

Paradise Canto 15

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Canto XV

Argument

The spirit of Cacciaguida, our Poet's ancestor, glides rapidly to the foot of the cross; tells who he is; and speaks of the simplicity of the Florentines in his days, since then much corrupted.

True love, that ever shows itself as clear
In kindness, as loose appetite in wrong,
Silenced that lyre harmonious, and still'd
The sacred cords, that are by Heaven's right hand
Unwound and tighten'd. How to righteous prayers
Should they not hearken, who, to give me will
For praying, in accordance thus were mute?
He hath in sooth good cause for endless grief,
Who, for the love of thing that lasteth not,
Despoils himself forever of that love.

As oft along the still and pure serene,
At nightfall, glides a sudden trail of fire,
Attracting with involuntary heed
The eye to follow it, erewhile at rest;
And seems some star that shifted place in Heaven,
Only that, whence it kindles, none is lost,
And it is soon extinct: thus from the horn,
That on the dexter of the cross extends,
Down to its foot, one luminary ran
From mid the cluster shone there; yet no gem
Dropp'd from its foil: and through the beamy list,
Like flame in alabaster, glow'd its course.

So forward stretch'd him (if of credence aught
Our greater muse may claim) the pious ghost
Of old Anchises, in the Elysian bower,
When he perceived his son. "O thou, my blood!
O most exceeding grace divine! to whom,
As now to thee, hath twice the heavenly gate
Been e'er unclosed?" So spake the light: whence I
Turn'd me toward him; then unto my dame
My sight directed: and on either side
Amazement waited me; for in her eyes
Was lighted such a smile, I thought that mine

Had dived unto the bottom of my grace
And of my bliss in Paradise. Forthwith,
To hearing and to sight grateful alike,
The spirit to his proem added things
I understood not, so profound he spake:
Yet not of choice, but through necessity,
Mysterious; for his high conception soar'd
Beyond the mark of mortals. When the flight
Of holy transport had so spent its rage,
That nearer to the level of our thought
The speech descended; the first sounds I heard
Were, "Blest be thou, Triunal Deity!
That hast such favour in my seed vouchsafed."
Then follow'd. "No unpleasant thirst, though long,
Which took me reading in the sacred book,
Whose leaves or white or dusky never change,
Thou hast allay'd, my son! within this light,
From whence my voice thou hear'st: more thanks to her,
Who, for such lofty mounting, has with plumes
Begirt thee. Thou dost deem thy thoughts to me
From Him transmitted, who is first of all,
E'en as all numbers ray from unity;
And therefore dost not ask me who I am,
Or why to thee more joyous I appear,
Than any other in this gladsome throng.
The truth is as thou deem'st; for in this life
Both less and greater in that Mirror look,
In which thy thoughts, or e'er thou think'st, are shown.
But, that the love, which keeps me wakeful ever,
Urging with sacred thirst of sweet desire,
May be contented fully; let thy voice,
Fearless, and frank, and jocund, utter forth
Thy will distinctly, utter forth the wish,
Whereto my ready answer stands decreed."

I turn'd me to Beatrice; and she heard
Ere I had spoken, smiling an assent,
That to my will gave wings; and I began:
"To each among your tribe, what time ye kenn'd
The nature, in whom naught unequal dwells,
Wisdom and love were in one measure dealt;
For that they are so equal in the Sun,
From whence ye drew your radiance and your heat,
As makes all likeness scant. But will and means,
In mortals, for the cause ye well discern,
With unlike wings are fledged. A mortal, I
Experience inequality like this;

And therefore give no thanks, but in the heart,
For thy paternal greeting. This howe'er
I pray thee, living topaz! that ingemm'st
This precious jewel; let me hear thy name."

"I am thy root,[1] O leaf! whom to expect
Even, hath pleased me." Thus the prompt reply
Prefacing, next it added: "He, of whom[2]

[1: "I am thy root." Cacciaguida, father to Alighieri, of whom our
Poet was the great - grandson.]

[2: "He, of whom." "Thy great - grandfather, Alighieri, has been in
the first round of Purgatory more than a hundred years; and it is fit that
thou by thy good deserts shouldst endeavor to shorten the time of his
remaining there." His son Bellincione was living in 1266; and of him was born
the father of our Poet, whom Benvenuto da Imola calls a lawyer by profession.]

Thy kindred appellation comes, and who,
These hundred years and more, on its first ledge
Hath circuited the mountain, was my son,
And thy great - grandsire. Well befits, his long
Endurance should he shorten'd by thy deeds.

