

# ROBERT BROWNING

CHRISTMAS  
EVE

# **Robert Browning**

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*Christmas Eve:*

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## Christmas Eve

### I

Out of the little chapel I burst  
    Into the fresh night-air again.  
Five minutes full, I waited first  
    In the doorway, to escape the rain  
That drove in gusts down the common's centre  
    At the edge of which the chapel stands,  
Before I plucked up heart to enter.

Heaven knows how many sorts of hands  
Reached past me, groping for the latch  
Of the inner door that hung on catch  
More obstinate the more they fumbled,  
    Till, giving way at last with a scold  
Of the crazy hinge, in squeezed or tumbled

One sheep more to the rest in fold,  
And left me irresolute, standing sentry  
In the sheepfold's lath-and-plaster entry,  
Six feet long by three feet wide,  
Partitioned off from the vast inside—

    I blocked up half of it at least.  
No remedy; the rain kept driving.

They eyed me much as some wild beast,  
That congregation, still arriving,  
Some of them by the main road, white  
A long way past me into the night,  
Skirting the common, then diverging;  
Not a few suddenly emerging  
From the common's self thro' the paling-gaps  
—They house in the gravel-pits perhaps,  
Where the road stops short with its safeguard border  
Of lamps, as tired of such disorder;—  
But the most turned in yet more abruptly  
    From a certain squalid knot of alleys,  
Where the town's bad blood once slept corruptly,  
    Which now the little chapel rallies  
And leads into day again,—its priestliness  
Lending itself to hide their beastliness  
So cleverly (thanks in part to the mason),  
And putting so cheery a whitewashed face on  
Those neophytes too much in lack of it,  
    That, where you cross the common as I did,  
    And meet the party thus presided,  
"Mount Zion" with Love-lane at the back of it,  
They front you as little disconcerted  
As, bound for the hills, her fate averted,  
And her wicked people made to mind him,  
Lot might have marched with Gomorrah  
behind him.

## II

Well, from the road, the lanes or the common,  
In came the flock: the fat weary woman,  
Panting and bewildered, down-clapping  
Her umbrella with a mighty report,  
Grounded it by me, wry and flapping,  
A wreck of whalebones; then, with snort,  
Like a startled horse, at the interloper  
(Who humbly knew himself improper,  
But could not shrink up small enough)  
—Round to the door, and in,—the gruff  
Hinge's invariable scold  
Making my very blood run cold.  
Prompt in the wake of her, up-pattered  
On broken clogs, the many-tattered  
Little old-faced peaking sister-turned-mother  
Of the sickly babe she tried to smother  
Somehow up, with its spotted face,  
From the cold, on her breast, the one warm place;  
She too must stop, wring the poor ends dry  
Of a draggled shawl, and add thereby  
Her tribute to the door-mat, sopping  
Already from my own clothes' dropping,  
Which yet she seemed to grudge I should stand on:  
Then, stooping down to take off her pattens,

She bore them defiantly, in each hand one,  
Planted together before her breast  
And its babe, as good as a lance in rest.

Close on her heels, the dingy satins  
Of a female something, past me flitted,  
With lips as much too white, as a streak  
Lay far too red on each hollow cheek;  
And it seemed the very door-hinge pitied  
All that was left of a woman once,  
Holding at least its tongue for the nonce.  
Then a tall yellow man, like the Penitent Thief,  
With his jaw bound up in a handkerchief,  
And eyelids screwed together tight,  
Led himself in by some inner light.  
And, except from him, from each that entered,

I got the same interrogation—  
"What, you the alien, you have ventured  
"To take with us, the elect, your station?  
"A carer for none of it, a Gallio!"—

Thus, plain as print, I read the glance  
At a common prey, in each countenance  
As of huntsman giving his hounds the tallyho.  
And, when the door's cry drowned their wonder,

The draught, it always sent in shutting,  
Made the flame of the single tallow candle  
In the cracked square lantern I stood under,

Shoot its blue lip at me, rebutting  
As it were, the luckless cause of scandal:  
I verily fancied the zealous light

