  
Who see not what the point was I had past,  
Bethink them if sore toil oppress'd me then.

"Arise," my master cried, "upon thy feet.  
The way is long, and much uncouth the road;  
And now within one hour and a half of noon[2]  
The sun returns." It was no palace - hall

[2: The Poet uses the Hebrew manner of computing the day, according to which the third hour answers to our twelve o'clock at noon.]

Lofty and luminous wherein we stood,  
But natural dungeon where ill - footing was  
And scant supply of light. "Ere from the abyss  
I separate," thus when risen I began:  
"My guide! vouchsafe few words to set me free  
From error's thralldom. Where is now the ice?  
How standeth he in posture thus reversed?  
And how from eve to morn in space so brief  
Hath the sun made his transit?" He in few  
Thus answering spake: "Thou deemest thou art still  
On the other side the centre, where I grasp'd  
The abhorred worm that boreth through the world.  
Thou wast on the other side, so long as I  
Descended; when I turn'd, thou didst o'erpass  
That point, to which from every part is dragg'd  
All heavy substance. Thou art now arrived  
Under the hemisphere opposed to that,  
Which the great continent doth overspread,  
And underneath whose canopy expired

The Man, that was born sinless and so lived.  
Thy feet are planted on the smallest sphere,  
Whose other aspect is Judecca. Morn  
Here rises, when there evening sets: and he,  
Whose shaggy pile we scaled, yet standeth fix'd,  
As at the first. On this part he fell down  
From Heaven; and th' earth here prominent before,  
Through fear of him did veil her with the sea,  
And to our hemisphere retired. Perchance,  
To shun him, was the vacant space left here,  
By what of firm land on this side appears,[3]  
That sprang aloof." There is a place beneath,  
From Belzebub as distant, as extends  
The vaulted tomb;[4] discover'd not by sight,  
But by the sound of brooklet, that descends  
This way along the hollow of a rock,  
Which, as it winds with no precipitous course,  
The wave hath eaten. By that hidden way  
My guide and I did enter, to return

[3: The mountain of Purgatory.]

[4: "The vaulted tomb" ("La tomba"). This word is used to express the whole depth of the infernal region.]

To the fair world: and heedless of repose  
We climb'd, he first, I following his steps,  
Till on our view the beautiful lights of Heaven  
Dawn'd through a circular opening in the cave:  
Thence issuing we again beheld the stars.