

ROBERT BROWNING

POMEGRANATES FROM
AN ENGLISH GARDEN

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**Pomegranates from
an English Garden**

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Robert Browning

Pomegranates from an English Garden / A selection from the poems of Robert Browning

INTRODUCTORY

The name of Robert Browning has been before the world now for fifty years. For the greater part of the time his work has had so little recognition, that one marvels at his courage in going so steadily on with it. His “Pomegranates” have been produced year after year, decade after decade, in unfailing abundance; and, while critics have kept paring at the rind, and the general public has not even asked if there was anything beneath it, he has laboured on with unremitting energy, calmly awaiting the time when “the heart within, blood-tinctured, of a veined humanity,” should be at length discovered. It can scarcely be said, even yet, that that time has come; but it is coming fast. Already he is something more than “the poet’s poet.” Few intelligent people now are content to know one of the master minds of the age simply as the author of “The Pied Piper of Hamelin,” as if that were the only thing he had written worth reading!

That the form in which the thought of Browning is cast is altogether admirable, is what none but his most indiscriminating admirers will assert. It is often, unquestionably, rough and forbidding. But there is strength even in its ruggedness; and in its entire freedom from conventionality there is a charm such as one enjoys in wild mountain scenery, even though only in little patches it may have any suggestion of the garden or the lawn. There are those who have charged the poet with affectation of the uncouth and the bizarre; but careful reading will, we think, render it apparent that it is rather his utter freedom from affectation which determines and perpetuates the peculiarities and oddities of his style; that, in fact, the aphorism of Buffon, “*le style est l’homme même*,” is undoubtedly true as applied to him. It would, of course, be absurd to claim for the pomegranate the bloom and beauty of the peach; but, equally with the other, it is Nature’s gift, and to toss aside a rough-rinded fruit because it needs to be “cut deep down the middle” before its pulp and juices can be reached, is surely far from wise. Even hard nuts are not to be despised, if the kernels are good; and as to Browning’s “nuts,” we have this to say, that not only are they well worth cracking, but there is in the process excellent exercise for the teeth.

This brings us to the alleged “obscurity” of Browning’s writings, which still continues to be the main obstacle to their general appreciation. It is freely admitted that often it is not quite easy, and sometimes very difficult, to understand him; and it is hard for most people to see why he could not make his meaning plainer, and matter for regret to many, who heartily admire him, that he has not done so. That he has taken some pains to this end is evident from what he says in the preface to “Sordello,” written for an edition issued in 1863, twenty-three years after its original publication: “My own faults of expression were many... I blame nobody, least of all myself, who did my best then and since, for I lately gave time and pains to turn my work into what the many might – instead of what the few must – like.” In a later preface (1872) he says, “Nor do I apprehend any more charges of being wilfully obscure, unconscientiously careless, or perversely harsh.” The true explanation of it seems to be what we have already suggested, that he does not think of his audience as he writes, his only care being to express the thought in the way which comes most natural to him. As a dramatist, he can throw himself with abandonment into the persons he represents; but he never seems to think of putting himself in the position of a listener, or, if he does, he assumes too readily that he has a mind of similar texture and grasp to his own. On the other hand, it is fair to say that the difficulty of understanding him

arises in great part from the very excellence of his work. The following considerations will illustrate what we mean: —

1. His work is full of *thought*, and the thought is never commonplace. There is so much of it, and all is so fresh, and therefore unfamiliar, that some mental effort is necessary to grasp it. The following characteristic remark of Bishop Butler, in his preface to the famous Fifteen Sermons, is worth consideration in this connection: “It must be acknowledged that some of the following Discourses are very abstruse and difficult; or, if you please, obscure; but I must take leave to add that those alone are judges, whether or no and how far this is a fault, who are judges, whether or no and how far it might have been avoided — those only who will be at the trouble to understand what is here said, and to see how far the things here insisted upon, and not other things, might have been put in a plainer manner; which yet I am very far from asserting that they could not.”

2. The expression is always the briefest. Not only are no words wasted, but, where connecting ideas are easily supplied, they are often left unexpressed, the intelligence and mental activity of the reader being always taken for granted.

3. The poems are, for the most part, dramatic in principle. The reader is brought face to face with some soul, in its thoughts and emotions, frequently in the very process of the thinking and the feeling. The poet has stepped aside, and of course supplies no key. The author does not appear, like the chorus in a Greek play, to point a moral or explain the situation. The *dramatis personæ* must explain themselves. And, just as Shakespeare must be *studied* in order to an appreciation other than second-hand, so must Browning be studied in order to be appreciated at all; for his writings are not yet old enough to secure much second-hand enthusiasm.

4. The wealth of allusion is another source of difficulty. The learning of our poet is encyclopædic; and though there is no display of it, there is large use of it; and it often happens that passages or phrases, which seem crabbed or obscure, require only the knowledge of some unfamiliar fact in science or in history, or it may be something not readily thought of, and yet within easy range of a keen enough observation, to light them up and reveal unsuspected strength or beauty.