(In the chapel's secret, too!) for spite  
Would shudder itself clean off the wick,  
With the airs of a Saint John's Candlestick.<sup>1</sup>  
There was no standing it much longer.  
"Good folks," thought I, as resolve grew stronger,  
"This way you perform the Grand-Inquisitor  
"When the weather sends you a chance visitor?  
"You are the men, and wisdom shall die with you,  
"And none of the old Seven Churches vie with you!  
"But still, despite the pretty perfection  
    "To which you carry your trick of exclusiveness,  
"And, taking God's word under wise protection,  
    "Correct its tendency to diffusiveness,  
"And bid one reach it over hot ploughshares,—  
    "Still, as I say, though you've found salvation,  
"If I should choose to cry, as now, 'Shares!'—  
    "See if the best of you bars me my ration!  
"I prefer, if you please, for my expounder  
"Of the laws of the feast, the feast's own Founder;  
"Mine's the same right with your poorest and sickliest  
    "Supposing I don the marriage vestiment:  
    "So shut your mouth and open your Testament,  
"And carve me my portion at your quickliest!"  
Accordingly, as a shoemaker's lad  
    With wizened face in want of soap,  
    And wet apron wound round his waist like a rope,  
(After stopping outside, for his cough was bad,  
To get the fit over, poor gentle creature,

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<sup>1</sup> See Rev. i. 20.



And so avoid disturbing the preacher)  
—Passed in, I sent my elbow spikewise  
At the shutting door, and entered likewise,  
Received the hinge's accustomed greeting,  
    And crossed the threshold's magic pentacle,  
    And found myself in full conventicle,  
—To wit, in Zion Chapel Meeting,  
On the Christmas-Eve of 'Forty-nine,  
    Which, calling its flock to their special clover,  
    Found all assembled and one sheep over,  
Whose lot, as the weather pleased, was mine.

### III

I very soon had enough of it.

The hot smell and the human noises,  
And my neighbour's coat, the greasy cuff of it,  
Were a pebble-stone that a child's hand poises,  
Compared with the pig-of-lead-like pressure  
Of the preaching man's immense stupidity,  
As he poured his doctrine forth, full measure,  
To meet his audience's avidity.

You needed not the wit of the Sibyl  
To guess the cause of it all, in a twinkling:  
No sooner our friend had got an inkling  
Of treasure hid in the Holy Bible,  
(Whene'er 'twas the thought first struck him,  
How death, at unawares, might duck him  
Deeper than the grave, and quench  
The gin-shop's light in hell's grim drench)  
Than he handled it so, in fine irreverence,

As to hug the book of books to pieces:  
And, a patchwork of chapters and texts in severance,  
Not improved by the private dog's-ears and creases,  
Having clothed his own soul with, he'd fain see equipt yours,

---

So tossed you again your Holy Scriptures.  
And you picked them up, in a sense, no doubt:

Nay, had but a single face of my neighbours  
Appeared to suspect that the preacher's labours  
Were help which the world could be saved without,  
'Tis odds but I might have borne in quiet  
A qualm or two at my spiritual diet,  
Or (who can tell?) perchance even mustered  
Somewhat to urge in behalf of the sermon:  
But the flock sat on, divinely flustered,  
Sniffing, methought, its dew of Hermon  
With such content in every snuffle,  
As the devil inside us loves to ruffle.  
My old fat woman purred with pleasure,  
And thumb round thumb went twirling faster,  
While she, to his periods keeping measure,  
Maternally devoured the pastor.  
The man with the handkerchief untied it,  
Showed us a horrible wen inside it,  
Gave his eyelids yet another screwing,  
And rocked himself as the woman was doing.  
The shoemaker's lad, discreetly choking,  
Kept down his cough. 'Twas too provoking!  
My gorge rose at the nonsense and stuff of it;  
So, saying like Eve when she plucked the apple,  
"I wanted a taste, and now there's enough of it,"  
I flung out of the little chapel.

## IV

There was a lull in the rain, a lull

In the wind too; the moon was risen,  
And would have shone out pure and full,

But for the ramparted cloud-prison,  
Block on block built up in the West,  
For what purpose the wind knows best,  
Who changes his mind continually.

And the empty other half of the sky  
Seemed in its silence as if it knew  
What, any moment, might look through  
A chance gap in that fortress massy:—

Through its fissures you got hints  
Of the flying moon, by the shifting tints,  
Now, a dull lion-colour, now, brassy  
Burning to yellow, and whitest yellow,  
Like furnace-smoke just ere flames bellow,  
All a-simmer with intense strain  
To let her through,—then blank again,  
At the hope of her appearance failing.  
Just by the chapel, a break in the railing  
Shows a narrow path directly across;  
'Tis ever dry walking there, on the moss—  
Besides, you go gently all the way uphill.

