



*Elizabeth
Barrett
Browning*

Selected Poems

Compiled by Emma Laybourn 2019

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Introduction

Elizabeth Barrett was born in 1806, the oldest of twelve children of a wealthy plantation-owner, and spent her childhood in Herefordshire in the west of England. She was educated at home, acquiring a deep knowledge of the classics; her first printed work was an epic poem about the battle of Marathon, published privately when she was 14. In her teens, she developed a debilitating spine disease, but this did not prevent her from continuing to study and write.

In 1835 the family moved to London. Elizabeth, who had already published four volumes anonymously, first achieved critical attention in 1838 with *The Seraphim and other Poems*. Her next volume, *Poems* (1844), was highly acclaimed: she came to be regarded as one of the country's foremost poets. She socialised with Tennyson and Wordsworth, and was considered for the post of Poet Laureate after Wordsworth's death. However, her life in Wimpole Street in London was restricted by her father, a controlling and dominant figure who forbade his children to marry.

In 1845 she began a correspondence with the poet Robert Browning, six years her junior; they admired each other's work and when they met the admiration turned to love. Their engagement was concealed from Elizabeth's father, and after a secret marriage in 1846, they left England to live in Italy.

Settling in Florence, they had a son Robert ('Pen'), born in 1849. Elizabeth's volume of love poems, *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, was published in 1850, followed by a long political poem, *Casa Guidi Windows*, the following year. Elizabeth had always been interested in social issues, and was a passionate partisan for Italian unification. In 1857 her long novel-poem, *Aurora Leigh*, appeared; it was much concerned with the role of both women and of art in the modern world. The last volume of poems to be published during her lifetime, the political *Poems Before Congress*, came out in 1860.

The Brownings' marriage was a happy one, but lasted only fifteen years. In 1861 Elizabeth died in her husband's arms.

A final volume, *Last Poems*, was published after her death. Elizabeth Barrett Browning left behind a body of poetry that has little equal for force of intellect and technical skill. From ballads and love poems, to declamations against the slave trade and social injustice – particularly its effects on women – she wrote nothing that was lazy or trite. Although her work has nowadays fallen somewhat into critical neglect, she deserves the place she held in her lifetime, amongst the first rank of Victorian poets.

There are several articles about Elizabeth Barrett Browning and her work at the British Library website: <https://www.bl.uk/people/elizabeth-barrett-browning>

This collection contains 64 shorter poems and excerpts, as well as more extensive extracts from *Casa Guidi Windows* and the verse-novel *Aurora Leigh*. Gaps between extracts are indicated by three asterisks: * * *. In *Aurora Leigh* and a few other works, a brief outline of the omitted narrative is sometimes given where appropriate.

Poems in this collection are arranged thematically rather than chronologically. All works included here are in the public domain.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning
Selected Poems

EARLY WORKS

↑

The Battle of Marathon (extracts)

Jove's sacred smile lulls every care to rest,
Calms every woe, and gladdens every breast.
But what shrill blast thus bursts upon the ear?
What banners rise, what heralds forms appear?
That haughty mien, and that commanding face
Bespeak them Persians, and of noble race;
One on whose hand Darius' signet beamed,
Superior to the rest, a leader seemed,
With brow contracted, and with flashing eye
Thus threatening spoke, in scornful majesty:
'Know Greeks that I, a sacred herald, bring
The awful mandate of the Persian King,
To force allegiance from the Sons of Greece;
Then earth and water give, nor scorn his peace.
For, if for homage, back reproof I bear,
To meet his wrath, his vengeful wrath, prepare...'

* * *

He stood astounded, rivetted, opprest
By grief unspeakable, which swelled his breast;
Life, feeling, being, sense forgotten lie,
Buried in one wide waste of misery.
Can this be Athens! this her Senates pride?
He asked but gratitude,— was this denied?
Tho' Europe's homage at his feet were hurled
Athens forsakes him— Athens was his world.
Unutterable woe! by anguish stung
All his full soul rushed heaving to his tongue,
And thoughts of power, of fame, of greatness o'er,
He cried 'Athenians!' and he could no more.