Before leaving the subject of the rough and often tough exterior of Browning's work, it may be interesting to refer to the characteristic illustration of it he has lately given us in the prologue to “Ferishtah's Fancies,” his most recent work. He begins by asking the reader whether he has ever “eaten ortolans in Italy,” and then goes on to describe the preparation of them. The following lines will show the use he makes of the illustration:

“First comes plain bread, crisp, brown, a toasted square;
Then, a strong sage-leaf;
(So we find books with flowers dried here and there
Lest leaf engage leaf.)
First, food — then, piquancy — and last of all
Follows the thirdling;
Through wholesome hard, sharp soft, your tooth must bite
Ere reach the birdling.
Now, were there only crust to crunch, you'd wince:
Unpalatable!
Sage-leaf is bitter-pungent — so's a quince;
Eat each who's able!
But through all three bite boldly — lo, the gust!
Flavour — no fixture —
Flies permeating flesh and leaf and crust
In fine admixture.
So with your meal, my poem; masticate

Sense, sight and song there!
Digest these, and I praise your peptics' state,
Nothing found wrong there."

This extract also furnishes an example of the strange rhymes in which the poet sometimes indulges, with what appears too little refinement of taste.

The themes of Browning's poetry are the very greatest that can engage the thought of man. He ranges over a vast variety of topic; but, wherever his thought may lead him, he never loses sight of that which is to him the centre of all, the human soul, with its infinite wants and capabilities. In the preface to "Sordello" he says: "The historical decoration was purposely of no more importance than a background requires; and my stress lay on the incidents in the development of a soul: little else is worth study. I, at least, always thought so." To this principle he has kept true through all his work; and hence it is that, whether the particular subject be love, or home, or country; poetry, painting, or music; life, death, or immortality; it is dealt with in its relation to "the development of a soul." Hence it is that his poetry is so thoroughly and profoundly spiritual, and so exceedingly valuable as a counteractive to the materialism of the age, which ever tends to merge the soul in the body, and swallow up the real in mere phenomena.

As might be expected of one who deals so profoundly with all that he touches, the great reality of the universe to him is God. Agnosticism has little mercy at his hands; if a man knows anything at all, he knows God. And the God whom he knows is not a God apart, looking down from some infinite or indefinite height upon the world, but one in whom all live and move and have their being. Out of this springs, of course, the hope of immortality, and also that bright and cheerful view of life so completely opposed to the dark pessimism to which much of the unbelieving speculation of the present day so painfully tends. The dark things of human life and destiny are by no means ignored; rather are they dwelt on with a painful and sometimes frightful realism; but even amid deepest darkness the light above is never quite extinguished, and some little "Pippa passes" singing:

"The year's at the spring
And day's at the morn;
Morning's at seven;
The hill-side's dew-pearled;
The lark's on the wing;
The snail's on the thorn:
God's in his heaven —
All's right with the world."

There has been much discussion as to Browning's personal attitude to Christianity. The profoundly Christian tone of his writings is, of course, universally acknowledged; but attempts are sometimes made to evade the force of those numerous passages in which he speaks of the Incarnation, and Death, and Resurrection of the Lord Jesus, in a way which seems to imply his hearty acceptance of the substance of what is known as evangelical truth. Much has been made in this connection of the way in which, in one of his prefaces, he characterises his work as "poetry always dramatic in principle, and so many utterances of so many imaginary persons, not mine;" and it has been asserted that it is as unwarrantable to consider him to be speaking his own sentiments in a poem like "Christmas Eve," as in one like "Johannes Agricola," or "Bishop Blougram's Apology." The obvious answer is that this profound sympathy with the Christ of God and His salvation is not found in some solitary production, but appears and reappears, often when least expected, all through his works. In that remarkable little poem, entitled "House," in which more strongly than anywhere else he claims personal privacy, while he declines to be regarded as having furnished his publishers with tickets to view his own soul's

dwelling, he admits that “whoso desires to penetrate deeper” may do so “by the spirit sense;” and accordingly some of his admirers, who dissent from him most strongly on this point, are the most ready to acknowledge that his Christian faith is no stage suit, but the very garment of his soul. As illustration of this we may refer to the admirable essay by the late James Thomson, published in Part II. of the Browning Society’s Papers, in which, after expressing his amazement that a great mind like Browning’s could be Christian, he asserts the, to him, remarkable but quite undeniable fact in these words: “The devout and hopeful Christian faith, explicitly or implicitly affirmed in such poems as *Saul*, *Kharshish*, *Cleon*, *Caliban upon Setebos*, *A Death in the Desert*, *Instans Tyrannus*, *Rabbi Ben Ezra*, *Prospice*, the *Epilogue*, and throughout that stupendous monumental work, *The Ring and the Book*, must surely be as clear as noonday to even the most purblind vision.”

