

Canto VIII



THE STORY. *NIGHT is now falling; and after the Souls of the Preoccupied Rulers have sung their evening hymn, two Angels descend from Heaven to protect the Valley. Led by Sordello, the Poets advance, and Dante is recognized by Judge Nino Visconti, who, learning that his former friend is still alive, sends a message by him, asking for prayers. While he is speaking, Dante notices that the Four Stars which he had seen before daybreak have set, and Three Others risen in their place. A Serpent comes creeping into the Valley, but is immediately put to flight by the Angels. Dante converses with the soul of Conrad Malaspina, to whose family he will, as he learns, shortly have cause to be grateful.*

Now — in the hour that melts with homesick yearning 1
The hearts of seafarers who've had to say
Farewell to those they love, that very morning —

Hour when the new-made pilgrim on his way 4
Feels a sweet pang go through him, if he hears
Far chimes that seem to knell the dying day —

Did I suspend the office of my ears, 7
And turn to watch a spirit rising there,
And beckoning with his hand for listeners.

Folding his palms, he lifted them in prayer, 10
With gaze set eastward, that said visibly
To God: "For Thee and nothing else I care."

Te lucis ante, so devoutly he 13
Breathed forth, so sweet the singing syllables,
All sense of self was ravished out of me.

The others joined their sweet, devout appeals 16
To his, and sang the whole hymn afterward,
Fixing their eyes on the eternal wheels.

Sharpen thy sight now, Reader, to regard 19
The truth, for so transparent grows the veil,
To pass within will surely not be hard.

I saw that goodly host stand sentinel 22
Thereafter, speechless, in expectant love
Scanning the sky with lowly looks, all pale;

And then I saw descending from above 25
Two angels, bearing fiery swords in hand,
Broke short and bated at the points thereof!

Green as fresh leaves new-budded on a wand as 28
Their raiment was, which billowed out and blew
Behind, by flutter of green pinions fanned.

One lit down just above us, and one flew 31
To the far bank and poised there in his place,
So that the folk lay folded 'twixt the two,

Clearly I saw their bright heads, but the face 34
Dazzled the eye beneath the locks of yellow,
As every sense is vanquished by excess.

“They’re sent from Mary’s bosom,” said Sordello, 37
“To guard the vale; for any moment now
The serpent comes.” Then to my friend and fellow

I turned, not knowing whence ’twould come or how, 40
And to those trusty shoulders clung affrighted,
Shuddering, an ice-cold sweat upon my brow.

“And now come down,” Sordel again invited, 43
“Visit these noble shades in their green nook,
And talk to them — I know they’ll be delighted.”

I think ’twas but three paces that I took, 46
Ere I was down, and saw a shadow peer
At me, with knowledge dawning in his look.

Darkness was falling now, yet not so sheer 49
But that the truth it had at first made dim
To our two pairs of eyes grew plain and clear.

So he advanced to me, and I to him; 52
What joy to see thou wast not damnified,
Worthy Judge Nino, dear to my esteem!

No welcoming word was left on either side 55
Unspoken; then: “How long since thou,” said he,
“Cam’st to the hill’s foot o’er the waters wide?”

“This morn I left the abodes of misery 58
And still in my first life I journey thus,
Though journeying thus I gain the life to be.”

I told him this: whereat, unanimous, 61
He and Sordello started back anon,
Like men astounded and incredulous.

Then this to Virgil turned, and that, to one 64
Set near him, crying: “Conrad, up! come here,
See this great thing God’s grace hath willed and done!”

Then turned to me: “By that most singular 67
Favour thou ow’st to Him whose primal *why*
Lies so deep hid, no wit can wade so far,

When the great seas once more behind thee lie, 70
Bid my Giovanna plead for me, before
That court which hears the guiltless when they cry.

Her mother does not love me any more, 73
I think, since she put off those weeds of white
Which, hapless wretch, she soon will hanker for,

Easy it is in her to read aright 76
How brief a blaze a woman’s love will yield
If not relit by frequent touch and sight.