Notes

The Battle of Marathon took place in 490 BCE when the Persians, under King Darius I, invaded Greece. The subject of the second extract is the experienced Greek general, Miltiades, whose tactics defeated the Persians.
Elizabeth Barrett was eleven when she began to write this long poem, which was privately published by her father in 1820.



An Essay on Mind, Book 1 (extracts)

If some gay picture, vilely daubed, were seen
With grass of azure, and a sky of green,
Th' impatient laughter we'd suppress in vain,
And deem the painter jesting, or insane.
But when the sun of blinding prejudice
Glares in our faces, it deceives our eyes;
Truth appears falsehood to the dazzled sight,
The comment apes the fact, and black seems white;
Commingle hues, their separate colours lost,
Dance wildly on, in bright confusion tost;
And, midst their drunken whirl, the giddy eye
Beholds one shapeless blot for earth and sky.

Of such delusions let the mind take heed,
And learn to think, or wisely cease to read...

* * *

With what triumphant joy, what glad surprise,
The dull behold the dullness of the wise!
What insect tribes of brainless impudence
Buzz round the carcass of perverted sense!
What railing idiots hunt, from classic school,
Each flimsy sage and scientific fool,
Crying, "'Tis well! we see the blest effect
Of watchful night and toiling intellect!"
Yet let them pause, and tremble – vainly glad;
For too much learning maketh no man mad!
Too *little* dims the sight, and leads us o'er
The twilight path, where fools have been before;
With not enough of Reason's radiance seen,
To track the footsteps where those fools have been.

Divinest Newton! if my pen may show
A name so mighty, in a verse so low,
Still let the sons of Science, joyful, claim
The bright example of that splendid name!
Still let their lips repeat, my page bespeak,
The sage how learned! and the man how meek!
Too wise, to think his human folly less;
Too great, to doubt his proper littleness;
Too strong, to deem his weakness passed away;
Too high in soul, to glory in his clay:
Rich in all nature, but her erring side:
Endowed with all of Science – but its pride.



An Essay on Mind, Book 2 (extracts)

...O'er the scene the poet's spirit broods,
To warm the thoughts that form his noblest moods;
Peopling his solitude with faery play,
And beckoning shapes that whisper him away,
While liliated fields, and hedge-row blossoms white,
And hills, and glittering streams, are full in sight—
The forests wave, the joyous sun beguiles,
And all the poetry of Nature smiles!

Such poetry is formed by Mind, and not
By scenic grace of one peculiar spot.
The artist lingers in the moonlit glade,
And light and shade, with him, are – light and shade.
The philosophic chemist wandering there,
Dreams of the soil and nature of the air;
The rustic marks the young herbs' fresh'ning hue,
And only thinks – his scythe may soon pass through!
None “muse on nature with a Poet's eye,”
None read, but Poets, Nature's poetry!
Its characters are traced in mystic hand,
And all may gaze, but few can understand.

* * *

I love my own dear land – it doth rejoice
The soul to stretch my arms and lift my voice,
To tell her of my love! I love her green
And bowery woods, her hills in mossy sheen,
Her silver running waters – there's no spot
In all her dwelling which my breast loves not—
No place not heart-enchanted! Sunnier skies
And calmer waves may meet another's eyes;
I love the sullen mist, the stormy sea,
The winds of rushing strength which, like the land, are free!
Such is my love – yet turning thus to thee,
Oh Graecia! I must hail with hardly less
Of joy, and. pride, and deepening tenderness,
And feelings wild, I know not to controul,
My other country – country of my soul!
For so, to me, thou art! my lips have sung
Of thee with childhood's lisp, and harp unstrung!
In thee, my Fancy's pleasant walks have been,
Telling her tales, while Memory wept between!
And now *for thee* I joy, with heart beguiled,
As if a dying friend looked up, and smiled.