That a great Christian poet, in an age when so many of the intellectual magnates of the time are hostile or simply silent, should remain unknown or little known to any large proportion of Christian readers, is certainly very much to be regretted. Surely the admiration which is freely and generously accorded to his work by many who are constrained to it in spite of his faith in a Christ whom they reject, is a rebuke to the indifference of those who, sharing his faith, do not give themselves the trouble to inquire what he has to say about it. There are not so many avowed and outspoken Christians in the highest walks of literature that we can afford to pay only slight attention to the utterances of one who has the ear of the deepest thinkers in every school of thought all the world over.

The immediate object of this selection is to supply an introduction to the study of Browning for the benefit of the readers of the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle; but it is hoped that many others, inspired with similar aims, and who have not had such advantages that they can dispense with all assistance in the study of a difficult author, may find help from this little book. It is, of course, better to read for one’s self than to follow the guidance of another; and yet it may be necessary to open a path far enough to lead within sight of the treasures in store. This is all that has been attempted here – only the indication of a few veins near the surface of a rich mine, which the reader is strongly recommended to explore for himself.

The selection has been arranged on the principle of beginning with that which is simple, and proceeding gradually to the more complex, with some regard also to variety and progress in subjects, and at the same time to appropriateness for the use of those younger readers for whom this selection mainly is intended.

The notes are meant to serve only as a guide to beginners; and as guides are proverbially an annoyance when their services are imposed unsought, these are disposed at the end of each poem, and without reference marks to mar the pages, so that the selection may be read, if desired, without any interference from the notes.

Within the limits of a volume like this, only the shorter poems could find a place. Most valuable extracts from the longer works might have been given; but this is always a questionable method of dealing with the best writers, with those especially whose thought is strictly consecutive, while the effect of particular passages depends to a large extent on their setting and their relation to the work as a whole. The only¹ exception to this is the treatment of “Christmas Eve and Easter Day,” with extracts from which this volume closes. That remarkable work occupies a middle position between the shorter and the longer poems of our author; and, though too long for insertion entire, is yet so important, that it seemed very desirable to give some idea of it. In furnishing a series of extracts from this work, an attempt has been made to reduce the disadvantage above referred to by supplying along with them a slight sketch or “argument,” so as to give some idea, to those unacquainted with it, of the course of thought throughout.

¹ It has been found necessary also to give only the latter part of the noble poem “Saul.” A slight sketch of the part omitted is given, and the poem is continued without interruption to its close.

It is right to say that Mr. Browning has given his kind permission for the publication in the United States of this Selection, and also of the Notes, for which, however, as for the selection itself, he is in no wise responsible.

HOME THOUGHTS, FROM ABROAD

Oh, to be in England now that April's there,
And whoever wakes in England sees, some morning, unaware,
That the lowest boughs and the brushwood sheaf
Round the elm-tree bole are in tiny leaf,
While the chaffinch sings on the orchard bough
In England – now!
And after April, when May follows,
And the white-throat builds, and all the swallows!
Hark, where my blossomed pear-tree in the hedge
Leans to the field and scatters on the clover
Blossoms and dewdrops – at the bent spray's edge —
That's the wise thrush; he sings each song twice over
Lest you should think he never could recapture
The first fine careless rapture!
And, though the fields look rough with hoary dew,
All will be gay when noontide wakes anew
The buttercups, the little children's dower
– Far brighter than this gaudy melon-flower!

HOME THOUGHTS, FROM THE SEA

Nobly, nobly Cape Saint Vincent to the North-West died away;
Sunset ran, one glorious blood-red, reeking into Cadiz Bay;
Bluish 'mid the burning water, full in face Trafalgar lay;
In the dimmest North-East distance dawned Gibraltar grand and grey;
“Here and here did England help me: how can I help England?” – say,
Whoso turns as I, this evening, turn to God to praise and pray,
While Jove’s planet rises yonder, silent over Africa.

The former of these companion poems may have been written from Italy or the south of Spain, as would appear from the last line of it. Mr. E. C. Stedman, one of the severest of Browning’s appreciative critics, commenting (in his “Victorian Poets”) on the lines beginning “That’s the wise thrush,” says: – “Having in mind Shakespeare and Shelley, I nevertheless think these three lines the finest ever written touching the song of a bird.”

In the latter poem, the course is from the southern point of Portugal through the Straits. “Here and here” – the reference is to the battles of Cape St. Vincent (1796) and Trafalgar (1805), and perhaps to the defence of Gibraltar (1782).

“HOW THEY BROUGHT THE GOOD NEWS FROM GHENT TO AIX.”

[16 – .]

I

I sprang to the stirrup, and Joris, and he;
I galloped, Dirck galloped, we galloped all three;
“Good speed!” cried the watch, as the gate-bolts undrew;
“Speed!” echoed the wall to us galloping through;
Behind shut the postern, the lights sank to rest,
And into the midnight we galloped abreast.

