

Canto XIX



THE STORY. *SHORTLY before dawn, Dante dreams of the Siren and her song, and sees her unmasked by Virgil at the bidding of a Discreet Lady. He wakes at Virgil's call to find that it is broad daylight, and as they proceed on their way they are met by the Angel of Zeal, who pronounces the Benediction and directs them to the next stairway. Coming to the Fifth Cornice, they encounter the spirits of the Covetous, fettered face downwards, and Dante talks with the shade of Pope Adrian V.*

What hour the heat of day can warm no longer 1
The chill moon's influence, because the cold
Of earth, or sometimes Saturn's power, is stronger;

When geomancers, looking east, behold 4
Their Greater Fortune rising through a reach
Of sky that darkness cannot long enfold;

In dream a woman sought me, halt of speech, 7
Squint-eyed, on maimed feet lurching as she stept,
With crippled hands, and skin of sallowy bleach.

I gazed; and as to cold limbs that have crept 10
Heavy with night, the sun gives life anew,
Even so my look unloosed the string that kept

Her utterance captive, and right quickly drew 13
Upright her form that all misshapen hung,
And stained her withered cheek to love's own hue.

Then she began to sing, when thus her tongue 16
Was freed — and such a spell she held me by
As had been hard to break; and so she sung:

“Lo, the sweet Siren! yea, 'tis I, 'tis I 19
Who lead the mariners in mid-sea astray,
Such pleasures in my melting measures lie.

I turned Ulysses from his wandering way 22
With music; few, I trow, to me who grow
Know how to go, longing I so allay.”

Her lips yet moved to that melodious flow 25
When hard at hand a lady I espied,
Holy, alert, her guiles to overthrow.

“O Virgil, Virgil, who is this?” she cried 28
Indignant; and he came, with heedful eyes
On that discreet one, and on naught beside.

The first he seized, and, rending her disguise 31
In front, showed me her belly, which released
So foul a stench, I woke with that surprise.

I looked about for my good lord: “At least 34
Three times,” said he, “I've called thee; rise and come;
Let's find the breach whereby thou enterest.”

I rose; we went. Broad day had masterdom 37
Now of the holy mountain's every ledge,
And on our backs the new sun's rays smote plumb.

So, following on along the circle's edge, 40
With bended brow, like one who, bowed in thought,
Makes of himself the half-arch of a bridge,

"Come, here's the pass," I heard, in accents fraught 43
With so benign a tenderness of tone
As never ear in mortal precinct caught.

He who thus spake, wide-winged as 'twere a swan, 46
Signed our steps upward to our destination
Between the two unyielding walls of stone;

Then fluttering, fanned us with his wings' vibration, 49
And told us, blessed should *qui lugent* be,
Having their souls made queens of consolation.

Now, when we'd climbed a little, I and he, 52
Above the angel, thus my guide began:
"Still gazing on the ground? what aileth thee?"

"A strange, disturbing dream, I cannot ban 55
From out my mind, has set me in a scare,"
Said I, "and makes me only half a man."

"Saw'st thou that ancient witch, for whose sole snare 58
The mount above us weeps? and how one deals
With her," he answered, "and is rid of her?"

Suffice it thee! spurn earth beneath thy heels; 61
Look only to the lure the eternal King
Whirls yonder with the great celestial wheels."

Like to a hawk, that sits with folded wing, 64
Eyeing its feet, and at the call turns swift,
Eager for food, wings spread to soar and swing,

Such I became; and so, right through the rift 67
One climbs by, up to where the shelf runs round
Once more, did I my cheerful flight uplift.

Emerging on the open ledge, I found, 70
On the Fifth Cornice, people stretched out here
Weeping, their faces turned towards the ground,

"*Adhaesit pavimento anima mea,*" 73
I heard, though such deep sighs clothed their laments
That the faint words well-nigh escaped the ear.

"Spirits elect of God, whose punishments 76
Both hope and justice help you to endure,
Pray you, direct us toward the high ascents."

