

Canto XIII



THE STORY. *THE Poets reach the Second Cornice, where the sin of Envy is purged, and hear voices crying through the air examples of the virtue of Generosity. Presently they come to where the Envious sit like blind beggars, dressed in sackcloth, and having their eyes stitched up with wire. Dante talks with Sapia of Siena, who tells him her story.*

We'd gained the stair-head, where, the second time, 1
A cutting comes to break that mountain-flank
Which sets us free from evil as we climb;

Here once again, winding all round the bank, 4
A level cornice, like the former one,
Though curved more sharply, stretches bare and blank;

No figures to be seen, no image, none; 7
Barren the cliff seems, barren seems the way,
Barren the livid colour of the stone.

"Now," so the poet argued, "if we stay 10
Till some one comes from whom to ask advice
I fear our choice may make too long delay."

Then on the sun he fixed his steady eyes 13
And made a pivot of his right-hand side,
Turning his left upon it swivel-wise.

"Blest fire," said he, "in whom my feet confide 16
Entering on this new way untrodden quite,

As we would fain be guided, do thou guide.

'Tis thou dost warm the earth and give it light; 19
If reason good dissuade not, let us still
Trust to thy beams to lead our steps aright."

We'd gone already yonder what our skill 22
In reckoning here would call a mile, maybe,
And quickly, too, we walked with such good will,

When borne towards us came — we could not see 25
But heard them — spirits on the wing, and crying
Their summons to love's table courteously.

And loud above our heads the first voice flying 28
"*Vinum non habent*," cried, and passed, and sent
The call reiterate behind us dying.

And ere the echo of the first was spent 31
With distance, came a second cry likewise:
"I am Orestes"; and stayed not, but went.

"Father," said I, "what is it that so cries?" 34
And even while I questioned him thereof,
Lo! the third voice, saying: "Love your enemies."

Then my good lord: "This circle doth reprove 37
And scourge the sin of Envy; that is why
Its whip is fashioned from the cords of love;

Doubtless the bridle sounds the counter-cry; 40
Thou wilt, I think, most likely hear it, ere

Thou reach the Pass of Pardon by and by.

But fix a steady gaze now through the air ⁴³
Before us; thou wilt see folk sitting down,
Huddled against the cliff-side over there.”

I looked attentively and, further on, ⁴⁶
Beheld some shades wrapped up in cloaks, whose grey
Could scarcely be distinguished from the stone;

And when we had advanced a little way ⁴⁹
I heard them crying: “Mary, pray for us!”
And, “Michael, Peter, and All Hallows, pray!”

I think there’s no man so dispiteous ⁵²
Walking the earth, whose heart would not be stung
By what I saw, could he but see them thus;

For when I’d travelled far enough along ⁵⁵
To make their features plainly visible,
The heavy sorrow from my eyes was wrung.

It seemed coarse hair-cloth clothed them one and all, ⁵⁸
And each one’s shoulder propped his neighbour’s head,
And all of them were propped against the wall.

In just that way the blind who lack for bread ⁶¹
Sit at the pardons, begging for their need,
Pillowing each other, all their suffering spread

Before the passer-by, that he may heed ⁶⁴
More quickly, moved not only by their speech

But by their piteous looks, which likewise plead,

And as no profit of the sun can reach ⁶⁷
Blind men, so with the aforesaid shades: the fire
Of heaven is niggard of his light to each;

For all their eyelids with an iron wire ⁷⁰
Are stitched and sealed, as to a wild young hawk
That won’t be still, men do to quiet her.

It seemed a kind of outrage thus to walk ⁷³
Staring at them when they could not see me;
I turned to my wise mentor, but of talk

There was no need, for he right easily ⁷⁶
Guessed what the dumb would say, nor stayed for it:
“Speak — to the point and briefly, please,” said he.

Virgil was now abreast of me, to wit ⁷⁹
That side the cornice whence, if you mis-stept,
You’d fall, since there’s no girding parapet.

My other side, the praying shadows kept ⁸²
Their places still, and through the ghastly seam
Squeezing slow drops to bathe their cheeks, they wept

“O people,” I began, being turned to them, ⁸⁵
“Assured of looking on that one great good
Your heart’s desire, the heavenly Light supreme,

So may grace quickly scour away the mud ⁸⁸
Of conscience, that through channels clean and clear

Remembrance' stream may pour its crystal flood,

Tell me— 'twill be most kind to me and dear — 91
Is any Latian with you? If there be,
It may be good for him that I should hear."

"O brother mine, citizens all are we 94
Of one true city; any, thou wouldst say,
That lived a sojourner in Italy."

This answer seemed to come from one who lay 97
Somewhat ahead of where I was; I threw
My own voice, therefore, rather more that way;

And there a spirit came within my view 100
Who looked expectant. "How?" did you exclaim?
She tilted up her chin as blind folk do.

"Spirit, learning to soar, that here dost tame 103
Thy wings," said I, "if 'twas thy voice that spake,
Make thyself known to me by place or name."