II

Not a word to each other; we kept the great pace
Neck by neck, stride by stride, never changing our place;
I turned in my saddle and made its girths tight,
Then shortened each stirrup, and set the pique right,
Rebuckled the cheek-strap, chained slacker the bit,
Nor galloped less steadily Roland a whit.

III

’Twas moonset at starting; but while we drew near
Lokeren, the cocks crew and twilight dawned clear;
At Boom, a great yellow star came out to see;
At Düffeld, ’twas morning as plain as could be;
And from Mecheln church-steeple we heard the half-chime,
So, Joris broke silence with, “Yet there is time!”

IV

At Aershot, up leaped of a sudden the sun,
And against him the cattle stood black every one,
To stare thro’ the mist at us galloping past,

And I saw my stout galloper Roland at last,
With resolute shoulders, each butting away
The haze, as some bluff river headland its spray:

V

And his low head and crest, just one sharp ear bent back
For my voice, and the other pricked out on his track;
And one eye's black intelligence, – ever that glance
O'er its white edge at me, his own master, askance!
And the thick heavy spume-flakes which aye and anon
His fierce lips shook upwards in galloping on.

VI

By Hasselt, Dirck groaned; and cried Joris, “Stay spur!
“Your Roos galloped bravely, the fault's not in her,
“We'll remember at Aix” – for one heard the quick wheeze
Of her chest, saw the stretched neck and staggering knees,
And sunk tail, and horrible heave of the flank,
As down on her haunches she shuddered and sank.

VII

So, we were left galloping, Joris and I,
Past Looz and past Tongres, no cloud in the sky;
The broad sun above laughed a pitiless laugh,
'Neath our feet broke the brittle bright stubble like chaff;
Till over by Dalhem a dome-spire sprang white,
And “Gallop,” gasped Joris, “for Aix is in sight!”

VIII

“How they'll greet us!” – and all in a moment his roan
Rolled neck and croup over, lay dead as a stone;
And there was my Roland to bear the whole weight
Of the news which alone could save Aix from her fate,
With his nostrils like pits full of blood to the brim,
And with circles of red for his eye-sockets' rim.

IX

Then I cast loose my buffcoat, each holster let fall,
Shook off both my jack-boots, let go belt and all,
Stood up in the stirrup, leaned, patted his ear,
Called my Roland his pet-name, my horse without peer;
Clapped my hands, laughed and sang, any noise, bad or good,
Till at length into Aix Roland galloped and stood.

X

And all I remember is, friends flocking round
As I sat with his head 'twixt my knees on the ground;
And no voice but was praising this Roland of mine,
As I poured down his throat our last measure of wine,
Which (the burgesses voted by common consent)
Was no more than his due who brought good news from Ghent.

The indefiniteness of the date at the head of this poem will be best explained by the following extract from a letter of Mr. Browning's, published in 1881 in the *Boston Literary World*: —

“There is no sort of historical foundation about ‘Good News From Ghent.’ I wrote it under the bulwark of a vessel off the African coast, after I had been at sea long enough to appreciate even the fancy of a gallop on the back of a certain good horse ‘York,’ then in my stable at home.”

This poem, therefore, widely known and appreciated as one of the most stirring in the language, may be regarded as a living picture to illustrate the pages – no page in particular – of Motley.

As parallels in American literature, reference may be made to “Paul Revere’s Ride,” by Longfellow, and “Sheridan’s Ride,” by T. B. Reade.

ECHETLOS

Here is a story, shall stir you! Stand up, Greeks dead and gone,
Who breasted, beat Barbarians, stemmed Persia rolling on,
Did the deed and saved the world, since the day was Marathon!

No man but did his manliest, kept rank and fought away
In his tribe and file: up, back, out, down – was the spear-arm play:
Like a wind-whipt branchy wood, all spear-arms a-swing that day!

But one man kept no rank, and his sole arm plied no spear,
As a flashing came and went, and a form i' the van, the rear,
Brightened the battle up, for he blazed now there, now here.

Nor helmed nor shielded, he! but, a goat-skin all his wear,
Like a tiller of the soil, with a clown's limbs broad and bare,
Went he ploughing on and on: he pushed with a ploughman's share.

Did the weak mid-line give way, as tunnies on whom the shark
Precipitates his bulk? Did the right-wing halt when, stark
On his heap of slain, lay stretched Kallimachos Polemarch?

Did the steady phalanx falter? To the rescue, at the need,
The clown was ploughing Persia, clearing Greek earth of weed,
As he routed through the Sakian and rooted up the Mede.

But the deed done, battle won, – nowhere to be descried
On the meadow, by the stream, at the marsh, – look far and wide
From the foot of the mountain, no, to the last blood-plashed sea-side,
—

Not anywhere on view blazed the large limbs thonged and brown,
Shearing and clearing still with the share before which – down
To the dust went Persia's pomp, as he ploughed for Greece, that clown!

