

Canto VI



THE STORY. *AFTER extricating himself from a whole crowd of the Unshriven, who besiege him with requests for help, Dante asks Virgil about the efficacy of prayer, and receives an interim answer, the profounder aspects of the matter being referred to Beatrice for explanation. The Poets meet with Sordello, who affectionately hails Virgil as his fellow Mantuan, and thus prompts Dante to denounce at some length the internecine quarrels which divide Italy, concluding with a savagely ironical passage of invective directed against Florence.*

The loser at the hazard, when the game breaks up, 1
Sadder and sorrier lingers on alone,
Re-plays each throw, and drinks of wisdom's cup.

Off go the others with the lucky one; 4
This tries to catch his eye, that jogs his back,
One plucks his sleeve with: "Think of me anon!"

He pushes through — tips Tom, remembers Jack — 7
And where his hand goes out they melt away,
Till in the end he's quit of all the pack.

So in that milling crowd was I that day, 10
And, turning here, there, everywhere my face,
Bought myself off with promises to pay.

There was that Aretine whom vengeance 13
At Ghin di Tacco's murderous hand pursued;
There he who drowned while running in the chase.

There Frederick Novello pleading stood 16
With outstretched hands; the Pisan too, whose fate
Made good Marzucco show such fortitude.

I saw Count Orso; and that soul whom hate 19
And envy severed from its flesh by force —
For no crime done, it said; I'll name him straight:

Pierre de la Brosse; and ere she end her course 22
Here, let the Lady of Brabant give heed
Lest this procure her other mates, and worse.

So, being at length from all those spirits freed, as 25
Whose one prayer was that we should pray for them,
And help them to grow holy with more speed,

"My Light," said I, "I think thou didst condemn 28
Expressly, once, the thought that Heaven's decree
Would bow to any prayer; and yet the theme

Of all these people's prayers is constantly 31
That, and that only. Is their hope then vain?
Or are thy words not fully clear to me?"

And he to me: "That which I wrote is plain, 34
Nor are their hopes deceived, if thy wit skills
With clear, whole sight to con this point again.

High justice does not stoop when love fulfils 37
In one fire's flash the whole great payment owed
By him that here in debt and bondage dwells;

But in that case I treated of, the load ⁴⁰
Might not be shifted; prayer had no effect
Because the prayer was then disjoined from God,

These are deep waters; rest not there — reject ⁴³
Conclusion, till she show it thee who is
Set as a light ‘twixt truth and intellect —

I know not if thou understandest this: ⁴⁶
I mean Beatrice; on this mount’s high crest
Thou shalt behold her, smiling and in bliss.”

“O sir,” said I, “let us make greater haste! ⁴⁹
I can, indeed — I’m much less tired already —
And look how the hill’s shadow veils its breast.”

“While this day lasts we’ll march on straight and steady ⁵²
As far as maybe; yet the facts,” he said,
“Are other than thou think’st, and howso speedy

Our pace, thou wilt not reach the mountain’s head ⁵⁵
Ere he return, who now is so far gone
Behind the slope that thou dost cast no shade.

But see! a soul, all by himself alone, ⁵⁸
Looking our way; he’ll guide us toward our goal,
And show the quickest way to walk upon.”

We came to him. O lofty Lombard soul, ⁶¹
How stately didst thou bear thyself, avouching
Scorn in thine eyes’ slow glance majestic!

He said no word to us, but, gravely watching, ⁶⁴
Let us come on, and sat and eyed us there,
After the fashion of a lion couching.

Yet Virgil still drew nigh him, with a prayer ⁶⁷
That he would show the ascent; the shadowy man
Ignored all this, demanding who we were,

And whence. Straightway my courteous guide began: ⁷⁰
“Mantua ...” And, starting from his sullen smother,
All self-absorbed, the shade leapt up and ran

From where he was to meet him, crying: ⁷³
“Brother! O brother-Mantuan! Sordello am I
Of thine own city!” And they embraced each other,

O house of grief! O bond-slave Italy! ⁷⁶
Ship without pilot in a raging gale!
No mistress-province, but a stew and sty!