The viper that Milan bears on his shield 79
Will make a tomb less goodly for her rest
Than if Gallura’s cock had held the field.”

Thus he; while all his countenance expressed 82
A measured anger, such as sets its seal
Rightly upon a warm and generous breast.

But my rapt gaze grew fixed in heaven, where reel 85
The slowest-gyring stars, as the wheel's gyre
Is slowest near the axle of the wheel.

"What is it, son," my lord began inquire, 88
"That takes thine eye so?" "Those three torches there,"
Said I, "that kindle all this pole with fire."

And he: "The four bright stars that shone so fair 91
To greet thee in the dawn have dipped from view
Yonder, and these have risen up where they were."

While he yet spake, Sordello seized and drew 94
Him close and cried: "See there, the enemy!"
Pointing the way that he should look unto.

And there, where no bank fenced beneath its lee 97
That little vale, came sliding in the snake,
Such as gave Eve the bitter fruit, maybe.

'Twixt grass and flowers flickered the wicked strake 100
With head turned ever anon to lick its back,
As a beast licks itself for sleekness' sake.

I cannot tell — my sight could not keep track — 103
Of how the heavenly falcons moved to stoop;
But well I saw them in the mid-attack

Moving; and when it heard the swish and swoop 106
Of the green wings, the serpent fled; and they
Back to their posts wheeled equal round and up.

The shade the judge had called to, while this fray 109
Went on, stood by and gazed upon me still,
Nor for one moment took his eyes away.

"So may thy guiding light in thy free will 112
Find wax enough to feed on till thou stand
Safe on the flower-bright summit of the hill,"

Said he, "if thou have certain news at hand 115
Of Valdimagra or the parts near by,
Tell me, who once was mighty in that land;

Currado Malaspina then was I — 118
Not the old man, his grandson; to mine own
I bore that love which here we purify."

"O," I replied, "I never yet have gone 121
Through your domain; yet who lives so remote
But that all Europe knows it by renown?

The fame that of your noble house goes out 124
Proclaims the rulers and the land abroad,
Even to men who never there set foot;

And, as I hope to speed, I pledge my word, 127
Your lineage still maintains inviolate
The honour of the purse and of the sword.

So rare its blood and wont, that though the great 130
Lord of Misrule wrench all the world aside,
It shuns ill ways, and it alone goes straight."

Then he: “Go to; or ere the seventh tide ¹³³
Bring back the sun to rest in that bright bed
The Ram’s four feet arch over and bestride,

Events shall hammer home into thy head ¹³⁶
That courteous judgement with much stouter nails
Than this and that that other men have said,

If nothing stay the hand that bears the scales.” ¹³⁹

The Images.

The Serpent and the Angels: The intrusion of the Serpent “such as gave Eve the bitter fruit, maybe”, into this Eden-like valley naturally raises the question whether, in the *literal story*, the souls in Ante-Purgatory are still liable to temptation and sin. It would appear that they are — not in the conscious will, which in the hour of death was firmly set towards God — but in the subconscious, the region of dreams, which is not yet subject to the will, so that a special intervention of Divine Grace is needed to protect it from assault. (The souls in Purgatory Proper are definitely beyond the reach of sin — see Canto xi. 22 and note.)

The green robes of the Angels are the colour of Hope — specifically the hope of salvation. Their fiery swords remind us of the flaming sword of *Gen.* iii. 24, set at the gate of Eden after the expulsion of Adam and Eve; but these are blunted at the point: “salvation, in these souls, is now working out the reversal of the Fall” (J. D. Sinclair). The blunted points are usually taken to signify Mercy as opposed to Judgement; but it is, perhaps, rather that the contest with the Serpent is now hardly more than a fencing bout: the creature needs only to be routed and not slain, for sin “has retreated to its last stronghold” (J. S. Carroll), and is reduced to a mere fantasy, which can only trouble and not corrupt.