How spake the Oracle? "Care for no name at all!
Say but just this: We praise one helpful whom we call
The Holder of the Ploughshare. The great deed ne'er grows small."

Not the great name! Sing – woe for the great name Míltiadés,
And its end at Paros isle! Woe for Themistokles —
Satrap in Sardis court! Name not the clown like these!

The name, Echetlos, is derived from ἐχέτλη, a plough handle. It is not strictly a proper name, but an appellative, meaning "the Holder of the Ploughshare." The story is found in Pausanias, author of the "Itinerary of Greece" (1, 15, 32). Nothing further is necessary in order to understand this little poem and appreciate its rugged strength than familiarity with the battle of Marathon, and some

knowledge of Miltiades and Themistocles, the one known as the hero of Marathon, and the other as the hero of Salamis. The lesson of the poem (“The great *deed* ne’er grows small, not the great *name*!”) is taught in a way not likely to be forgotten. One is reminded of another, who wished to be nameless, heard only as “the voice of one crying in the wilderness!”

The ellipsis in thought between the eighth and ninth stanzas is so easily supplied that it is noticed here only as a simple illustration of what is sometimes the occasion of difficulty (see Introduction, p. iii). It would only have lengthened the poem and weakened it to have inserted a stanza telling in so many words that when the hero could not be found, a message was sent to the Oracle to enquire who it could be.

As a companion to “Echetlos” may be read the stirring poem of “Hervé Riel.”

HELEN'S TOWER

Ἑλένη ἐπὶ πύργῳ

Who hears of Helen's Tower, may dream perchance,
How the Greek Beauty from the Scæan Gate
Gazed on old friends unanimous in hate,
Death-doom'd because of her fair countenance.

Hearts would leap otherwise, at thy advance,
Lady, to whom this Tower is consecrate:
Like hers, thy face once made all eyes elate,
Yet, unlike hers, was bless'd by every glance.

The Tower of Hate is outworn, far and strange:
A transitory shame of long ago,
It dies into the sand from which it sprang:
But thine, Love's rock-built Tower, shall fear no change:
God's self laid stable Earth's foundations so,
When all the morning-stars together sang.

The tower is one built by Lord Dufferin, in memory of his mother Helen, Countess of Gifford, on one of his estates in Ireland. "The Greek Beauty" is, of course, Helen of Troy, and the reference in the alternative heading is apparently to that fine passage in the third book of the "Iliad," where Helen meets the Trojan chiefs at the Scæan Gate (see line 154, which speaks of "Helen at the Tower").

On the last two lines, founded of course on the well-known passage in Job (xxxviii. 4-7), compare Dante:

"E il sol montava in su con quelle stelle
Ch'eran con lui, quando l'Amor Divino
Mosse da prima quelle cose belle."

"Aloft the sun ascended with those stars
That with him rose, when Love Divine first moved
Those its fair works."
– *Inferno* I. 38-40.

SHOP

I

So, friend, your shop was all your house!
Its front, astonishing the street,
Invited view from man and mouse
To what diversity of treat
Behind its glass – the single sheet!

II

What gimcracks, genuine Japanese:
Gape-jaw and goggle-eye, the frog;
Dragons, owls, monkeys, beetles, geese;
Some crush-nosed human-hearted dog:
Queer names, too, such a catalogue!

III

I thought “And he who owns the wealth
“Which blocks the window’s vastitude,
“ – Ah, could I peep at him by stealth
“Behind his ware, pass shop, intrude
“On house itself, what scenes were viewed!

IV

“If wide and showy thus the shop,
“What must the habitation prove?
“The true house with no name a-top —
“The mansion, distant one remove,
“Once get him off his traffic groove!

V

“Pictures he likes, or books perhaps;
“And as for buying most and best,
“Commend me to these city chaps.
“Or else he’s social, takes his rest
“On Sundays, with a Lord for guest.

VI

“Some suburb-palace, parked about
“And gated grandly, built last year:
“The four-mile walk to keep off gout;
“Or big seat sold by bankrupt peer:
“But then he takes the rail, that’s clear.

VII

“Or, stop! I wager, taste selects
“Some out o’ the way, some all-unknown
“Retreat: the neighbourhood suspects
“Little that he who rambles lone
“Makes Rothschild tremble on his throne!”

VIII

Nowise! Nor Mayfair residence
Fit to receive and entertain, —
Nor Hampstead villa’s kind defence
From noise and crowd, from dust and drain, —
Nor country-box was soul’s domain!

IX

Nowise! At back of all that spread
Of merchandize, woe’s me, I find
A hole i’ the wall where, heels by head,
The owner couched, his ware behind,
– In cupboard suited to his mind.

