

# INFERNO

## CANTO XII

Steep was the cliff we had to clamber down,  
rocky and steep, but -- even worse -- it held  
a sight that every eye would shun. 3

As on the rockslide that still marks the flank  
of the Àdige, this side of Trent,  
whether by earthquake or erosion at the base, 6  
from the mountain-top they slid away from,  
the shattered boulders strew the precipice  
and thus give footing to one coming down -- 9  
just so was the descent down that ravine.  
And at the chasm's jagged edge  
was sprawled the infamy of Crete, 12  
conceived in that false cow.  
When he caught sight of us, he gnawed himself  
like someone ruled by wrath. 15

My sage cried out to him: 'You think,  
perhaps, this is the Duke of Athens,  
who in the world above put you to death. 18

'Get away, you beast, for this man  
does not come tutored by your sister,  
he comes to view your punishments.' 21

Like the bull that breaks its tether  
just as it receives the mortal blow  
and cannot run, but lunges here and there, 24  
so raged the Minotaur. My artful guide  
called out: 'Run to the passage:  
hurry down while he is in his fury.' 27

And so we made our way down the steep landslide  
on scree that often shifted  
under my feet with unexpected weight. 30

I went on lost in thought. And he said:  
'Perhaps you're wondering about this rockslide  
guarded by that bestial rage I quelled just now. 33

'I would like you to know, the other time  
 I came down into nether Hell  
 this rock had not yet fallen. 36

'But surely, if memory does not fail,  
 it was just before He came who carried off  
 from Dis the great spoil of the highest circle 39

'when the deep and foul abyss shook on every side,  
 so that I thought the universe felt love,  
 by which, as some believe, 42

'the world has many times been turned to chaos.  
 And at that moment this ancient rock,  
 here and elsewhere, fell broken into pieces. 45

'But fix your eyes below, for we draw near  
 the river of blood that scalds  
 those who by violence do injury to others.' 48

O blind covetousness, insensate wrath,  
 which in this brief life goad us on and then,  
 in the eternal, steep us in such misery! 51

I saw a broad moat curving in its arc  
 that seemed to circle all the plain,  
 just as my guide had said. 54

Between the edge of moat and precipice  
 ran centaurs in a file and armed with arrows,  
 as when they went off hunting in our world. 57

They saw us coming, stopped, and three  
 departed from the troop with bows  
 and shafts they had selected with great care. 60

One cried from afar: 'To what torment  
 do you come, you two approaching down the slope?  
 Tell us from there. If not, I draw my bow.' 63

My master said: 'We will give our answer  
 to Chiron once we have come closer.  
 Your will was always hasty, to your hurt.' 66

Then he nudged me, saying: 'That is Nessus,  
 who died for lovely Deianira  
 and fashioned of himself his own revenge. 69

'The middle one, his gaze fixed on his chest,  
 is the great Chiron, he who raised Achilles.  
 The other one is Pholus, who was so filled with wrath. 72

'Around the moat they go in thousands,  
shooting arrows at any soul that rises  
higher from the blood than guilt allows.' 75

As we drew near those swift wild beasts,  
Chiron took an arrow and with its nock  
pulled back his beard along his jaw. 78

When he had uncovered his enormous mouth  
he said to his companions: 'Have you observed  
the one behind dislodges what he touches? 81

'That is not what the feet of dead men do.'  
And my good leader, now at Chiron's breast  
where his two natures join, replied: 84

'He is indeed alive, and so alone,  
it is my task to show him this dark valley.  
Necessity compels us, not delight. 87

'One briefly left her song of hallelujah  
and came to charge me with this novel task.  
He is no robber, nor am I a thief. 90

'But, by that power by which I move my steps  
on this wild road, lend us a guide,  
one of your band to whom we may stay close, 93

'one who will show us to the ford  
and carry this man over on his back,  
for he is not a spirit that can fly through air.' 96

Chiron bent his torso to the right, then said  
to Nessus: 'Go back and guide them.  
If you meet another troop, have it give way.' 99

And with this trusty escort we went on,  
skirting the edge of the vermilion boil  
from which the boiled cried out with piercing shrieks. 102

There I saw some sunken to the eyebrows,  
and the great centaur said: 'They are tyrants  
who took to blood and plunder. 105

'Here they lament their ruthless crimes.  
Here is Alexander, here cruel Dionysius,  
who gave to Sicily its years of woe. 108

'And that brow with such jet-black hair  
is Ezzelino, while the other blond one there  
is Obizzo d'Este, who was indeed 111

'slain by his stepson in the world above.'  
Then I turned to the poet, and he said:  
'Now let Nessus be your guide and I will follow.' 114

A little farther on the centaur stopped  
above a crowd who, from the neck up,  
seemed to issue from that boiling stream. 117

He pointed out a shade apart, alone:  
'In God's bosom that one clove in two  
the heart that on the Thames still drips with blood.' 120

Then I saw some who had their heads,  
even their whole chests, out of the river,  
and of these I recognized a number, 123

as the blood became even more shallow  
until it cooked nothing but their feet.  
And here was our place to cross the moat. 126

'Just as on this side you can see  
the boiling stream always diminishing,'  
said the centaur, 'so, I'll have you know, 129

'on the other side the bottom falls away  
until it plumbs the depths  
where tyranny must groan. 132

'There divine justice stings Attila,  
who was a scourge on earth, and Pyrrhus,  
and Sextus, and eternally wrings 135

'tears, loosed by the boiling,  
from Rinier of Corneto and Rinier Pazzo,  
who on the highways made such strife.' 138

Then he turned back and crossed the ford again. 139