Notes

Published in 1826 when the poet was twenty, this long poem was written in the style of Alexander Pope.

Divinest Newton – Isaac Newton (1642 – 1726) – eminent mathematician and scientist who formed the theory of gravity.

Graecia – Greece: the Greek War of Independence was fought in the 1820's.



Song

Weep, as if you thought of laughter:
Smile, as tears were coming after!
Marry your pleasures to your woes;
And think life's green well worth its rose!

No sorrow will your heart betide,
Without a comfort by its side;
The sun may sleep in his sea bed,
But you have starlight overhead.

Trust not to Joy! the rose of June,
When opened wide, will wither soon;
Italian days without twilight
Will turn them suddenly to night.

Joy, most changeful of all things,
Flits away on rainbow wings;
And when they look the gayest, know,
It is that they are spread to go!

Note

First published in *An Essay on Mind, with other poems*, in 1826, when the author was twenty.

POEMS ABOUT CHILDHOOD



Hector in the Garden

Nine years old! The first of any
Seem the happiest years that come:
Yet when *I* was nine, I said
No such word! – I thought instead
That the Greeks had used as many
In besieging Ilium.

Nine green years had scarcely brought me
To my childhood's haunted spring:
I had life, like flowers and bees
In betwixt the country trees,
And the sun the pleasure taught me
Which he teacheth everything.

If the rain fell, there was sorrow,
Little head leant on the pane,
Little finger drawing down it
The long trailing drops upon it,
And the 'Rain, rain, come to-morrow,'
Said for charm against the rain.

Such a charm was right Canidian,
Though you meet it with a jeer!
If I said it long enough,
Then the rain hummed dimly off,
And the thrush with his pure Lydian
Was left only to the ear;

And the sun and I together
Went a-rushing out of doors!
We, our tender spirits, drew
Over hill and dale in view,
Glimmering hither, glimmering thither,
In the footsteps of the showers.

Underneath the chestnuts dripping,
Through the grasses wet and fair,
Straight I sought my garden-ground
With the laurel on the mound,
And the pear-tree oversweeping
A side-shadow of green air.

In the garden lay supinely
A huge giant wrought of spade!
Arms and legs were stretched at length
In a passive giant strength,—
The fine meadow turf, cut finely,
Round them laid and interlaid.

Call him Hector, son of Priam!
Such his title and degree:
With my rake I smoothed his brow,
Both his cheeks I weeded through,
But a rhymer such as I am
Scarce can sing his dignity.

Eyes of gentianellas azure,
Staring, winking at the skies,
Nose of gillyflowers and box;
Scented grasses put for locks,
Which a little breeze, at pleasure,
Set a-waving round his eyes:

Brazen helm of daffodillies,
With a glitter toward the light;
Purple violets for the mouth,
Breathing perfumes west and south;
And a sword of flashing lilies,
Holden ready for the fight;

And a breastplate made of daisies,
Closely fitting, leaf on leaf;
Periwinkles interlaced
Drawn for belt about the waist;
While the brown bees, humming praises,
Shot their arrows round the chief.

And who knows (I sometimes wondered)
If the disembodied soul
Of old Hector, once of Troy,
Might not take a dreary joy
Here to enter – if it thundered,
Rolling up the thunder-roll?

Rolling this way from Troy-ruin,
In this body rude and rife
Just to enter, and take rest
'Neath the daisies of the breast—
They, with tender roots, renewing
His heroic heart to life?

Who could know? I sometimes started
At a motion or a sound!
Did his mouth speak – naming Troy,
With an οτοτοτοτο?
Did the pulse of the Strong-hearted
Make the daisies tremble round?

It was hard to answer, often:
But the birds sang in the tree,—
But the little birds sang bold
In the pear-tree green and old,
And my terror seemed to soften
Through the courage of their glee.