X

For, why? He saw no use of life
But, while he drove a roaring trade,
To chuckle "Customers are rife!"
To chafe "So much hard cash outlaid
"Yet zero in my profits made!"

XI

"This novelty costs pains, but – takes?
"Cumbers my counter! Stock no more!
"This article, no such great shakes,
"Fizzes like wild fire? Underscore
"The cheap thing – thousands to the fore!"

XII

'Twas lodging best to live most nigh
(Cramp, coffinlike as crib might be)
Receipt of Custom; ear and eye
Wanted no outworld: "Hear and see
"The bustle in the shop!" quoth he.

XIII

My fancy of a merchant-prince
Was different. Through his wares we groped
Our darkling way to – not to mince
The matter – no black den where moped
The master if we interloped!

XIV

Shop was shop only: household-stuff?
What did he want with comforts there?
"Walls, ceiling, floor, stay blank and rough,
"So goods on sale show rich and rare!"

“Sell and scud home,” be shop’s affair!

XV

What might he deal in? Gems, suppose!
Since somehow business must be done
At cost of trouble, – see, he throws
You choice of jewels, everyone
Good, better, best, star, moon and sun!

XVI

Which lies within your power of purse?
This ruby that would tip aright
Solomon’s sceptre? Oh, your nurse
Wants simply coral, the delight
Of teething baby, – stuff to bite!

XVII

Howe’er your choice fell, straight you took
Your purchase, prompt your money rang
On counter, – scarce the man forsook
His study of the “Times,” just swang
Till-ward his hand that stopped the clang, —

XVIII

Then off made buyer with a prize,
Then seller to his “Times” returned,
And so did day wear, wear, till eyes
Brightened apace, for rest was earned:
He locked door long ere candle burned.

XIX

And whither went he? Ask himself,
Not me! To change of scene, I think.

Once sold the ware and pursed the pelf,
Chaffer was scarce his meat and drink,
Nor all his music – money-chink.

XX

Because a man has shop to mind
In time and place, since flesh must live,
Needs spirit lack all life behind,
All stray thoughts, fancies fugitive,
All loves except what trade can give?

XXI

I want to know a butcher paints,
A baker rhymes for his pursuit,
Candlestick-maker much acquaints
His soul with song, or, haply mute,
Blows out his brains upon the flute!

XXII

But – shop each day and all day long!
Friend, your good angel slept, your star
Suffered eclipse, fate did you wrong!
From where these sorts of treasures are,
There should our hearts be – Christ, how far!

There ought to be far more in a man than can be put into a front window. This man had all sorts of “curios” in his shop window, but there was nothing rich or rare in his soul; and so there was room for all of *him* in a den which would not have held the hundredth part of his wares. The contemptible manner of the man’s life is strikingly brought out by the various suppositions (stanzas 5, 6, 7) so different from the poor reality (8-9). All he cared for was business, which made him “chuckle” on the one hand or “chafe” on the other, according as times were good or bad (10). Even in his business it was not the real excellence of his wares he cared for, only their saleability (11). A merchant prince is a very different person (13-19). The last three stanzas give the lesson in a style partly humorous, but passing in the end to an impressive solemnity.

In connection with this should be read the companion piece, “House,” to which reference is made in the Introduction.

THE BOY AND THE ANGEL

Morning, evening, noon and night,
“Praise God!” sang Theocrite.

Then to his poor trade he turned,
Whereby the daily meal was earned.

Hard he laboured, long and well;
O’er his work the boy’s curls fell.

But ever, at each period,
He stopped and sang, “Praise God!”

Then back again his curls he threw,
And cheerful turned to work anew.

Said Blaise, the listening monk, “Well done;
“I doubt not thou art heard, my son:

“As well as if thy voice to-day
“Were praising God, the Pope’s great way.

“This Easter Day, the Pope at Rome
“Praises God from Peter’s dome.”

Said Theocrite, “Would God that I
“Might praise Him, that great way, and die!”

Night passed, day shone,
And Theocrite was gone.

With God a day endures alway,
A thousand years are but a day.

God said in heaven, “Nor day nor night
“Now brings the voice of my delight.”

Then Gabriel, like a rainbow’s birth,
Spread his wings and sank to earth;

Entered, in flesh, the empty cell,
Lived there, and played the craftsman well;

And morning, evening, noon and night,
Praised God in place of Theocrite.

And from a boy, to youth he grew:
The man put off the stripling's hue:

The man matured and fell away
Into the season of decay:

And ever o'er the trade he bent,
And ever lived on earth content.

(He did God's will; to him, all one
If on the earth or in the sun.)

God said, "A praise is in mine ear;
"There is no doubt in it, no fear:

"So sing old worlds, and so
"New worlds that from my footstool go.

"Clearer loves sound other ways:
"I miss my little human praise."

Then forth sprang Gabriel's wings, off fell
The flesh disguise, remained the cell.