"If needing no prostration for your cure 79
You come, and seek swift passage undeferred,
Turn right-hand to the brink, and go secure."

Thus did the poet ask, and thus I heard, 82
A little way ahead, the answer made,
And grasped the implications of that word.

I looked towards my master, who conveyed 85
At once, by a pleased gesture, his consent
To the request my eager looks portrayed.

Then I, set free to follow my intent, ⁸⁸
Advanced to where I saw that being lie
Whose words I'd marked, and over him I bent,

"Spirit, whose flowing tears mature," said I, ⁹¹
"Man's only means to God, awhile repress
Thy greater care; tell me thy name, and why

You're laid backs up, and whether, in that place ⁹⁴
From which, still loaded with their mortal bias,
My feet have brought me, I can do thee grace."

"Why Heaven has turned our backs to Heaven, to lie as ⁹⁷
Up here we do, I'll tell," said he, "but first,
Quod ego Petri fui successor scias.

Twixt Chiaveri and Sestri drops dispersed ¹⁰⁰
A noble river; thence derives our blood,
And thence its proudest title is rehearsed.

One month, scarce more, I learned how every load ¹⁰³
Is gossamer to the Great Mantle's weight
Pressing on him who keeps it from the mud.

My change of heart, alas for me! was late; ¹⁰⁶
But when I stood upon ambition's crest
Pastor of Rome, I learned how life can cheat,

I saw how there the heart can find no rest, ¹⁰⁹
And higher in that life no man could climb;
So love for this life kindled in my breast.

A wretched soul was I until that time, ¹¹²
Cut off from God, consumed with avarice;
Here, as thou see'st, I'm punished for my crime.

What avarice works is known here as it is, ¹¹⁵
In the purgation of the souls contrite;
The mount has no more bitter pain than this.

For as our eyes would never seek the height, ¹¹⁸
Being bent on earthly matters, earthward thus
Justice here bends them in their own despite.

As love of all true good was quenched in us ¹²¹
By avarice, and our works were left undone,
So justice here doth hold us prisoners close,

Fettered and tied by hands and feet each one; ¹²⁴
And for so long as the just Lord shall please,
Outstretched and motionless we must be prone."

Here I, who'd promptly fallen on my knees, ¹²⁷
Started to speak; but my first word betrayed
My reverent posture to those ears of his.

"What's bowed thee down like that?" said he. I said; ¹³⁰
"My standing upright wronged your dignity;
I felt my conscience, as it were, upbraid."

"Brother, make straight thy knees," he answered me; ¹³³
"Rise up; err not; a fellow-servant I
To one sole power, with others and with thee.

If e'er thou'st understood that holy and high 136
Word of the Gospel, *Neque nubent*, thou
Wilt well perceive wherefore I thus reply,

Now go; I am reluctant to allow 139
Thy longer stay; thy presence keeps confined
The tears which ripen what thou saidst just now.

I've one niece, named Alagia, left behind 142
Yon side, who in herself is virtuous, save
Our house's bad ways should corrupt her mind;

And over yonder, she is all I have." 145

The Images.

Dante's Dream of the Siren: This, the second of Dante's dreams in Purgatory, is the subtlest and most difficult of the three. It has often been imitated since his time, but never with his wealth of implication.

Virgil (ll. 58-9) calls the *Siren* that "ancient witch" because of whose beguilements the souls do penance in Upper Purgatory. Obviously, she does not represent the "Secondary Goods" themselves, for whom love (in due measure) is right and proper. Moreover, she is at first sight unattractive; she only acquires strength and beauty from Dante's own gaze. She is, therefore, the projection upon the outer world of something in the mind: the soul, falling in love with itself, perceives other people and things, not as they are, but as wish-fulfillments of its own: i.e. its love for them is not love for a "true other" (cf. xviii. 22-6 and note), but a devouring egotistical fantasy, by absorption in which the personality rots away into illusion. The Siren is, in fact, the "ancient witch" Lilith, the fabled first wife of Adam, who was not a real woman of flesh and blood, but a magical imago, begotten of Samael, the Evil One, to be a fantasm of Adam's own desires. (According to Rabbinical

legend, God, seeing that "it was not good for man to be alone" with himself in this fashion, created Eve to be his true other, and to be loved and respected by him as a real person.) In later legend, the magical fantasm of man's own desire is the demon-lover called the *succubus* (or in the case of a woman, the *incubus*), intercourse with which saps the strength and destroys the life.