She answered: "I was Sienese; I make 106
My foul life clean, weeping with these amain
To Him, to lend Him to us for love's sake.

That I was sapient, no one could maintain, 109
Though I was called Sapia; my heart conceived
More joy from others' loss than my own gain.

Does that sound too absurd to be believed? m 112
Nay, hear and judge if I o'erstate my folly.

My life's arch was declining — I'd achieved

Ripe age — the day my countrymen, near Colle, 115
Joined with their foes; and I prayed God for what
His will already had determined wholly.

Beaten they were, and fled in bitter rout; 118
And there thrilled through me, when I saw the chase,
Such glee as till that hour I'd tasted not;

So that I lifted up my impudent face, 121
Shrilling to God: 'I fear Thee now no more,'
As doth the blackbird for a few fine days.

Right on the brink of death, and not before, 124
I made my peace with God; nor could have won me
Penance as yet for paying off my score,

Had not a wealth of charity been shown me 127
By Peter Combseller, who was distressed
For me, and showered his holy prayers upon me.

But who art thou, so urgent to request 130
News of our state, who go'st, I think, with sight
Unsealed, and speakest from a breathing breast?"

"Mine eyes have yet to be deprived of light 133
Up here, though not for long; their sin," I said,
"In casting looks of envy has been slight;

Much more — immensely more — my soul must dread 136
The torment down beneath; I'll not dispute

Feeling that load already crush my head.”

But she: “Who led thee up, then, to set foot ¹³⁹

Here, if thou thinkest to return below?”

And I: “He who is with me, and stands mute.

And I am living; tell me then, pray do, ¹⁴²

Spirit elect, if thou have, over there,

Some errand that my mortal feet can go.”

“O, but this is so strange a thing to hear,” ¹⁴⁵

Said she, “it shows that God must love thee dearly;

Help me, then, sometimes, with a little prayer.

And, by the wish that touches thee most nearly, ¹⁴⁸

Shouldst thou tread Tuscan soil, report good news

Of me, and tell it to my kinsfolk clearly.

Seek them among those harebrains who will lose ¹⁵¹

More hopes in Talamone than they lost

Digging to set the alleged Diana loose;

Though there the admirals stand to lose the most.” ¹⁵⁴

The Images.

The Penance of the Envious: the Sealed Eyes. The sin of Envy (*Invidia*) differs from that of Pride in that it contains always an element of fear. The proud man is self-sufficient, rejecting with contempt the notion that anybody can be his equal or superior. The envious man is afraid of losing something by the admission of superiority in others, and therefore looks with grudging hatred upon other men’s gifts and good fortune, taking every opportunity to

run them down or deprive them of their happiness. On the Second Cornice, therefore, the eyes which could not endure to look upon joy are sealed from the glad light of the sun, and from the sight of other men. Clad in the garments of poverty and reduced to the status of blind beggars who live on alms, the Envious sit amid the barren and stony wilderness imploring the charity of the saints, their fellow-men. Because they are blind, the Whip and Bridle of Envy are brought to them by the voices of passing spirits.

Sapia, the spirit who converses with Dante in this canto, is the image of Envy’s malicious delight in the misfortune of others.

Notes.

ll. 13-21: *then en the sun*, etc.: the sun being in all religions a natural symbol of the divine, Virgil here takes it for his guide, supposing (rightly) that in Purgatory the direction to take will always be with the sun (right-handed), as in Hell it was always widdershins (left-handed). Cf. *Inf. passim*.

l. 22-3: *what our skill ... would call a mile*: this is another of Dante’s reminders that the realms of the dead are not enclosed in our familiar time-space continuum.

l. 25-36: *when borne towards us ... love your enemies*: these voices in the air are the Whip of Envy. The first example of the opposing virtue of *Generosity* is taken, as always, from the life of the Blessed Virgin; the second is from a classical source. The third is taken from Our Lord Himself, and stands in isolated honour, not having any counterpart in the Bridle.

l. 29: *Vinum non habent* = they have no wine. See *John* ii. 3.

l. 33: *I am Orestes*: When Orestes, the son of Agamemnon, was condemned to death, his devoted friend Pylades wished to give himself to die in his stead, saying that he himself was Orestes. The story is told by Cicero (*De Amicitia*).

l. 36: *love your enemies*: See *Matt* v. 44; *Luke* vi. 27-8. Note that the words of Christ are not “cried” but quietly “said”, as though the poet wished

to surround them with an atmosphere of especial reverence.

ll. 50-1: *Mary, pray for us, etc.*: This is the Prayer of the Envious, taken from the Litany of the Saints.

l. 58: *coarse hair-cloth*: the garments of penitence as well as of poverty.

l. 62: *the pardons*: Dante uses the word to mean the churches at which pardons, or indulgences, could be obtained, and whose porches were always thronged with beggars.