'Twas Easter Day: He flew to Rome,
And paused above Saint Peter's dome.

In the tiring-room close by
The great outer gallery,

With his holy vestments dight,
Stood the new Pope, Theocrite:

And all his past career
Came back upon him clear,

Since when, a boy, he plied his trade,
Till on his life the sickness weighed;

And in his cell, when death drew near,
An angel in a dream brought cheer:

And, rising from the sickness drear,
He grew a priest, and now stood here.

To the East with praise he turned,
And on his sight the angel burned.

"I bore thee from thy craftsman's cell,

“And set thee here; I did not well.

“Vainly I left my angel-sphere,
“Vain was thy dream of many a year.

“Thy voice’s praise seemed weak; it dropped —
“Creation’s chorus stopped!

“Go back and praise again
“The early way, while I remain.

“With that weak voice of our disdain,
“Take up creation’s pausing strain.

“Back to the cell and poor employ:
“Resume the craftsman and the boy!”

Theocrite grew old at home;
A new Pope dwelt in Peter’s dome.

One vanished as the other died:
They sought God side by side.

The lesson of this beautiful fancy is the complement of the “Shop” lesson. Even drudgery may be divine; since the will of God is the work to be done, no matter whether under St. Peter’s dome or in the cell of the craftsman (the Boy) – “all one, if on the earth or in the sun” (the Angel).

The poem is so full of exquisite things, that only a few can be noted. The value of the “little human praise” to God Himself (distich 12), all the dearer because of the doubts and fears in it (20-22); and the contrast between its seeming weakness and insignificance and its real importance as a necessary part of the great chorus of creation (34); the eager desire of Gabriel to anticipate the will of God, and his content to live on earth and bend over a common trade, if only thus he can serve Him best (13-19); and again the content of the “new pope Theocrite” to go back to his “cell and poor employ” and fill out the measure of his day of service, growing old at home, while Gabriel as contentedly takes his place as pope (probably a harder trial than the more menial service) and waits for the time when both “sought God side by side” – these are some of the fine and far reaching thoughts which find simple and beautiful expression here.

Longfellow’s “King Robert of Sicily,” though not really parallel, has points of similarity to “The Boy and the Angel.”

THE PATRIOT

AN OLD STORY

I

It was roses, roses, all the way,
With myrtle mixed in my path like mad:
The house-roofs seemed to heave and sway,
The church-spires flamed, such flags they had,
A year ago on this very day.

II

The air broke into a mist with bells,
The old walls rocked with the crowd and cries.
Had I said, "Good folk, mere noise repels —
"But give me your sun from yonder skies!"
They had answered "And afterward, what else?"

III

Alack, it was I who leaped at the sun
To give it my loving friends to keep!
Nought man could do, have I left undone:
And you see my harvest, what I reap
This very day, now a year is run.

IV

There's nobody on the house-tops now —
Just a palsied few at the windows set;
For the best of the sight is, all allow,
At the Shambles' Gate — or, better yet,
By the very scaffold's foot, I trow.

V

I go in the rain, and, more than needs,
A rope cuts both my wrists behind,
And I think, by the feel, my forehead bleeds,
For they fling, whoever has a mind,
Stones at me for my year's misdeeds.

VI

Thus I entered, and thus I go!
In triumphs, people have dropped down dead.
“Paid by the world, what dost thou owe
Me?” – God might question; now instead,
’Tis God shall repay: I am safer so.

The Patriot, on his way to the scaffold, surrounded by a hooting crowd, remembers how, just a year ago, the same people had been mad in their enthusiasm for him. Anything at all, however extravagant, would have been too little for them to do for him (stanza 2; cf. Gal. iv. 15, 16); but now – ! The fourth stanza is very powerful. All have gone who can, to be ready to see the execution; only the “palsied few,” who cannot, are at the windows to see him pass. In the last stanza the thought of a more sudden contrast still is presented. A man may drop dead in the midst of a triumph, to find that in its brief plaudits he has his reward, while a vast account stands against him at the higher tribunal. Far better die amid the execrations of men and find the contrast reversed.

It is “an old story,” and therefore general; but one naturally thinks of such cases as Arnold of Brescia, or the tribune Rienzi. A higher Name than these need not be introduced here, in proof of the people’s fickleness!

INSTANS TYRANNUS

I

Of the million or two, more or less,
I rule and possess,
One man, for some cause undefined,
Was least to my mind.

II

I struck him, he grovelled of course —
For, what was his force?
I pinned him to earth with my weight
And persistence of hate;
And he lay, would not moan, would not curse,
As his lot might be worse.

III

“Were the object less mean, would he stand
“At the swing of my hand!
“For obscurity helps him, and blots
“The hole where he squats.”
So, I set my five wits on the stretch
To inveigle the wretch.
All in vain! Gold and jewels I threw
Still he couched there perdue;
I tempted his blood and his flesh,
Hid in roses my mesh,
Choicest cates and the flagon’s best spilth
Still he kept to his filth.