That noble soul was swift; he did not fail, ⁷⁹
For the sweet name, his city’s name — no more —
To bid his fellow-countryman all-hail.

But in thy borders is no rest from war ⁸²
For living men; those whom one moat doth bound,
One wall, destroy each other and devour.

Search, wretched! search thy seas and coasts around; ⁸⁵
Then search thy bosom; see if thou canst hit
On any nook where pleasant peace is found.

What though Justinian fettled up thy bit 88
If still the saddle's empty? That can do
Nought but make worse the bitter shame of it.

You reverend gentlemen, who should pursue 91
Your calling, and let Caesar mount and ride,
Could you but read what God set down for you,

See how this brute turns vicious in her pride, 94
Missing the spurred heel, since you snatched at her,
Fumbling the rein with hands not fit to guide.

Thou, German Albert, who hast left this mare 97
To run wild and ungoverned, thou indeed
Shouldst now bestride her back — what dost thou care?

Let judgement fall, judgement on all thy breed 100
From the just stars! be it strange and manifest,
So that thine heir shall tremble and give heed;

Because thy father and thou, by greed possessed, 103
Lingering up there, have suffered this abuse
To lay the garden of the Empire waste.

Come, see the Capulets and Montagues; 106
See, heedless man, Monaldi's house made poor,
The Filippeschi shaking in their shoes.

Come, see thy nobles, persecuted sore, 109
And bind their bleeding wounds; come, heart of stone,
And see how safe life is in Santafior.

Come, see thy city, weeping there alone, 112
That cries by night and day, poor widowed
Rome, "Caesar and husband, whither art thou gone?"

Come, see how all thy people here at home 115
Love one another. If no ruth can move,
Then for fame's sake, for very shame's sake, come!

Nay (be the thought permitted) most high Jove, 118
Once for our sins slain here upon the rood,
Are Thy just eyes turned elsewhere and aloof?

Or dost Thou thus prepare, as seemeth good 121
To Thine abysmal wisdom, some great plan,
Dark to our eyes, not to be understood?

For every town in Italy is a den 124
Swarming with tyrants; any churl's Marcellus,
Who comes along to play the partisan.

Florence, my Florence, laugh! enjoy this jealous 127
Little digression, for it galls thee not,
Thanks to thy citizens, so wise, so zealous!

Some people's justice is heart-deep, slow-shot, 130
Stopping to think ere loosing from the bow;
Thy folk have justice at tongue's tip, I wot.

Some shun the cares of office: thy folk? 133
No! "I'll sacrifice myself!" they gaily shout
Long before anybody asks them to.

Be glad, with so much to be glad about, ¹³⁶
Thou rich, thou peaceable, thou well-advised!
Do I speak truth? the facts will bear me out.

Athens and Lacedaemon, that devised ¹³⁹
Old laws and arts urbane in years bygone,
Had scarcely started to be civilized

Compared with thee, whose planning's so well-done, ¹⁴²
Thou hast ere now run through by mid-November
The store of thread that thy October spun.

How often, in the days thou canst remember, ¹⁴⁵
Have customs, coinage, codes been redesigned,
Each office changed, and changed thy every member!

Bethink thee then, and if thou art not blind ¹⁴⁸
Thou'lt see thyself a woman sick with pain,
Who on the softest down no rest can find,

Tossing and turning weary limbs in vain. ¹⁵¹

The Images.

Sordello: Since Virgil (whether considered *literally* as an Ancient and a heathen, or *allegorically* as the Natural Man) cannot of himself know all the inhabitants of Mount Purgatory or explain its organization in detail, an interpreter is provided at each stage of the journey to supply the deficiency. Sordello performs this office in Ante-Purgatory, as does Statius later on in Purgatory Proper, and Matilda in the Earthly Paradise.

In this canto we are still in the region of the Unshriven.