Oh, the birds, the tree, the ruddy
And white blossoms sleek with rain!
Oh, my garden, rich with pansies!
Oh, my childhood's bright romances!
All revive, like Hector's body,
And I see them stir again!

And despite life's changes, chances,
And despite the deathbell's toll,
They press on me in full seeming:
Help, some angel! stay this dreaming!
As the birds sang in the branches,
Sing God's patience through my soul!

That no dreamer, no neglecter
Of the present's work unsped,
I may wake up and be doing,
Life's heroic ends pursuing,
Though my past is dead as Hector,
And though Hector is twice dead.

Notes

In a letter of 1843, Barrett Browning referred to her childhood garden, in which she created a figure out of plants – “a great Hector of Troy, in relieve, with a high heroic box nose & shoe-ties of columbine.”

Hector: in Homer's *Iliad*, Hector was the Trojan hero and warrior eventually killed by his Greek opponent Achilles.

Ilium – Troy

Canidian – magical: Canidia was a witch in ancient Roman literature (notably in Horace's poems).

Lydian – a musical mode of ancient Greece

οτοτοτοτοι (pronounced ototototoi) – a Greek cry of lament.

↑

The Romance of the Swan's Nest (extracts)

Little Ellie sits alone
'Mid the beeches of a meadow,
By a stream-side on the grass,
And the trees are showering down
Doubles of their leaves in shadow
On her shining hair and face.

She has thrown her bonnet by,
And her feet she has been dipping
In the shallow water's flow:
Now she holds them nakedly
In her hands, all sleek and dripping,
While she rocketh to and fro.

Little Ellie sits alone,
And the smile she softly uses
Fills the silence like a speech,
While she thinks what shall be done,
And the sweetest pleasure chooses
For her future within reach.

Little Ellie in her smile
Chooses... 'I will have a lover,
Riding on a steed of steeds!
He shall love me without guile,
And to *him* I will discover
The swan's nest among the reeds.

'And the steed shall be red-roan,
And the lover shall be noble,
With an eye that takes the breath;
And the lute he plays upon
Shall strike ladies into trouble,
As his sword strikes men to death.'

* * *

'He will kiss me on the mouth
Then, and lead me as a lover
Through the crowds that praise his deeds;
And, when soul-tied by one troth,
Unto *him* I will discover
That swan's nest among the reeds.'

Little Ellie, with her smile
Not yet ended, rose up gaily,
Tied the bonnet, donned the shoe,
And went homeward, round a mile,
Just to see, as she did daily,
What more eggs were with the two.

Pushing through the elm-tree copse,
Winding up the stream, light-hearted,
Where the osier pathway leads,
Past the boughs she stoops – and stops.
Lo, the wild swan had deserted,
And a rat had gnawed the reeds!

Ellie went home sad and slow.
If she found the lover ever,
With his red-roan steed of steeds,
Sooth I know not! but I know
She could never show him – never,
That swan's nest among the reeds!



The Lost Bower (extracts)

In the pleasant orchard-closes,
‘God bless all our gains,’ say we;
But ‘May God bless all our losses,’
Better suits with our degree.
Listen, gentle – ay, and simple! listen, children on the knee!

Green the land is where my daily
Steps in jocund childhood played,
Dimpled close with hill and valley,
Dappled very close with shade:
Summer-snow of apple-blossoms running up from glade to glade.

There is one hill I see nearer
In my vision of the rest;
And a little wood seems clearer
As it climbeth from the west,
Sideway from the tree-locked valley, to the airy upland crest.

Small the wood is, green with hazels,
And, completing the ascent,
Where the wind blows and sun dazzles
Thrills in leafy tremblement,
Like a heart that, after climbing, beateth quickly through content.

Not a step the wood advances
O’er the open hill-top’s bound;
There, in green arrest, the branches
See their image on the ground:
You may walk beneath them smiling, glad with sight and glad with sound.