The Lady who intervenes to thwart the Siren is not to be identified with Beatrice, Lucy, or any other of the poem's *dramatis personae*. It will be noticed that she acts more promptly than Virgil (reason); but she cannot herself unmask the Siren; she calls upon Virgil to do so. She symbolizes something immediate, instinctive, and almost automatic: one might call her an intuition, or perhaps the reflex action of a virtuous habit, whose instant warning puts the soul on the alert and prompts it to think rationally about what it is doing.

[Charles Williams's novel, *Descent into Hell*, is a brilliant expansion and interpretation of the theme of Dante's dream of the Siren. Those who do not care for commentary in the form of fiction may find illumination in a phrase of Fr Gerald Vann's: "If you exalt the objects of your love until your picture is a false one; if you idealize them; *if you project upon them your own ideal self*; then you are loving not a real person but a dream" (*The Seven Swords* — italics mine).]

The Penance of the Covetous: Binding in fetters face downwards: Covetousness (*Avaritia*) is the inordinate love of wealth, and the power that wealth gives, whether it is manifested by miserly hoarding or by lavish spending. It is a peculiarly earth-bound sin, looking to nothing beyond the rewards of this life (cf. Bunyan's "man with the muck-rake"); it is expiated here by the endurance of its effects; the souls are so fettered that they can see nothing but the earth on which they once set store.

Pope Adrian is the image of Covetousness in the form of Ambition — the concentration upon worldly place and power — an ambition no less earth-bound for being centred upon ecclesiastical preferment.

Notes.

Il. 2-3: *the chill moon's influence ... or sometimes Saturn's power*: The Moon (no doubt because of her heatless light) and Saturn (on account of his distance from the Sun) were from ancient times regarded as cold planets, both in themselves and in their influence. Virgil (*Georg.* i. 336) calls Saturn "*frigida Stella*", and Dante (*Canz.* Io son venuto) "the planet that strengthens the cold". *Sometimes*: Dante is here careful not to suggest that Saturn is exerting his influence at the time he is describing, for Saturn is in Leo (*Para.* xxi. 14), and will only rise two signs after the Sun.

l. 5: *their Greater Fortune*: the *Fortuna Major* of the Geomancers, who predicted the future from the random dispositions of points on the earth, paper, or elsewhere (as certain of their successors from the random disposition of tea-leaves), was a group of stars in the last degrees of *Aquarius* (the Water-Carrier) and the first of *Pisces* (the *Fishes*), forming the figure below. The time is therefore some two hours before dawn (about 4 a.m.).

* * *

* * *

* * *

The mention here of the forbidden art of divination has its sinister appropriateness as an introduction to the dream of the "ancient witch".

Il. 7-33: *in dream a woman sought me*: See Images.

l. 22: *7 turned Ulysses*: in the *Odyssey* (which Dante had not read, knowing no Greek) Ulysses stops his ears with wax and so escapes the lure of the Sirens. Moore suggests that the source here may be Cicero, *De Finibus*, v. 18.

l. 35: "*three times*", said he, "*I've called thee*": Dante's dream-psychology is excellent as usual: the voice of Virgil introduces the speaker as a character into the dream and, at the same time, breaks the dream and wakes the sleeper.

