

CANTO XX.

ARGUMENT.

Among those on the fifth cornice, Hugh Capet records illustrious examples of voluntary poverty and of bounty; then tells who himself is, and speaks of his descendants on the French throne; and, lastly, adds some noted instances of avarice. When he has ended, the mountain shakes, and all the spirits sing "Glory to God."

ILL strives the will, 'gainst will more wise that strives:

His pleasure therefore to mine own preferr'd,
I drew the sponge¹ yet thirsty from the wave.

Onward I moved: he also onward moved,
Who led me, coasting still, wherever place
Along the rock was vacant; as a man
Walks near the battlements on narrow wall.
For those on the other part, who drop by drop
Wring out their all-infecting malady,
Too closely press the verge. Accurst be thou,
Inveterate wolf!² whose gorge ingluts more prey
Than every beast beside, yet is not fill'd;
So bottomless thy maw.—Ye spheres of heaven!
To whom there are, as seems, who attribute
All change in mortal state, when is the day
Of his appearing,³ for whom fate reserves
To chase her hence?—With wary steps and slow
We pass'd; and I attentive to the shades,
Whom piteously I heard lament and wail;
And, 'midst the wailing, one before us heard
Cry out, "O blessed Virgin!" as a dame

¹ *I drew the sponge.*—"I did not persevere in my inquiries from the spirit, though still anxious to learn more."

² *Wolf.*—Avarice.

³ *Of his appearing.*—He is thought to allude to Can Grande della Scala. See "Hell," canto i. 89.

In the sharp pangs of childbed; and "How poor
Thou wast," it added, "witness that low roof
Where thou didst lay thy sacred burden down
O good Fabricius!¹ thou didst virtue chuse
With poverty, before great wealth with vice.

The words so pleased me, that desire to know
The spirit, from whose lip they seem'd to come,
Did draw me onward. Yet it spake the gift
Of Nicholas,² which on the maidens he
Bounteous bestow'd, to save their youthful prime
Unblemish'd. "Spirit! who dost speak of deeds
So worthy, tell me who thou wast," I said,
"And why thou dost with single voice renew
Memorial of such praise. That boon vouchsafed
Haply shall meet reward; if I return
To finish the short pilgrimage of life,
Still speeding to its close on restless wing."

"I," answer'd he, "will tell thee; not for help,
Which thence I look for; but that in thyself
Grace so exceeding shines, before thy time
Of mortal dissolution. I was root³
Of that ill plant whose shade such poison sheds
O'er all the Christian land, that seldom thence
Good fruit is gather'd. Vengeance soon should come,
Had Ghent and Douay, Lille and Bruges power;⁴

¹ *Fabricius.*—So our author in the second book of the "De Monarchia," p. 121, "Nonne Fabricium," &c. "Has not Fabricius given us another example of resisting avarice, when, poor as he was, he preserved his faith to the republic, and rejected with scorn a great sum of gold that was offered him?" Our poet, in the sixth book, records this when he says:

"Parvoque potentem
Fabricium."

Compare Petrarch, "Tr. della Fama," c. i.:

"Un Curio ed un Fabricio assai più belli
Con la lor povertà, che Mida e Crasso
Con l'oro ond' a virtù furon rubelli."

² *Nicholas.*—The story of Nicholas is, that an angel having revealed to him that the father of a family was so impoverished as to resolve on exposing the chastity of his three daughters to sale, he threw in at the window of their house three bags of money, containing a sufficient portion for each of them.

³ *Root.*—Hugh Capet, ancestor of Philip IV.

⁴ *Had Ghent and Douay, Lille and Bruges power.*—These cities had lately been seized by Philip IV. The spirit is made to intimate the approaching defeat of the French army by the Flemings in the battle of Courtrai, which happened in 1302.

And vengeance I of heaven's great Judge implore.
 Hugh Capet was I hight; from me descend
 The Philips and the Louis, of whom France
 Newly is govern'd: born of one, who plied
 The slaughterer's trade¹ at Paris. When the race
 Of ancient kings had vanish'd (all save one²
 Wrapt up in sable weeds) within my gripe
 I found the reins of empire, and such powers
 Of new acquirement, with full store of friends,
 That soon the widow'd circlet of the crown
 Was girt upon the temples of my son,³
 He, from whose bones the anointed race begins.
 Till the great dower of Provence⁴ had removed
 The stains,⁵ that yet obscured our lowly blood,
 Its sway indeed was narrow; but howe'er
 It wrought no evil: there, with force and lies,
 Began its rapine: after, for amends,⁶
 Poitou it seized, Navarre and Gascony.⁷

¹ *The slaughterer's trade.*—This reflection on the birth of his ancestor induced Francis I. to forbid the reading of Dante in his dominions. Hugh Capet, who came to the throne of France in 987, was, however, the grandson of Robert, who was the brother of Eudes, King of France in 888; and it may, therefore, well be questioned whether by Beccaio di Parigi is meant literally one who had carried on the trade of a butcher at Paris, and whether the sanguinary disposition of Hugh Capet's father is not stigmatised by this opprobrious appellation. See Cancellieri, "Osservazioni," &c., Roma, 1814, p. 6.

² *All save one.*—The posterity of Charlemagne, the second race of French monarchs, had failed, with the exception of Charles of Lorraine, who is said, on account of the melancholy temper of his mind, to have always clothed himself in black. Venturi suggests that Dante may have confounded him with Childeric III., the last of the Merovingian, or first race, who was deposed and made a monk in 751.

³ *My son.*—Hugh Capet caused his son Robert to be crowned at Orleans.

⁴ *The great dower of Provence.*—Louis IX. and his brother Charles of Anjou married two of the four daughters of Raymond Berenger, Count of Provence. See "Paradise," c. vi. 135.