For you hearken on your right hand,
How the birds do leap and call
In the greenwood, out of sight and
Out of reach and fear of all;
And the squirrels crack the filberts through their cheerful madrigal.

On your left, the sheep are cropping
The slant grass and daisies pale,
And five apple-trees stand dropping
Separate shadows toward the vale,
Over which, in choral silence, the hills look you their ‘All hail!’

Far out, kindled by each other,
Shining hills on hills arise,
Close as brother leans to brother
When they press beneath the eyes
Of some father praying blessings from the gifts of paradise.

While beyond, above them mounted,
And above their woods also,
Malvern hills, for mountains counted
Not unduly, loom a-row—
Keepers of Piers Plowman's visions through the sunshine and the snow.

Yet, in childhood, little prized I
That fair walk and far survey;
'Twas a straight walk unadvised by
The least mischief worth a nay;
Up and down – as dull as grammar on the eve of holiday.

But the wood, all close and clenching
Bough in bough and root in root,—
No more sky (for overbranching)
At your head than at your foot,—
Oh, the wood drew me within it, by a glamour past dispute.

Few and broken paths showed through it,
Where the sheep had tried to run,—
Forced with snowy wool to strew it
Round the thickets, when anon
They, with silly thorn-pricked noses, bleated back into the sun.

But my childish heart beat stronger
Than those thickets dared to grow:
I could pierce them! *I* could longer
Travel on, methought, than so.
Sheep for sheep-paths! braver children climb and creep where they would go.

And the poets wander, said I,
Over places all as rude:
Bold Rinaldo's lovely lady
Sat to meet him in a wood:
Rosalinda, like a fountain, laughed out pure with solitude.

And if Chaucer had not travelled
Through a forest by a well,
He had never dreamt nor marvelled
At those ladies fair and fell
Who lived smiling without loving in their island-citadel.

Thus I thought of the old singers,
And took courage from their song,
Till my little struggling fingers
Tore asunder gyve and thong
Of the brambles which entrapped me, and the barrier branches strong.

On a day, such pastime keeping,
With a fawn's heart debonair,
Under-crawling, overleaping
Thorns that prick and boughs that bear,
I stood suddenly astonished – I was gladdened unaware.

From the place I stood in, floated
Back the covert dim and close,
And the open ground was coated
Carpet-smooth with grass and moss,
And the blue-bell's purple presence signed it worthily across.

Here a linden-tree stood, bright'ning
All adown its silver rind;
For as some trees draw the lightning,
So this tree, unto my mind,
Drew to earth the blessed sunshine from the sky where it was shrined.

Tall the linden-tree, and near it
An old hawthorn also grew;
And wood-ivy like a spirit
Hovered dimly round the two,
Shaping thence that bower of beauty which I sing of thus to you.

'Twas a bower for garden fitter
Than for any woodland wide:
Though a fresh and dewy glitter
Struck it through from side to side,
Shaped and shaven was the freshness, as by garden-cunning plied,

Oh, a lady might have come there,
Hooded fairly like her hawk,
With a book or lute in summer,
And a hope of sweeter talk, –
Listening less to her own music than for footsteps on the walk.

But that bower appeared a marvel
In the wildness of the place;
With such seeming art and travail,
Finely fixed and fitted was
Leaf to leaf, the dark-green ivy, to the summit from the base.

And the ivy veined and glossy
Was enwrought with eglantine;
And the wild hop fibred closely,
And the large-leaved columbine,
Arch of door and window-mullion, did right sylvanly entwine.

Rose-trees either side the door were
Growing lithe and growing tall,
Each one set a summer warder
For the keeping of the hall,—
With a red rose and a white rose, leaning, nodding at the wall.

As I entered, mosses hushing
Stole all noises from my foot;
And a green elastic cushion,
Clasped within the linden's root,
Took me in a chair of silence very rare and absolute.

All the floor was paved with glory,
Greenly, silently inlaid
(Through quick motions made before me),
With fair counterparts in shade
Of the fair serrated ivy-leaves which slanted overhead.

