

Purgatory Canto 2

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[Christianity Index](#) [Divine Comedy Index](#) [Previous: Purgatory Canto 1](#) [Next: Purgatory Canto 3](#)

Canto II

Argument

They behold a vessel under conduct of an angel, coming over the waves with spirits to Purgatory, among whom, when the passengers have landed, Dante recognizes his friend Casella; but, while they are entertained by him with a song, they hear Cato exclaiming against their negligent loitering, and at that rebuke hasten forward to the mountain.

Now had the sun[1] to that horizon reach'd,
That covers, with the most exalted point
Of its meridian circle, Salem's walls;
And night, that opposite to him her orb
Rounds, from the stream of Ganges issued forth,
Holding the scales,[2] that from her hands are dropt
When she reigns highest:[3] so that where I was,
Aurora's white and vermeil - tintured cheek
To orange turn'd as she in age increased.

[1: "Now had the sun." Dante was now antipodal to Jerusalem; so that while the sun was setting with respect to that place, which he supposes to be the middle of the inhabited earth, to him it was rising.]

[2: The constellation Libra.]

[3: "When she reigns highest" is (according to Venturi, whom I have followed) "when the autumnal equinox is passed." Lombardi supposes it to mean "when the nights begin to increase, that is, after the summer solstice."]

Meanwhile we linger'd by the water's brink,
Like men, who, musing on their road, in thought
Journey, while motionless the body rests.
When lo! as, near upon the hour of dawn,
Through the thick vapors Mars with fiery beam
Glares down in west, over the ocean floor;
So seem'd, what once again I hope to view,
A light, so swiftly coming through the sea,
No winged course might equal its career.
From which when for a space I had withdrawn
Mine eyes, to make inquiry of my guide,
Again I look'd, and saw it grown in size
And brightness: then on either side appear'd
Something, but what I knew not, of bright hue,

And by degrees from underneath it came
Another. My preceptor silent yet
Stood, while the brightness, that we first discern'd,
Open'd the form of wings: then when he knew
The pilot, cried aloud, "Down, down; bend low
Thy knees; behold God's angel: fold thy hands:
Now shalt thou see true ministers indeed.
Lo! how all human means he sets at naught;
So that nor oar he needs, nor other sail
Except his wings, between such distant shores.
Lo! how straight up to Heaven he holds them rear'd,
Winnowing the air with these eternal plumes,
That not like mortal hairs fall off or change."

As more and more toward us came, more bright
Appear'd the bird of God, nor could the eye
Endure his splendor near: I mine bent down.
He drove ashore in a small bark so swift
And light, that in its course no wave it drank.
The heavenly steersman at the prow was seen,
Visibly written Blessed in his looks.
Within a hundred spirits and more there sat.

"In Exitu[4] Israel de Egypto,"
All with one voice together sang, with what
In the remainder of that hymn is writ.
Then soon as with the sign of holy cross
He bless'd them, they at once leap'd out on land:
He, swiftly as he came, return'd. The crew,
There left, appear'd astounded with the place,
Gazing around, as one who sees new sights.

[4: "In Exitu." "When Israel came out of Egypt." Ps. cxiv.]

From every side the sun darted his beams,
And with his arrowy radiance from mid heaven
Had chased the Capricorn, when that strange tribe,
Lifting their eyes toward us: "If ye know,
Declare what path will lead us to the mount."

Them Virgil answer'd: "Ye suppose, perchance,
Us well acquainted with this place: but here,
We, as yourselves, are strangers. Not long erst
We came, before you but a little space,
By other road so rough and hard, that now

The ascent will seem to us as play." The spirits,
Who from my breathing had perceived I lived,
Grew pale with wonder. As the multitude
Flock round a herald sent with olive branch,

To hear what news he brings, and in their haste
Tread one another down; e'en so at sight
Of me those happy spirits were fix'd, each one
Forgetful of its errand to depart
Where, cleansed from sin, it might be made all fair.

Then one I saw darting before the rest
With such fond ardour to embrace me, I
To do the like was moved. O shadows vain!
Except in outward semblance: thrice my hands
I clasp'd behind it, they as oft return'd
Empty into my breast again. Surprise
I need must think was painted in my looks,
For that the shadow smiled and backward drew.
To follow it I hasten'd, but with voice
Of sweetness it enjoin'd me to desist.
Then who it was I knew, and pray'd of it,
To talk with me it would a little pause.
It answer'd: "Thee as in my mortal frame
I loved, so loosed from it I love thee still,
And therefore pause: but why walkest thou here?"

"Not without purpose once more to return,
Thou find'st me, my Casella,[5] where I am,
Journeying this way;" I said: "but how of thee
Hath so much time been lost?" He answer'd straight:

[5: "My Casella." A Florentine, celebrated for his skill in music,
"in whose company, says Landino, "Dante often recreated his spirits, wearied
by severer studies," See Dr. Burney's History of Music, vol. ii. cap. iv., p.
322. See also Milton's sonnet to Henry Lawes: "Dante shall give fame leave to
set thee higher Than his Casella, whom he wooed to sing, Met in the milder
shades of Purgatory."]

"No outrage hath been done to me, if he,[6]
Who when and whom he chooses takes, hath oft
Denied me passage here; since of just will
His will he makes. These three months past[7] indeed,
He, who so chose to enter, with free leave

[6: "He." The conducting angel.]

[7: "These three months past." Since the time of the Jubilee, during
which all spirits not condemned to eternal punishment were supposed to pass
over to Purgatory as soon as they pleased.]

Hath taken; whence I wandering by the shore[8]
Where Tiber's wave grows salt, of him gain'd kind
Admittance, at that river's mouth, toward which
His wings are pointed; for there always throng

All such as not to Acheron descend."

[8: "The shore." Ostia.]

Then I: "If new law taketh not from thee
Memory or custom of love - tuned song,
That whilom all my cares had power to 'swage;
Please thee therewith a little to console
My spirit, that encumber'd with its frame,
Travelling so far, of pain is overcome."

"Love, that discourses in my thoughts," he then
Began in such soft accents, that within
The sweetness thrills me yet. My gentle guide,
And all who came with him, so well were pleased,
That seem'd naught else might in their thoughts have room.

Fast fix'd in mute attention to his notes
We stood, when lo! that old man venerable
Exclaiming, "How is this, ye tardy spirits?
What negligence detains you loitering here?
Run to the mountain to cast off those scales,
That from your eyes the sight of God conceal."

As a wild flock of pigeons, to their food
Collected, blade or tares, without their pride
Accustom'd, and in still and quiet sort,
If aught alarm them, suddenly desert
Their meal, assail'd by more important care;
So I that new - come troop beheld, the song
Deserting, hasten to the mountain's side,
As one who goes, yet, where he tends, knows not.

Nor with less hurried step did we depart.