IV

Had he kith now or kin, were access
To his heart, did I press
Just a son or a mother to seize!
No such booty as these.

Were it simply a friend to pursue
'Mid my million or two,
Who could pay me, in person or pelf,
What he owes me himself!
No: I could not but smile through my chafe:
For the fellow lay safe
As his mates do, the midge and the nit,
– Through minuteness, to wit.

V

Then a humour more great took its place
At the thought of his face:
The droop, the low cares of the mouth,
The trouble uncouth
'Twixt the brows, all that air one is fain
To put out of its pain.
And, “no!” I admonished myself,
“Is one mocked by an elf,
“Is one baffled by toad or by rat?
“The gravamen’s in that!
“How the lion, who crouches to suit
“His back to my foot,
“Would admire that I stand in debate!
“But the small turns the great
“If it vexes you, – that is the thing!
“Toad or rat vex the king?
“Though I waste half my realm to unearth
“Toad or rat, ’tis well worth!”

VI

So, I soberly laid my last plan
To extinguish the man.
Round his creep-hole, with never a break
Ran my fires for his sake;
Over-head, did my thunder combine
With my under-ground mine:
Till I looked from my labour content
To enjoy the event.

VII

When sudden ... how think ye, the end?
Did I say "without friend?"
Say rather from marge to blue marge
The whole sky grew his targe
With the sun's self for visible boss,
While an Arm ran across
Which the earth heaved beneath like a breast
Where the wretch was safe prest!
Do you see! Just my vengeance complete,
The man sprang to his feet,
Stood erect, caught at God's skirts, and prayed!
– So, *I* was afraid!

"Instans Tyrannus," the *present* tyrant, the tyrant for the time only, whose apparently illimitable power to hurt shrivels into nothing in presence of the King of kings, whose dominion is everlasting.

The poor victim of this tyrant's oppression is a true child of God, but the nobility of his inner life is of course concealed from the proud wretch who despises him, and who, it must be remembered, is the speaker throughout. We must be careful, therefore, to estimate at their proper worth the epithets he applies and the motives he attributes to the object of his hate. *He* can, of course, think of no other reason why his victim "would not moan, would not curse," than that, if he did, "his lot might be worse." And again, when temptation failed to shake his steadfast patience, the tyrant is quite consistent with himself, as one of those who call evil good, and good evil, in speaking of him as still keeping "to his filth." The last stanza is magnificent. Has the power of prayer ever been set forth in nobler language?

THE LOST LEADER

I

Just for a handful of silver he left us,
Just for a riband to stick in his coat —
Found the one gift of which fortune bereft us,
Lost all the others, she lets us devote;
They, with the gold to give, doled him out silver,
So much was theirs who so little allowed:
How all our copper had gone for his service!
Rags – were they purple, his heart had been proud!
We that had loved him so, followed him, honoured him,
Lived in his mild and magnificent eye,
Learned his great language, caught his clear accents,
Made him our pattern to live and to die!
Shakespeare was of us, Milton was for us,
Burns, Shelley, were with us, – they watch from their graves!
He alone breaks from the van and the freemen,
He alone sinks to the rear and the slaves!

II

We shall march prospering, – not thro' his presence;
Songs may inspirit us, – not from his lyre;
Deeds will be done, – while he boasts his quiescence,
Still bidding crouch whom the rest bade aspire:
Blot out his name, then, record one lost soul more,
One task more declined, one more footpath untrod,
One more devil's-triumph and sorrow for angels,
One more wrong to man, one more insult to God!
Life's night begins: let him never come back to us!
There would be doubt, hesitation and pain,
Forced praise on our part – the glimmer of twilight,
Never glad confident morning again!
Best fight on well, for we taught him – strike gallantly,
Menace our heart ere we master his own;
Then let him receive the new knowledge and wait us,
Pardoned in heaven, the first by the throne!

“The Lost Leader” is supposed to be the poet Wordsworth, who, on accepting the laureateship, abandoned the party of distinguished literary men who had enthusiastically supported the principles of the French Revolution. It is necessary, of course, to enter into the lofty enthusiasm of that party,

and for the moment to identify ourselves with it, in order to appreciate the wonderful power and pathos of this exquisite poem. (See Wordsworth's "French Revolution as it appeared to enthusiasts at its commencement.")

The contrasts are very powerful between the one (paltry) gift he gained, and all the others (love, loyalty, life, &c.) they were privileged to *devote* (far richer than mere possession); and again, between the niggardliness of his new patrons with their dole of silver, contrasted with the enthusiastic devotion of his own followers, who having nothing but "copper," would yet put it all at his service – having nothing but "rags," were yet so liberal with what they had, that had they been purple, he would have been proud indeed, seeing that "a riband to stick in his coat" had proved so great an attraction.

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