'Is such pavement in a palace?'
So I questioned in my thought:
The sun, shining through the chalice
Of the red rose hung without,
Threw within a red libation, like an answer to my doubt.

* * *

So, young muser, I sat listening
To my fancy's wildest word:
On a sudden, through the glistening
Leaves around, a little stirred,
Came a sound, a sense of music, which was rather felt than heard.

Softly, finely, it inwound me;
From the world it shut me in,—
Like a fountain falling round me,
Which with silver waters thin
Clips a little water Naiad sitting smilingly within.

Whence the music came, who knoweth?
I know nothing. But indeed
Pan or Faunus never bloweth
So much sweetness from a reed
Which has sucked the milk of waters at the oldest river-head.

Never lark the sun can waken
With such sweetness! when the lark,
The high planets overtaking
In the half-*evanished* Dark,
Casts his singing to their singing, like an arrow to the mark.

Never nightingale so singeth:
Oh, she leans on thorny tree,
And her poet-song she flingeth
Over pain to victory!
Yet she never sings such music,— or she sings it not to me.

* * *

And I said within me, laughing,
'I have found a bower to-day,
A green lusus, fashioned half in
Chance and half in Nature's play,
And a little bird sings nigh it, I will nevermore mis-say.

'Henceforth, I will be the fairy
Of this bower not built by one;
I will go there, sad or merry,
With each morning's benison,
And the bird shall be my harper in the dream-hall I have won.'

So I said. But the next morning,
(— Child, look up into my face —
'Ware, oh sceptic, of your scorning!
This is truth in its pure grace!)
The next morning, all had vanished, or my wandering missed the place.

Bring an oath most sylvan-holy,
And upon it swear me true —
By the wind-bells swinging slowly
Their mute curfews in the dew,
By the advent of the snowdrop, by the rosemary and rue,—

I affirm by all or any,
Let the cause be charm or chance,
That my wandering searches many
Missed the bower of my romance —
That I nevermore upon it turned my mortal countenance.

I affirm that, since I lost it,
Never bower has seemed so fair;
Never garden-creeper crossed it
With so deft and brave an air,—
Never bird sung in the summer, as I saw and heard them there.

* * *

Years have vanished since, as wholly
As the little bower did then;
And you call it tender folly
That such thoughts should come again?
Ah, I cannot change this sighing for your smiling, brother men!

For this loss it did prefigure
Other loss of better good,
When my soul, in spirit vigour
And in ripened womanhood,
Fell from visions of more beauty than an arbour in a wood.

I have lost – oh, many a pleasure,
Many a hope and many a power –
Studios health, and merry leisure,
The first dew on the first flower!
But the first of all my losses was the losing of the bower.

* * *

By this couch I weakly lie on,
While I count my memories,–
Through the fingers which, still sighing,
I press closely on mine eyes,–
Clear as once beneath the sunshine, I behold the bower arise.

Springs the linden-tree as greenly
Stroked with light adown its rind;
And the ivy-leaves serenely
Each in either intertwined;
And the rose-trees at the doorway, they have neither grown nor pined.

From those overblown faint roses
Not a leaf appeareth shed,
And that little bud discloses
Not a thorn's-breadth more of red
For the winters and the summers which have passed me overhead.

And that music overfloweth,
Sudden sweet, the sylvan eaves:
Thrush or nightingale – who knoweth?
Fay or Faunus – who believes?
But my heart still trembles in me to the trembling of the leaves.

Is the bower lost, then? who sayeth
That the bower indeed is lost?
Hark! my spirit in it prayeth
Through the sunshine and the frost,–
And the prayer preserves it greenly, to the last and uttermost.

Till another open for me
In God's Eden-land unknown,
With an angel at the doorway,
White with gazing at His Throne;
And a saint's voice in the palm-trees, singing – 'All is lost... and won!'