⁵ *The stains.*—Lombardi understands this differ-

ently from all the other commentators with whom I am acquainted. The word "vergogna" he takes in the sense of "a praise-worthy shame of doing ill;" and according to him the translation should run thus:

"The shame that yet restrain'd my race from ill."

By "Provenza" he understands the estates of Toulouse, the dowry of the only daughter of Raymond, Count of Toulouse, married to a brother of Louis IX.

⁶ *For amends.*—This is ironical.

⁷ *Poitou it seized, Navarre and Gascony.*—I venture to read—

"Pottì e Navarra prese e Guascogna,"

instead of

"Ponti e Normandia prese e Guascogna."

"Seized Ponthieu, Normandy, and Gascony."

Landino has "Pottì," and he is probably right; for Poitou was annexed to the French Crown by Philip IV. See Henault, "Abrégé Chron., A.D. 1283, &c. Normandy had been united to it long before by Philip Augustus, a circumstance of which it is difficult to imagine that Dante should have been ignorant; but Philip IV., says Henault, *ibid.*, took the title of King of Navarre: and the subjugation of Navarre is also alluded to in the "Paradise," canto xix. 140. In 1293, Philip IV. summoned Edward I.

To Italy came Charles; and for amends,
 Young Conradine,¹ an innocent victim, slew;
 And sent the angelic teacher² back to heaven,
 Still for amends. I see the time at hand,

to do him homage for the duchy of Gascony, which he had conceived the design of seizing. See G. Villani, lib. viii., cap. iv. The whole passage has occasioned much perplexity. I cannot withhold from my readers the advantage of an attempt made to unravel it by the late Archdeacon Fisher, which that gentleman, though a stranger, had the goodness to communicate to me in the following terms: "I am encouraged to offer you an elucidation of a passage, with the interpretation of which I was never yet satisfied. As it goes to establish the accuracy of two very happy conjectures which you have made at 'Purgatory,' xx. 66, you will perhaps forgive me, if my notion a little militates against your solution of the difficulty. The passage is as follows:

I fui radice della mala pianta,
 Che la terra Cristiana tutta aduggia,
 Si che buon frutto rado se ne schianta.
 Ma se Doagio, Guanto, Lilla, e Bruggia
 Potesser, tosto ne saria vendetta:
 Ed io la cheggio a lui, che tutto giuggia.
 * * * * *

Mentre che la gran dote Provenzale
 Al sangue mio non tolse la vergogna,
 Poco valse, ma pur non faceva male.
 Li cominciò con forza e con menzogna
 La sua rapina; e poscia, per ammenda,
 Pottì e Navarra prese, e Guascogna."

It is my persuasion that the stanzas I have copied are *one* passage, continuous in its sense, interrupted only by a parenthesis of four stanzas, which are introduced as necessary to the political solution of the meaning. Again, I think that my quoted stanzas refer to only one person, and that Philip IV., of France. He is depicted by both the phrases, "mala pianta," and "sangue mio." I do not find that Louis IX. obtained any part of Provence by dowry, owing to his marriage with the daughter of the prince of that country; at least, nothing equivalent to the words "la gran dote Provenzale." I suppose the stanzas quoted to depict the three great events in the life of Philip IV. He married, during the life of his father, the heiress of the kingdom of Navarre, and also of the duchy of Champagne. Philip obtained at once the sovereignty of both these dowries, and left to his son Philip V. the title of King of France and Navarre. On the accession of Philip IV. to the throne, he became embroiled with the English respecting the duchy of Guienne, which,

after having changed masters frequently, was then in the possession of Edward I. The word Guienne included Poitou and Gascony, and was generally the country termed by Caesar, Aquitania. By perfidy, and the childish ignorance of Edmund, the brother of Edward I., Philip got possession of Guienne. . . . The duchy of Champagne, now annexed to the crown of France, lying adjacent to that of Flanders, Philip next endeavoured to lay hands on that fief: and failing in treacherous negotiation, he carried a cruel and murderous war into the low countries, and laid them desolate. His progress was stopped by the Flemings at the battle of Courtrai, and he was soon after compelled to surrender Guienne to the English king, and to make peace with his numerous enemies. Now, to these three leading epochs of Philip's life, the poet seems to allude. 'Doagio, Guanto, Lilla e Bruggia' refer to his desolating war in Flanders; 'Vendetta,' to the battle of Courtrai; 'la gran dote Provenzale,' to the dowry of the kingdom of Navarre and the duchy of Champagne; 'forza e menzogna,' to his conduct respecting Guienne with its two sister provinces, as you so convincingly conjectured, 'Pottì e Guascogna.'"

¹ *Young Conradine.*—Charles of Anjou put Conradino to death in 1268, and became King of Naples. See "Hell," canto xxviii. 16, and note. Compare Fazio degli Uberti, "Dittamondo," lib. ii., cap. xxix.

² *The angelic teacher.*—Thomas Aquinas. He was reported to have been poisoned by a physician, who wished to ingratiate himself with Charles of Anjou. "In the year 1323, at the end of July, by the said Pope John and by his cardinals, was canonised at Avignon Thomas Aquinas, of the order of Saint Dominic, a master in divinity and philosophy, a man most excellent in all science, and who expounded the sense of Scripture better than any one since the time of Augustin. He lived in the time of Charles I. King of Sicily; and going to the council at Lyons, it is said that he was killed by a physician of the said king, who put poison for him into some sweetmeats, thinking to ingratiate himself with King Charles, because he was of the lineage of the lords of Aquino, who had rebelled against the king, and doubting lest he should be made cardinal: whence the church of God received great damage. He died at the abbey of Fossanova, in Campagna."—G. Villani, lib. ix., cap. cexviii. We shall find him in the "Paradise," canto x.