"Florence, within her ancient limit - mark,
Which calls her still[3] to matin prayers and noon,
Was chaste and sober, and abode in peace.
She had no armlets and no head - tires then;
No purpled dames; no zone, the caught the eye
More than the person did. Time was not yet,
When[4] at his daughter's birth the sire grew pale,
For fear the age and dowry should exceed,
On each side, just proportion. House was none
Void[5] of its family: nor yet had come
Sardanapalus,[6] to exhibit feats
Of chamber prowess. Montemalo[7] yet
O'er our suburban turret[8] rose; as much
To be surpass in fall, as in its rising.
I saw Bellincion Berti[9] walk abroad
In leathern girdle, and a clasp of bone;
And, with no artful colouring on her cheeks,

[3: The public clock being still within the circuit of the ancient
walls.]

[4: When the women were not married at too early an age, and did not
expect too large a portion.]

[5: Through the civil wars and banishments. Or he may mean that
houses were not formerly built merely for show, nor of greater size than was
necessary for containing the families that inhabited them.]

[6: The luxurious monarch of Assyria.]

[7: Either an elevated spot between Rome and Viterbo; or Monte Mario, the site of the villa Mellini, commanding a view of Rome.]

[8: Uccellatojo, near Florence, whence that city was discovered. Florence had not yet vied with Rome in the grandeur of her public buildings.]

[9: "Bellincion Berti." Hell, Canto xvi. 38, and notes. "And observe that in the time of the said people (A. D. 1259), and before and for a long time after, the citizens of Florence lived soberly, on coarse viands, and at little cost, and in many customs and courtesies of life were rude and unpolished; and dressed themselves and their women in coarse cloths: many wore plain leather, without cloth over it; bonnets on their heads; and all, boots on the feet; and the Florentine women were without ornament; the better sort content with a close gown of scarlet cloth of Ypres or of camlet, bound with a girdle in the ancient mode, and a mantle lined with fur, and a hood to it, which was worn on the head; the common sort of women were clad in a coarse gown of Cambrai in like manner . . . and with their coarse way of living and poverty [the Florentines] did greater and more virtuous deeds than have been done in our times with greater refinement and wealth." - G. Villani, lib. vi. c. lxxi.]

His lady leave the glass. The sons I saw
Of Nerli, and of Vecchio,[10] well content
With unrobed jerkin; and their good dames handling
The spindle and the flax: O happy they!
Each[11] sure of burial in her native land,
And none left desolate a - bed for France.
One waked to tend the cradle, hushing it
With sounds that lull'd the parent's infancy:
Another, with her maidens, drawing off
The tresses from the distaff, lectured them
Old tales of Troy, and Fesole, and Rome.
A Salterello and Cianghella[12] we
Had held a strange a marvel, as ye would
A Cincinnatus or Cornelia now.

[10: Two opulent families in Florence.]

[11: "Each." "None fearful either of dying in banishment, or of being deserted by her husband on a scheme of traffic in France."]

[12: The latter of shameless woman of the family of Tosa, married to Lito degli Alidosi of Imola: the former Lapo Salterello, a lawyer, with whom Dante was at variance. "We should have held an abandoned character, like these, as a great wonder, as ye would the contrary now."]

"In such composed and seemly fellowship,
Such faithful and such fair equality,
In so sweet household, Mary[13] at my birth

Bestow'd me, call'd on with loud cries; and there,
In your old baptistery, I was made
Christian at once and Cacciaguida; as were
My brethren, Eliseo and Moronto.

[13: "Mary." The Virgin was invoked in the pains of child - birth.
Purgatory, Canto xx.21.]

"From Valdipado[14] came to me my spouse;
And hence thy surname grew. I follow'd then
The Emperor Conrad:[15] and his knighthood he
Did gird on me; in such a good part he took
My valiant service. After him I went
To testify against that evil law,
Whose people,[16] by the Shepherd's fault, possess
Your right usurp'd. There I by that foul crew
Was disentangled from the treacherous world

[14: Cacciaguida's wife, whose family name was Alighieri, came from
Ferrara, called Val di Pado, from its being watered by the Po.]

[15: "Conrad." The Emperor Conrad III, who died in 1152.]

[16: The Mohammedans, who were left in the possession of the Holy
Land, through the supineness of the Pope. See Canto iv. 123.]

Whose base affection many a spirit soils;
And from the martyrdom came to this peace."