Notes

filberts – hazelnuts

madrigal – a 16th style of song

Piers Plowman's Visions – a 14th century poem by William Langland, which begin in the Malvern Hills of western England.

Bold Rinaldo – *Rinaldo* was an epic poem of chivalry by the 16th century Italian poet Tasso.

Chaucer... ladies fair and fell – Geoffrey Chaucer, the medieval poet, wrote amongst other works a dream poem called *The Legend of Good Women*.

Rosalinda – may refer to Shakespeare's heroine Rosalind in *As You Like It*, set in the Forest of Arden.

gyve and thong – a gyve is a shackle or fetter; thong here means a restraining cord.

linden-tree – lime tree

sylvanly – sylvan (or silvan) means of the woodland.

libation – an offering of drink poured out for the gods.

Naiad – a water-nymph in Greek mythology

Pan or Faunus – the Greek god Pan, with the horns and legs of a goat, was the god of nature, the wild and fertility. Faunus was his Roman equivalent.

lusus – a freak of nature

benison – a blessing

DREAMS AND ROMANCES

↑

An Island (extract)

My dream is of an island-place
Which distant seas keep lonely,
A little island, on whose face
The stars are watchers only.
Those bright still stars! they need not seem
Brighter or stiller in my dream.

An island full of hills and dells,
All rumped and uneven
With green recesses, sudden swells,
And odorous valleys driven
So deep and straight, that always there
The wind is cradled to soft air.

Hills running up to heaven for light
Through woods that half-way ran!
As if the wild earth mimicked right
The wilder heart of man:
Only it shall be greener far
And gladder than hearts ever are.

More like, perhaps, that mountain piece
Of Dante's paradise,
Disrupt to an hundred hills like these,
In falling from the skies;
Bringing within it, all the roots
Of heavenly trees and flowers and fruits.

For, saving where the grey rocks strike
Their javelins up the azure,
Or where deep fissures, miser-like
Hoard up some fountain treasure
(And e'en in them – stoop down and hear–
Leaf sounds with water in your ear!)

The place is all awave with trees,
Limes, myrtles purple-beaded,
Acacias having drunk the lees
Of the night-dew, faint-headed,
And wan grey olive-woods which seem
The fittest foliage for a dream.

Trees, trees on all sides! they combine
Their plummy shades to throw,
Through whose clear fruit and blossom fine
Whene'er the sun may go,
The ground beneath he deeply stains,
As passing through cathedral panes.

Note

Dante's paradise – Dante's poem *Paradiso* begins on Mount Purgatory, otherwise known as the Earthly Paradise.



A Musical Instrument

What was he doing, the great god Pan,
Down in the reeds by the river?
Spreading ruin and scattering ban,
Splashing and paddling with hoofs of a goat,
And breaking the golden lilies afloat
With the dragon-fly on the river.

He tore out a reed, the great god Pan,
From the deep cool bed of the river:
The limpid water turbidly ran,
And the broken lilies a-dying lay,
And the dragon-fly had fled away,
Ere he brought it out of the river.

High on the shore sat the great god Pan,
While turbidly flowed the river;
And hacked and hewed as a great god can,
With his hard bleak steel at the patient reed,
Till there was not a sign of a leaf indeed
To prove it fresh from the river.

He cut it short, did the great god Pan,
(How tall it stood in the river!)
Then drew the pith, like the heart of a man,
Steadily from the outside ring,
And notched the poor dry empty thing
In holes, as he sat by the river.

‘This is the way,’ laughed the great god Pan,
(Laughed while he sat by the river,)
‘The only way, since gods began
To make sweet music, they could succeed.’
Then, dropping his mouth to a hole in the reed,
He blew in power by the river.

Sweet, sweet, sweet, O Pan!
Piercing sweet by the river!
Blinding sweet, O great god Pan!
The sun on the hill forgot to die,
And the lilies revived, and the dragon-fly
Came back to dream on the river.

