

# Inferno Canto 12

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[Christianity Index](#) [Divine Comedy Index](#) [Previous: Inferno Canto 11](#) [Next: Inferno Canto 13](#)

## Canto XII

### Argument

Descending by a very rugged way into the seventh circle, where the violent are punished, Dante and his leader find it guarded by the Minotaur; whose fury being pacified by Virgil, they step downward from crag to crag; till, drawing near the bottom, they descry a river of blood, wherein are tormented such as have committed violence against their neighbor. At these, when they strive to emerge from the blood, a troop of Centaurs, running along the side of the river, aim their arrows; and three of their band opposing our travellers at the foot of the steep, Virgil prevails so far that one consents to carry them both across the stream; and on their passage, Dante is informed by him of the course of the river, and of those that are punished therein.

The place, where to descend the precipice  
We came, was rough as Alp; and on its verge  
Such object lay, as every eye would shun.  
As is that ruin, which Adice's stream[1]

[1: "Adice's stream." After a great deal having been said on the subject, it still appears very uncertain at what part of the river this fall of the mountain happened.]

On this side Trento struck, shouldering the wave,  
Or loosed by earthquake or for lack of prop;  
For from the mountain's summit, whence it moved  
To the low level, so the headlong rock  
Is shiver'd, that some passage it might give  
To him who from above would pass; e'en such  
Into the chasm was that descent: and there  
At point of the disparted ridge lay stretch'd  
The infamy of Crete,[2] detested brood  
Of the feign'd heifer:[3] and at sight of us  
It gnaw'd itself, as one with rage distract.  
To him my guide exclaim'd: "Perchance thou deem'st  
The King of Athens[4] here, who, in the world  
Above, thy death contrived. Monster! avaunt!  
He comes not tutor'd by thy sister's art,[5]  
But to behold your torments is he come."

[2: "The infamy of Crete." The Minotaur.]

[3: "The feign'd heifer." Pasiphae.]

[4: "The King of Athens." Theseus, who was enabled by the instruction of Ariadne, the sister of the Minotaur, to destroy that monster.]

[5: "Thy sister's art." Ariadne.]

Like to a bull, that with impetuous spring  
Darts, at the moment when the fatal blow  
Hath struck him, but unable to proceed  
Plunges on either side; so saw I plunge  
The Minotaur; whereat the sage exclaim'd:  
"Run to the passage! while he storms, 'tis well  
That thou descend." Thus down our road we took  
Through those dilapidated crags, that oft  
Moved underneath my feet, to weight like theirs  
Unused. I pondering went, and thus he spake:  
"Perhaps thy thoughts are of this ruin'd steep,  
Guarded by the brute violence, which I  
Have vanquish'd now. Know then, that when I erst  
Hither descended to the nether Hell,  
This rock was not yet fallen. But past doubt,  
(If well I mark) not long ere He arrived,[6]  
Who carried off from Dis the mighty spoil  
Of the highest circle, then through all its bounds

[6: Our Saviour, who, according to Dante, when he ascended from Hell, carried with him the souls of the Patriarchs, and of other just men, out of the first circle. See Canto iv.]

Such trembling seized the deep concave and foul,  
I thought the universe was thrill'd with love,  
Whereby, there are who deem, the world hath oft  
Been into chaos turn'd: and in that point,  
Here, and elsewhere, that old rock toppled down.  
But fix thine eyes beneath: the river of blood  
Approaches, in the which all those are steep'd,  
Who have by violence injured." O blind lust!  
O foolish wrath! who so dost goad us on  
In the brief like, and in the eternal then  
Thus miserably o'erwhelm us. I beheld  
An ample foss, that in a bow was bent,  
As circling all the plain; for so my guide  
Had told. Between it and the rampart's base,  
On trail ran Centaurs, with keen arrows arm'd,  
As to the chase they on the earth were wont.

At seeing us descend they each one stood;  
And issuing from the troop, three sped with bows  
And missile weapons chosen first; of whom  
One cried from far: "Say, to what pain ye come

Condemn'd, who down this steep have journey'd. Speak  
From whence ye stand, or else the bow I draw."

To whom my guide: "Our answer shall be made  
To Chiron, there, when nearer him we come.  
Ill was thy mind, thus ever quick and rash."  
Then me he touch'd and spake: "Nessus is this,  
Who for the fair Deianira died,  
And wrought himself revenge[7] for his own fate.  
He in the midst, that on his breast looks down,  
Is the great Chiron who Achilles nursed;  
That other, Pholus, prone to wrath." Around  
The foss these go by thousands, aiming shafts  
At whatsoever spirit dares emerge  
From out the blood, more than his guilt allows.