Notes.

l. 1: *hazard (la zara)*: a gambling game played with three dice, the winner of the cast being the player whose pips added up to a number previously called.

ll. 13-19: *that Aretine*: Benincasa da Laterina; *he who drowned*: Guccio dei Tarlati; *the Pisan*: Farinata, son of Marzucco degli Scornigiani; for these, and for *Frederick Novello* and *Count Orso* see Glossary.

l. 22: *Pierre de la Brosse*: surgeon and afterwards chamberlain to Philip III of France. He accused Philip's wife Mary of Brabant (L 23) of having poisoned her stepson Louis, and she in revenge started a campaign of slander against him, as the result of which he was hanged in 1278, on a charge of treason which Dante obviously thought was undeserved.

l. 24: *test this procure her other mates, and worse*: i.e. lest after death she go to a worse place than Purgatory.

ll. 28-9: *thou didst condemn expressly once*: the reference is to *Aen.* vi. 376. Aeneas (see Glossary) on his visit to Hades meets the shade of the drowned steersman Palinurus, who begs to be conveyed across Styx, the passage of which is forbidden to those whose bodies are unburied. The Sibyl rebukes Palinurus with the words: "Cease to hope that prayer can alter the fixed decree of the gods."

l. 37-43: *high justice does not stoop*, etc.: Virgil explains that (a) when one person assumes another's debt of restitution and pays it all off in one moment of burning charity, the divine Justice is not diminished, since all its demands are fulfilled: but that (b) in the case of Palinurus and Aeneas, who were heathens, neither the petitioner nor the mediator was qualified to utter that "prayer from a soul in grace" which alone is effective (v. *Purg.* iv. 133-5, vi. 33) — The delay in Ante-Purgatory being purely penal, it can be *remitted* when satisfaction is made by another (see Introduction, p-4).

l. 56: *ere he return*: i.e. the sun, which has now passed behind the mountain: the time is therefore about 3 p.m.

l. 71: *Mantua*: Virgil is doubtless about to quote the inscription on his tomb in Naples (see iii. 25 and note) which begins: “*Mantua me genuit* — Mantua gave me birth.”

l. 74: *Sordello* the troubadour was born at Goito near Mantua about 1200. After wandering from court to court of Italy, Provence, Spain, Poitou, Portugal, and various parts of France, he attached himself to Charles of Anjou (who thought highly of him) and spent most of his later life in Provence. All record of him is lost after 1269, but there is a tradition that he died a violent death. Later in the *Comedy* we are reminded of Sordello’s intrigue with Cunizza (wife to Ricciardo di San Bonifazio and sister to Ezzelino III da Romano) whom Dante places in the Heaven of Venus (*Para.* ix. 25-36); the repentance of this pair of lovers seems to be of Dante’s own imagining. Sordello wrote all his poems (some forty of which are preserved), not in his own language but *in* Provencal; incidentally there is nothing in them to support Browning’s fanciful treatment of him (in *Sordello*) as a kind of fore-runner of Dante himself. One poem, the *Lament of Blacatz*, contains an impassioned and reproachful address to all the foremost princes of Europe, and it is presumably because of this that Dante chooses him, in the next canto (*q.v.*), to point out and name the various sovereigns in the Valley of the Rulers, besides echoing the *Lament* in the great passage of reproach which here follows.

l. 79-81: *he did not fail*, etc.: Sordello in his lifetime was certainly no patriot: he was an expatriate, who had renounced even his own language and had fought against Italy under a French banner; this perhaps is why we find him so solitary and self-absorbed (ll. 58 *sqq.*). The emotion stirred in him by the mere mention of his birthplace is for that very reason the more striking, and thus provokes Dante to his diatribe against Italy.

l. 88 ‘*Justinian fettled up thy bit*: The Roman law was codified in the sixth century by the Emperor Justinian (see Glossary), but there is now no

one to enforce it. (See *Inf.* Introduction, .)

l. 91: *you reverend gentlemen*: the clergy, who ought not to meddle with the temporal power but leave it to the Emperor (“Caesar”).

l. 97: *German Albert*: Albert I of Austria (1248-1308) elected Emperor in succession to his father, Rudolph of Hapsburg, in 1298.