Il. 37-9: *broad day ... smote plumb*: the sun has risen due east, and the poets continue their journey due west.

l. 46: *he who thus spake*: this is the Angel of Zeal, guardian of the Fourth Cornice. The wide sweep of his wings indicates his celerity in doing his task.

l. 49: *fanned us*: here the fourth P is erased from Dante's forehead.

l. 50: *qui lugent*: this is the Benediction of the Fourth Cornice, from the Beatitude: *Benedicti qui lugent, quoniam ipsi consolabuntur*: "blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted" (*Matt.* v. 5). The benediction refers, not merely to the "healing tears" of the penitents, but to the fact that depression of spirits accompanies the sin of Accidie (see Images to Canto xviii) and has now been purged away.

Il. 58-9: *that ancient witch*, etc.: See Images.

l. 62-3: *look only to the lure*: God is compared to a falconer, whirling his lure to recall the hawk to the fist. The following *terzain* carries on the simile of the hawk.

l. 71: *the Fifth Cornice*: here the sin of Covetousness is purged.

l. 73: *adhaesit pavimento anima mea*: "my soul cleaveth to the dust": This is the Prayer of the Covetous, taken from *Ps.* cxix. 25 (*Vulg.* cxviii. 25).

Il. 79-80: *needing no prostration*, etc.: the speaker (who, being face downwards, cannot see the questioner) takes Dante and Virgil to be spirits in

Purgatory.

l. 84: *the implications*: Dante grasps that (as we see later) any soul that has already (in life) made full satisfaction, both as to guilt and stain, for the sin purged on any particular Cornice, is not detained on that Cornice, but passes straight on to the next.

l. 89: *that being*: this is the spirit of Pope Adrian V (Ottobuono dei Fieschi); elected Pope July 1276; died in August of the same year (l. 103). He was papal legate to England in 1268.

l. 99: *Quod ego Petri fui successor scias*: “Thou must know that I was the successor of Peter”: i.e. that I was Pope. Adrian uses Latin as the official language of the Church.

l. 100: *twixt Chiaveri and Sestri*: the Fieschi, who were Counts of Lavagne, derived their title from a little river of that name, which enters the Gulf of Genoa between these two towns.

l. 104: *the Great Mantle*: i.e. of the Pope.

l. 134: *a fellow-servant* I: cf. *Rev.* xxii. 9.

l. 137: *Neque nubent* = “They neither marry [nor are given in marriage]” (*Matt.* xxii. 23-30; *Mark* xii. 18-25; *Luke* xx. 27-35): Every bishop, including the Pope, is ceremonially wedded to his see (which is why he wears a ring and changes his name to that of his diocese). But this marriage, like any earthly marriage, is dissolved in Heaven, together with all legal and official ties and all earthly rank and privilege (cf. v. 88 and note). This holds good, despite the sacramental nature of the ties of marriage, orders, and unction: for in Heaven there is no longer any need of sacraments.

l. 142: *Alagia*: she was the wife of Moroello Malaspina II (see Canto vii. 118, note).

Canto XX



THE STORY. *As they pass along the Fifth Cornice, the Poets hear the spirit of Hugh Capet proclaiming the Whip of Covetousness. Hugh utters a great lamentation over the crimes of the Capetian House and recites to Dante the examples of the Bridle. Proceeding on their way, the travellers are startled by feeling the whole Mountain shake from top to bottom, while all the prostrate penitents join in a great shout of Gloria in excelsis Deo. Dante is consumed with curiosity.*

Ill fares the will that fights a better will; 1
So, to content him, I, though discontent,
Withdrew the sponge ere it had drunk its fill.

I moved; my guide moved too, and on he went 4
Where space allowed, hugging the rock, like him
Who, on a rampart, hugs the battlement;

For those who, drop by drop from eyes a-brim, 7
Distil the drug that sets the whole world raving,
Lie, on the outer side, too near the rim.

Cursed be thou, thou ancient wolf, that having 10
More victims than all other beasts of prey,
Canst find no bottom to thine endless craving!

O Heaven, whose circling motions, some folk say, 13
Govern the fortunes of this world below,
When shall he come who'll hunt the brute away?