

Entrance to Second Circle - Minos - Good Friday Night

THE STORY. Dante and Virgil descend from the First Circle to the Second (the first of the Circle of Incontinence). On the threshold sits Minos, the judge of Hell, assigning the souls to their appropriate places of torment. His opposition is overcome by Virgil's word of power, and the Poets enter the Circle, where the souls of the Lustful are tossed for ever upon a howling wind. After Virgil has pointed out a number of famous lovers, Dante speaks to the shade of Francesca da Rimini, who tells him her story.

From the first circle thus I came descending
To the second, which, in narrower compass turning,
Holds greater woe, with outcry loud and rending.

There in the threshold, horrible and ginning, 4
Grim Minos sits, holding his ghastly session,
And, as he girds him, sentencing and spurning;

For when the ill soul faces him, confession 7
Pours out of it till nothing's left to tell;
Whereon that connoisseur of all transgression

Assigns it to its proper place in hell, 10
As many grades as he would have it fall,
So oft he belts him round with his own tail.

Before him stands a throng continual; 13
Each comes in turn to abye the fell arraign;
They speak - they hear- they're whirled down one and all.

"Ho! thou that comest to the house of pain," 16
Cried [Minos](#) when he saw me, the appliance
Of his dread powers suspending, "think again

How thou dost go, in whom is thy reliance; 19
Be not deceived by the wide open door!"
Then said my guide: "Wherefore this loud defiance?

Hinder not thou his fated way; be sure 22
Hindrance is vain; thus it is willed where will
And power are one; enough; ask thou no more."

And now the sounds of grief begin to fill 25
My ear; I'm come where cries of anguish smite
My shrinking sense, and lamentation shrill -

A place made dumb of every glimmer of light, 28
Which bellows like tempestuous ocean birling
In the batter of a two-way wind's buffet and fight.

The blast of hell that never rests from whirling 31
Harries the spirits along in the sweep of its swath,
And vexes them, for ever beating and hurling.

When they are borne to the rim of the ruinous path 34
With cry and wail and shriek they are caught by the gust,
Railing and cursing the power of the Lord's wrath.

Into this torment carnal sinners are thrust, 37
So I was told - the sinners who make their reason
Bond thrall under the yoke of their lust.

[Like as the starlings wheel in the winery season](#) 40
In wide and clustering flocks wing-borne, wind-borne
Even so they go, the souls who did this treason,

Hither and thither, and up and down, outworn, 43
Hopeless of any rest - rest, did I say?
Of the least minishing of their pangs forlorn.

And as the cranes go chanting their harsh lay, 46
Across the sky in long procession trailing,
So I beheld some shadows borne my way,

Driven on the blast and uttering wail on wailing; 49
Wherefore I said: "O Master, art thou able
To name these spirits thrashed by the black wind's flailing?"

"Among this band," said he, "whose name and fable 52
Thou seek'st to know, the first who yonder flies
Was empress of many tongues, mistress of Babel.

She was so broken to lascivious vice 55
She licensed lust by law, in hopes to cover
Her scandal of unnumbered harlotries.

This was Semiramis; 'tis written of her 58
That she was wife to Ninus and heiress, too,
Who reigned in the land the Soldan now rules over.

Lo! she that slew herself for love, untrue 61
To Sychaeus ashes. Lo! tost on the blast,
Voluptuous Cleopatra, whom love slew.

Look, look on Helen, for whose sake rolled past 64
Long evil years. See great Achilles yonder
Who warred with love, and that war was his last.

See Paris, Tristram see!" And many — oh, wonder 67
 Many — a thousand more, he showed by name
 And pointing hand, whose life love rent asunder.

And when I had heard my Doctor tell the fame 70
 Of all those knights and ladies of long ago,
 I was pierced through with pity, and my head swam.

"Poet," said I, "fain would I speak those two 73
 That seem to ride as light as any foam
 And [hand in hand on the dark wind drifting go.](#)"

And he replied: "Wait till they nearer roam, 76
 And thou shalt see; summon them to thy side
 By the power of the love that leads them, and they will come."

So, as they eddied past on the whirling tide, 79
 I raised my voice: "O souls that wearily rove,
 Come to us, speak to us - if it be not denied."

And as desire wafts homeward dove with dove 82
 To their sweet nest, on raised and steady wing
 Down-dropping through the air, impelled by love,

So these from Dido's flock came fluttering 85
 And dropping toward us down the cruel wind,
 Such power was in my affectionate summoning.

"O living creature, gracious and so kind, 88
 Coming through this black air to visit us,
 Us, who in death the globe incarnadined,

Were the world's King our friend and might we thus 91
 Entreat, we would entreat Him for thy peace,
 That pitiest so our pangs dispiteous!

Hear all thou wilt, and speak as thou shalt please, 94
 And we will gladly speak with thee and hear,
 While the winds cease to howl, as they now cease.

There is a town upon the sea-coast, near 97
 Where Po with all his streams come down to rest
 In ocean; I was born and nurtured there.

Love, that so soon takes hold in the gentle breast, 100
 Took this lad with the lovely body they tore
 From me; the way of it leaves me still distrest.

Love, that to no loved heart remits love's score, 103
 Took me with such great joy of him, that see!
 It holds me yet and never shall leave me more.

Love to a single death brought him and me; 106
 Cain's place lies waiting for our murderer now."
 These words came wafted to us plaintively.

Hearing those wounded souls, I bent my brow 109
 Downward, and thus bemused I let time pass,
 Till the poet said at length: "What thinkest thou?"

When I could answer, I began: "Alas! 112
 Sweet thoughts how many, and desire how great,
 Brought down these twain unto the dolorous pass!"

And then I turned to them: "Thy dreadful fate, 115
 Francesca, makes me weep, it so inspires
 Pity," said I, "and grief compassionate.

Tell me - in that time of sighing-sweat desires, 118
 How, and by what, did love his power disclose
 And grant you knowledge of your hidden fires?"

Then she to me: "The bitterest woe of woes 121
 Is to remember in our wretchedness
 Old happy times; and this thy Doctor knows;

Yet, if so dear desire thy heart possess 124
 To know that root of love which wrought our fall,
 I'll be as those who weep and who confess.

One day we read for pastime how in thrall 127
 Lord Lancelot lay to love, who loved the Queen;
 We were alone - we thought no harm at all.

As we read on, our eyes met now and then, 130
 And to our cheeks the changing colour started,
 But just one moment overcame us — when

We read of the smile, desired of lips long-thwarted, 133
 Such smile, by such a lover kissed away,
 He that may never more from me be parted

Trembling all over, kissed my mouth. I say 136
 The book was Galleot, Galleot the complying
 Ribald who wrote; we read no more that day."

While the one spirit thus spoke, the other's crying 139
 Wailed on me with a sound so lamentable,
 I swooned for pity like as I were dying,

And, [as a dead man falling, down I fell.](#) 142