In its *allegorical application* — i.e. to the experience of the soul in this world — the episode may perhaps be taken to mean that so long as the will *truly* intends penitence and amendment, the Christian need not, and should not, be unduly troubled about the involuntary aberrations of the unconscious, but should simply commend the matter to God, in the confident assurance that it will be taken care of.

The Three Stars: These typify the Theological Virtues (or Graces): Faith, Hope, and Charity.

Notes.

ll. 1- 6: *Now — in the hour*, etc.: This is the famous passage imitated by Byron in *Don Juan*, iii. 108.

l. 7: *did I suspend the office of my ears*: i.e. ceased listening to Sordello.

l. 12: *for Thee and nothing else I care*: the Preoccupied turn from the worldly cares which have become their punishment to that greater care which they once neglected.

l. 13: *Te lucis ante [terminum]*: “Before the ending of the day”: the compline hymn of St Ambrose, for protection against evil dreams and phantoms of the night (for an English translation see *Hymns A. & M.*

l. 18: *the eternal wheels*: the courses of the planets (see Dante’s Universe, *Inf.*).

ll. 19-20: *Sharpen thy sight now, Reader*: Cf. the parallel passage in *Inf.* ix. 61-3, which likewise announces the arrival of aid sent from Heaven to deal with a danger against which reason and will are powerless.

l. 36: *as every sense is vanquished by excess*: Dante is quoting from Aristotle, *De Anima*, ii. 12: “The excess of the sensibles corrupts the senses”: i.e. a too strong light dazzles, a too loud noise deafens, a too concentrated scent paralyses the sense of smell, or a too pungent taste, the palate.

l. 37: *from Mary's bosom*: The help and protection of the Queen of Heaven were invoked previously in the *Salve Regina* (vii. 82).

l. 54: *worthy Judge Nino*: Nino (Ugolino) Visconti, Justiciary of Gallura in Sardinia, was on the mother's side a grandson of Count Ugolino della Gherardesca (see *Inf.* xxxiii. 13 and note), and his rival in the leadership of the Guelfs in Pisa, to which city Sardinia at that time (1288) belonged. After the Ghibellines under Ruggieri degli Ubaldini had driven him from Pisa and assumed power in the city, Nino became head of the Tuscan Guelf league against Pisa, to which he returned in 1293. Later he went to Sardinia to punish Fra Gomita, his vicar in Sardinia, for bribery and corruption (see *Inf.* xxii. 81 and note). He appears to have been personally known to Dante, whom he may have met when visiting Florence from time to time between 1288 and 1293 on business connected with the Guelf league, if he was not actually his companion in arms at Caprona (see *Inf.* xxi. 95 and note). He died in 1296 in Sardinia. The old commentators speak of him as a man of noble spirit, stout, courageous, and well-bred.

Generations of commentators have made mildly merry over Dante's joy (in which they detect a note of surprise) in finding that his friend Nino is not among the damned. But this is, surely, to forget where we are. Everybody in Ante-Purgatory has, by hypothesis, attained salvation only at the last moment and by the skin of his teeth; and Dante, knowing Nino, may be supposed to have known whether or not his friend was careless about religion. He had already been distressed by seeing in Hell many people whom he had cause to love and admire (see *Inf.* xv, xvi.), and his relief now is natural enough.

Nino's presence among the saved need not, on the other hand, mean that in Dante's eyes he is exempted from all blame in the matter of his quarrel with Ugolino. What qualifies a soul for Purgatory is not innocence, but repentance. All we are entitled to infer from Dante's placing of the two men is that he is representing the one as a penitent, the other as an impenitent, sinner.

l. 65: *Conrad*: this is Conrad, or Currado, Malaspina. See note on l. 118.

l. 71: *my Giovanna*: Nino's daughter by Beatrice d'Este. In 1300 (see ll. 73 *sqq.*), four years after Nino's death, Beatrice was remarried to Galeazzo Visconti of Milan. Nino's "measured anger", with which Dante sympathizes, at this infidelity to the dead appears to us scarcely justified; but it must be remembered that the medieval Church had no great liking for second marriages.