Dante’s attitude to the Hapsburg emperor is ambivalent, according as he regards him (*a*) as King of the Germans — i.e. the feudal head of an invading and usurping race, or (*b*) as Roman Emperor — i.e. the divinely ordained guardian of law and civilization (see *Inf.* Introduction,). Compare his attitude to Julius Caesar (see *Inf.* xxxiv. Images under *Judas*, *Brutus*, *Cassius*) and to Pope Boniface VIII (see *Inf.* Introduction, , and *Purg.* xx. 86-90 and note).

l. 100-3: *let judgement fall*, etc.: a prophetic allusion to the murder of Albert by his nephew John, eight years after the supposed date of Dante’s vision. *Thine heir*: i.e. Henry VII of Luxemburg, the emperor on whom Dante built such high hopes (see *Inf.* Introduction, pp.43-7).

ll. 103-7: *thy father and thou*: Both Rudolph and Albert neglected Italy (“the garden of the Empire”), being preoccupied with their hereditary possessions.

ll. 106-11: *come, see the Capulets*, etc.: As examples of internal dissension in Italy Dante points to the feud between the Capulets and Montagues of Verona, made familiar to us by Shakespeare; to that between the Monaldi and Filippeschi in Orvieto; to the sufferings of the ancient nobility at the hands of the “new rich” middle classes; and to the precarious conditions of life in Santaflora (a county in the Sieneze Maremma) where incessant warfare raged between the Aldobrandeschi family and the commune of Siena.

l. 113: *poor widowed Rome*: cf. *Lamentations* i. 1: “How doth the city sit solitary How is she become as a widow!” The condition of the Empire’s

neglected capital was at this period impoverished, squalid, and disorderly, comparing very unfavourably with that of other Italian cities.

l. 118: *most high Jove*: the name “Jove” (possibly on account of its resemblance to “Jehovah”) is used more than once by Petrarch to designate “God the Father”, or “God” in general. Its use here with special reference to God the Son is more unusual: but Dante, being an accurate theologian, never hesitates to call the Second Person of the Trinity “God”, without qualification, in whatever connexion.

l. 125: *Marcellus*: a Roman consul, who supported Pompey against Julius Caesar, and was a violent opponent of the Empire. Dante means that any demagogue who defies the constitution is hailed by the populace as a hero.

l. 127-51: *Florence, my Florence*, etc.: the eulogy is, of course, ironical from start to finish (*cf.* the parallel passage in *Inf.* xxvi. 1-3).

l. 139: *Athens*: the cradle of Greek art and culture; *Lacedaemon*, chief city of Sparta, renowned for its laws and administration.

l. 147: *changed thy every member*: an allusion to the perpetual shift of parties, banished and recalled in turn (see *Inf.* Introduction, p-30). We need not suppose that Dante was altogether fair to Florence, whose institutions had all the qualities, as well as all the defects, of elasticity.

Canto VII



THE STORY. *AFTER repeatedly embracing his fellow-Mantuan, Sordello asks who the travellers are, and Virgil names himself Sordello at once drops down to clasp his knees, inquiring anxiously about Virgil's fate in the after-life, and is answered. In reply to Virgil's question, he then explains the Rule of the Mountain, which prevents any climbing after sunset. He then leads the Poets to a beautiful Valley, where they see a group of highly distinguished persons, representing the Third Class of the Late-Repentant — the Preoccupied — many of whom Sordello points out and names.*

When with a glad and solemn courtesy ¹
Greetings had been exchanged three times or four,
Sordel drew back: “Who are you, though?” said he,

“Ere to this mount those spirits fit to soar ⁴
Upward to God were brought first to be shriven,
Octavian to my bones gave sepulture.

Virgil am I; and I came short of Heaven ⁷
For no default, save that I had not faith.”
In such wise was my leader's answer given.

Like one who sees what takes away his breath, ¹⁰
Who half-believes, and then must hesitate
And doubt: “It is — it cannot be,” he saith;

So seemed that shade; and then, returning straight, ¹³
He stooped before him, and with bended head