[7: Nessus, when dying by the hand of Hercules, charged Deianira to preserve the gore from his wound; for that if the affections of Hercules should at any time be estranged from her, it would recall them. Deianira had occasion to try the experiment; and the venom, as Nessus had intended, caused Hercules to expire in torments.]

We to those beasts, that rapid strode along,  
Drew near; when Chiron took an arrow forth,  
  
And with the notch push'd back his shaggy beard  
To the cheek - bone, then, his great mouth to view  
Exposing, to his fellows thus exclaim'd:  
"Are ye aware, that he who comes behind  
Moves what he touches? The feet of the dead  
Are not so wont." My trusty guide, who now  
Stood near his breast, where the two natures join,  
Thus made reply: "He is indeed alive,  
And solitary so must needs by me  
Be shown the gloomy vale, thereto induced  
By strict necessity, not by delight.  
She left her joyful harpings in the sky,  
Who this new office to my care consign'd.  
He is no robber, no dark spirit I.  
But by that virtue, which empowers my step  
To tread so wild a path, grant us, I pray,  
One of thy band, whom we may trust secure,  
Who to the ford may lead us, and convey  
Across, him mounted on his back; for he  
Is not a spirit that may walk the air."

Then on his right breast turning, Chiron thus  
To Nessus spake: "Return, and be their guide.  
And if ye chance to cross another troop,

Command them keep aloof." Onward we moved,  
The faithful escort by our side, along  
The border of the crimson - seething flood,  
Whence, from those steep'd within, loud shrieks arose.

Some there I mark'd, as high as to their brow  
Immersed, of whom the mighty Centaur thus:  
"These are the souls of tyrants, who were given  
To blood and rapine. Here they wail aloud  
Their merciless wrongs. Here Alexander dwells,  
And Dionysius fell, who many a year  
Of woe wrought for fair Sicily. That brow,  
Whereon the hair so jetty clustering hangs,  
Is Azzolino;<sup>[8]</sup> that with flaxen locks  
Obizzo<sup>[9]</sup> of Este, in the world destroy'd  
By his foul step - son." To the bard revered  
I turn'd me round, and thus he spake: "Let him  
Be to thee now first leader, me but next  
To him in rank." Then further on a space  
The Centaur paused, near some, who at the throat  
Were extant from the wave; and, showing us  
A spirit by itself apart retired,  
Exclaim'd: "He<sup>[10]</sup> in God's bosom smote the heart,  
Which yet is honored on the bank of Thames."

[8: Azzolino, or Ezzolino di Romano, Lord of Padua, Vicenza, Verona, and Brescia, who died in 1260. His atrocities form the subject of a Latin tragedy, *Eccerinis*, by Albertino Mussato, of Padua, contemporary of Dante, and the most elegant writer of Latin verse of that age.]

[9: "Obizzo of Este." Marquis of Ferrara and of the Marca d' Ancona, was murdered by his own son (whom, for that most unnatural act, Dante calls his stepson) for the sake of the treasures which his rapacity had amassed.]

[10: "He." "Henrie, the brother of this Edmund, and son to the foresaid King of Almaine (Richard, brother of Henry III of England), as he returned from Affrike, where he had been with Prince Edward, was slain at Viterbo in Italy by the hand of Guy de Montfort, the son of Simon de Montfort, Earl of Leicester, in revenge of the same Simon's death. The murder was committed afore the high altar, as the same Henrie kneeled there to hear divine service." A. D. 1272. - Holinshed's Chron., p. 275. See also Giov. Villani, "Hist." lib. vii. c. xl., where it is said "that the heart of Henry was put into a golden cup, and placed on a pillar at London Bridge for a memorial to the English of the said outrage."]

A race I next espied who held the head,  
And even all the bust, above the stream.  
'Midst these I many a face remember'd well.  
Thus shallow more and more the blood became,

So that at last it but imbrued the feet;  
And there our passage lay athwart the foss.

"As ever on this side the boiling wave  
Thou seest diminishing," the Centaur said,  
"So on the other, be thou well assured,  
It lower still and lower sinks its bed,  
Till in that part it reuniting join,  
Where 'tis the lot of tyranny to mourn.  
There Heaven's stern justice lays chastising hand  
On Attila, who was the scourge of earth,  
On Sextus and on Pyrrhus,[11] and extracts  
Tears ever by the seething flood unlock'd  
From the Rinieri, of Corneto this,  
Pazzo the other named,[12] who fill'd the ways  
With violence and war." This said, he turn'd,  
And quitting us, alone repass'd the ford.

[11: Sextus, either the son of Tarquin the Proud or of Pompey the Great; and Pyrrhus, King of Epirus.]

[12: Two noted marauders, by whose depredations the public ways were infested. The latter was of the noble family of Pazzi in Florence.]