l. 74: *weeds of white*: the widow's dress — black robe with white veil — such as we see still used in the "*deuil blanc*" portrait of Mary Queen of Scots. The suggestion in l. 75, that Beatrice will soon repent her marriage, refers to the misfortunes which overtook the Visconti family from 1302 onwards.

ll. 79 and 81: *the viper [of] Milan ... Gallura's cock*: the arms of the Milanese and Pisan Visconti family respectively. "It would have been more to Beatrice's honour if she had died the widow of Nino than the wife of Galeazzo."

l. 85-6: *where reel the slowest-gyring stars*: I.e. near the Pole. We may infer that neither the four stars of Canto i, nor the three stars of Canto viii, ever actually set in Purgatory, any more than the Great and Little Bears ever set in the Northern Hemisphere. But since in these latitudes the pole is only 32 above the horizon, and the mountain itself permanently shuts off half the heavens from the view of those upon its lower slopes, the four stars are now behind the mountain and beneath the pole, while the three are just emerging into sight from the eastward edge of the mountain.

l. 104: *the heavenly falcons*: i.e. the angels.

l. 109: *the shade the judge had called to*: see l. 65.

ll. 112-14: *thy guiding light*: Divine grace; *the flower-bright (lit. enamelled) summit*: the Earthly Paradise at the top of the mountain.

l. 116: *Valdimagra*: see Glossary and *Inf.* xxiv. 142, note.

l. 118: *Curado Malaspina*: Conrad Malaspina I (“the old man”, l. 119) was grandfather to three cousins: Conrad II (now addressing Dante), who died about 1294; Moroello (see *Inf.* xxiv. 142 and note); and Franceschino (d. between 1313 and 1321) whose hospitality Dante enjoyed in Lunigiana in the autumn of 1306 — i.e. less than seven years (l. 133) from the time of this encounter in Purgatory.

l. 120: *that love which here we purify*: Conrad implies that it was absorption in family pride and family affection which placed him among the Preoccupied.

l. 122: *through your domain*: the “your” is here singular and honorific.

ll. 130-1: *the great Lord of Misrule*: (lit. “the evil head”): probably Satan: but possibly either Pope Boniface VIII or the Emperor.

l. 134-5: *that bright bed the Ram’s four feet arch over*: i.e. the sign of Aries, in which the sun now is.

l. 136-8: *events ... other men have said*: Dante has said that he has never visited Conrad’s domain (Lunigiana) but knows the generosity of the Malaspina family by repute. Conrad replies that he will before long know it by experience (thus prophesying Dante’s coming exile and dependence on the hospitality of his patrons).

Canto IX



THE STORY. *DANTE*, waking from a dream in which he is snatched away by an Eagle, finds that he has actually been carried up, in his sleep, by St Lucy to the Gate of Purgatory itself Here Virgil and he are challenged by the Porter, who, hearing that Lucy has sent them, invites Dante to climb the three steps that lead to the Gate, marks the sign of the Seven Capital Sins upon his forehead, and opens the Gate with the Keys of Peter. On entering Purgatory the Poets are greeted by the strains of the Te Deum.

Now, glimmering on her eastward balcony, 1
Came the white leman of Tithonus old
Forth of her lover’s arms reluctantly;

Her brow was starred with jewels manifold, 4
Set in the likeness of the beast whose tail
Smites on the people, and whose blood is cold.

Already, on the stair night has to scale, 7
Two paces, in that sky of ours, were stept,
And now the third flagged on the wing as well,

When I — in whom old Adam’s nature kept 10
Its share — began to nod, and on the lawn
Where all we five now sat, I sank and slept

About the hour when the sad swallow, drawn 13
In memory back, maybe, to her old woes,
Pipes out her mournful lay to greet the dawn,