I stooped under and soon felt better;

My head grew lighter, my limbs more supple,  
As I walked on, glad to have slipt the fetter.  
My mind was full of the scene I had left,  
That placid flock, that pastor vociferant,  
—How this outside was pure and different!  
The sermon, now—what a mingled weft  
Of good and ill! Were either less,  
Its fellow had coloured the whole distinctly;  
But alas for the excellent earnestness,  
And the truths, quite true if stated succinctly,  
But as surely false, in their quaint presentment,  
However to pastor and flock's contentment!  
Say rather, such truths looked false to your eyes,  
With his provings and parallels twisted and twined,  
Till how could you know them, grown double their size  
In the natural fog of the good man's mind,  
Like yonder spots of our roadside lamps,  
Haloed about with the common's damps?  
Truth remains true, the fault's in the prover;  
The zeal was good, and the aspiration;  
And yet, and yet, yet, fifty times over,  
Pharaoh received no demonstration,  
By his Baker's dream of Basket Three,  
Of the doctrine of the Trinity,—  
Although, as our preacher thus embellished it,  
Apparently his hearers relished it  
With so unfeigned a gust—who knows if  
They did not prefer our friend to Joseph?  
But so it is everywhere, one way with all of them!

These people have really felt, no doubt,  
A something, the motion they style the Call of them;  
And this is their method of bringing about,  
By a mechanism of words and tones,  
(So many texts in so many groans)  
A sort of reviving and reproducing,  
More or less perfectly, (who can tell?)  
The mood itself, which strengthens by using;  
And how that happens, I understand well.  
A tune was born in my head last week,  
Out of the thump-thump and shriek-shriek  
Of the train, as I came by it, up from Manchester;  
And when, next week, I take it back again,  
My head will sing to the engine's clack again,  
While it only makes my neighbour's haunches stir,  
—Finding no dormant musical sprout  
In him, as in me, to be jolted out.  
'Tis the taught already that profits by teaching;  
He gets no more from the railway's preaching  
Than, from this preacher who does the rail's office, I:  
Whom therefore the flock cast a jealous eye on.  
Still, why paint over their door "Mount Zion,"  
To which all flesh shall come, saith the prophecy?

# V

But wherefore be harsh on a single case?

After how many modes, this Christmas Eve,  
Does the self-same weary thing take place?

The same endeavour to make you believe,  
And with much the same effect, no more:

Each method abundantly convincing,  
As I say, to those convinced before,

But scarce to be swallowed without wincing  
By the not-as-yet-convinced. For me,  
I have my own church equally:

And in this church my faith sprang first!

(I said, as I reached the rising ground,  
And the wind began again, with a burst

Of rain in my face, and a glad rebound  
From the heart beneath, as if, God speeding me,  
I entered his church-door, nature leading me)

—In youth I look to these very skies,  
And probing their immensities,  
I found God there, his visible power;

Yet felt in my heart, amid all its sense

Of the power, an equal evidence  
That his love, there too, was the nobler dower.  
For the loving worm within its clod,  
Were diviner than a loveless god

Amid his worlds, I will dare to say.

You know what I mean: God's all, man's nought:

But also, God, whose pleasure brought  
Man into being, stands away

As it were a handbreadth off, to give

Room for the newly-made to live,

And look at him from a place apart,

And use his gifts of brain and heart,

Given, indeed, but to keep for ever.

Who speaks of man, then, must not sever

Man's very elements from man,

Saying, "But all is God's"—whose plan

Was to create man and then leave him

Able, his own word saith, to grieve him

But able to glorify him too,

As a mere machine could never do,

That prayed or praised, all unaware

Of its fitness for aught but praise and prayer,

Made perfect as a thing of course.

Man, therefore, stands on his own stock

Of love and power as a pin-point rock:

And, looking to God who ordained divorce

Of the rock from his boundless continent,

Sees, in his power made evident,

Only excess by a million-fold

O'er the power God gave man in the mould.

For, note: man's hand, first formed to carry

A few pounds' weight, when taught to marry

Its strength with an engine's, lifts a mountain,



—Advancing in power by one degree;  
And why count steps through eternity?  
But love is the ever-springing fountain:  
Man may enlarge or narrow his bed  
For the water's play, but the water-head—  
How can he multiply or reduce it?  
As easy create it, as cause it to cease;

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