l. 70-2: *with an iron wire*: To tame a hawk that has been caught wild it is necessary to blindfold her. In the west this is usually done with the hood, but the method of sealing the eyes was also known in Dante's time, being perhaps imported from the east, where it is still used. It is effected "with a sharp needle and waxed silk. Carefully, the ... falconer threads the silk through the edge of the lower eyelids, drawing them closed by twisting the thread and tying it across the bird's head. This method does not hurt the falcon, and as she sheds her ... fear ... the thread is gradually untwisted, letting her see a little more light, until finally the eyes are wide open and the thread can be removed" — Frank Illingworth: *Falcons and Falconry*, . The "iron wire" and the "ghastly seam" belong to the Cornice of Envy, not to falconry.

l. 92: *Latian*: i.e. Italian; see *Inf.* xxii. 65 and note.

ll. 103-4: *that here dost tame thy wings*: this line carries on the simile of the hawk.

l.110: *Sapia*: a lady of the Bigozzi family of Siena, who married Ghinibaldo dei Saracini, lord of Castiglioncello. It appears that she had been banished from Siena, on some grounds of suspicion, and bore a jealous grudge against her countrymen in consequence. Her account of herself, which begins with a wry pun on her own name (meaning "Sapience" or "Prudence"), is tinged throughout with a lively self-mockery. This, since few

sins take themselves with such savage seriousness as jealousy, is in itself a sign of her change of heart.

l. 115: *near Colle*: In 1269 the Sieneese, together with other Ghibelline forces, under Provenzano Salvani (see Canto xi. 121 and note) were totally defeated by the Florentines at Colle near Volterra. Sapia, who was living at Colle, watched the battle from a tower overlooking the field.

l. 123: *as doth the blackbird*: In Lombardy the occasional fine, springlike days which sometimes occur in January are popularly called *giorni di merla*, "blackbird's days", the fable being that the foolish bird, seeing the sun, cried out: "Lord, I fear Thee no more, spring has come!"

l. 124-5: *on the brink of death*: In 1269, after the death of her husband, Sapia apparently became reconciled to the Sieneese and made them a grant of his castle, presumably dying herself soon after.

ll. 125-6: *nor could have won me penance as yet*: her late repentance would have caused her to be detained on the Second Terrace of Ante-Purgatory, had she not been assisted by "prayers from a heart in grace".

l. 128: *Peter Combseller* (Piero Pettignagno or Pettinaio): a celebrated hermit, who had been a comb-seller in Siena, and is said to have been of so scrupulous an honesty that if he found a defective comb in his stock he would throw it into the Arno, saying that he did not wish anyone to buy bad merchandise from him, even at a reduced price. He was popularly reputed a saint even in his lifetime, and in 1328, 39 years after his death, a tomb and altar were dedicated to him in the church of St Francis at Siena.

ll. 133-8: *mine eyes have yet, etc.*: see xii. 1, note.

l. 151-4: *those harebrains, etc.*: The reference is to two Sieneese projects which had been notorious failures. One was an attempt to tap the supposed underground river which supplied the city fountains, and which was provisionally referred to as the Diana. (This scheme eventually succeeded, but not until after Dante's time.) The other was the purchase (for 8000 gold

florins) of the small port of Talamone in the Maremma, near Orbetello, in the hope of converting it into a fine harbour and so making Siena a great commercial power, like Genoa. The port filled up with sand as fast as it was dredged, and the place was found to be malarial and uninhabitable. These projects were thus the contemporary equivalents of a South Sea Bubble, or a Ground-Nuts Scheme. Dante seldom loses an opportunity of twitting the Sienese for their vanity (cf. *Inf.* xxix. 122 *sqq.*).

l. 154: *the admirals*: either this is an ironical allusion to the shipping which the Sienese hoped to base upon the elusive harbour (as who should speak of “the Swiss Navy”), or, as others think, the word means the contractors or workers on the dredging scheme (cf. our “navvies” — navigators), who stand to lose not only money and hope, but also their lives through sickness.

Canto XIV



THE STORY. *DANTE* converses with the spirits of two Romagnol noblemen, one of whom — Guido del Duca — speaks bitterly of the various towns upon the banks of the Arno, and recounts the degeneracy that has overtaken the noble families of Romagna. Passing on, the Poets hear voices crying out examples of the sin of Envy.

“Who’s this, that makes the circuit of our hill 1
Or ever death has freed his flight to go,
And shuts his eyes or opens them at will?”

“I don’t know who; he’s not alone, I know; 4
Thou’rt nearer to him — ask him; greet him fair,
With words he will be glad to answer to.”

Thus, on my right, discussing me, a pair 7
Of spirits talked, leaning their heads together;
Then raised their chins and spoke for me to hear:

“O soul,” said one, “still in the body’s tether, 10
Yet journeying on to Heaven, pray comfort us,
And be so charitable altogether

As tell us whence and who thou art, because 13
Thy meed of grace such wonder doth instil
As such a thing well may as never was.”

I said: “In Falterona springs a rill 16
That flows on through the heart of Tuscany,