Yet half a beast is the great god Pan,
To laugh as he sits by the river,
Making a poet out of a man:
The true gods sigh for the cost and pain,—
For the reed which grows nevermore again
As a reed with the reeds in the river.

Note

Pan – the Greek god of nature and the wild, and of music. The musical instrument called panpipes, named after Pan, consists of reeds of different lengths bound together.



A Romance of the Ganges (extract)

Seven maidens 'neath the midnight
Stand near the river-sea,
Whose water sweepeth white around
The shadow of the tree.
The moon and earth are face to face,
And earth is slumbering deep;
The wave-voice seems the voice of dreams
That wander through her sleep:
The river floweth on.

What bring they 'neath the midnight,
Beside the river-sea?
They bring the human heart wherein
No nightly calm can be,—
That droppeth never with the wind,
Nor drieth with the dew:
Oh, calm it God! thy calm is broad
To cover spirits, too.
The river floweth on.

The maidens lean them over
The waters, side by side,
And shun each other's deepening eyes,
And gaze adown the tide;
For each within a little boat
A little lamp hath put,
And heaped for freight some lily's weight
Or scarlet rose half shut.
The river floweth on.

Of a shell of cocoa carven
Each little boat is made;
Each carries a lamp, and carries a flower,
And carries a hope unsaid;
And when the boat hath carried the lamp
Unquenched till out of sight.
The maiden is sure that love will endure,—
But love will fail with light.
The river floweth on.

Why, all the stars are ready
To symbolize the soul,
The stars untroubled by the wind,
Unwearied as they roll;
And yet the soul by instinct sad
Reverts to symbols low—
To that small flame, whose very name

Breathed o'er it, shakes it so!
The river floweth on.

Six boats are on the river,
Seven maidens on the shore,
While still above them steadfastly
The stars shine evermore.
Go, little boats, go soft and safe,
And guard the symbol spark!—
The boats aright go safe and bright
Across the waters dark.
The river floweth on.

Notes

The river Ganges in India, or Maa Ganga (Mother Ganges), is revered and beloved in Hindu tradition. Offerings of coconuts may be made to the river.



The Romaunt of the Page (extracts)

A knight of gallant deeds
And a young page at his side,
From the holy war in Palestine
Did slow and thoughtful ride,
As each were a palmer and told for beads
The dews of the eventide.

‘O young page,’ said the knight,
‘A noble page art thou!
Thou fearest not to steep in blood
The curls upon thy brow;
And once in the tent, and twice in the fight,
Didst ward me a mortal blow.’

‘O brave knight,’ said the page,
‘Or ere we hither came,
We talked in tent, we talked in field,
Of the bloody battle-game;
But here, below this greenwood bough,
I cannot speak the same.

‘Our troop is far behind,
The woodland calm is new;
Our steeds, with slow grass-muffled hoofs,
Tread deep the shadows through;
And, in my mind, some blessing kind
Is dropping with the dew.

‘The woodland calm is pure—
I cannot choose but have
A thought from these, o’ the beechen-trees
Which in our England wave,
And of the little finches fine
Which sang there, while in Paletine
The warrior-hilt we drave.’

* * *

‘A boon, thou noble knight,
If ever I servèd thee!
Though thou art a knight and I am a page,
Now grant a boon to me;
And tell me sooth, if dark or bright,
If little loved or loved aright
Be the face of thy ladye.’

Gloomily looked the knight—
‘As a son thou hast servèd me,
And would to none I had granted boon
Except to only thee!
For haply then I should love aright,
For then I should know if dark or bright
Were the face of my ladye.’

(The knight tells the page how a Sir Walter, a friend of his father, died defending his father’s good name. When Sir Walter’s wife was dying, the knight promised to marry their orphaned daughter, although he had never seen her and was about to set off for Palestine.)

‘In the dark chambère, if the bride was fair,
Ye wis, I could not see,
But the steed thrice neighed, and the priest fast prayed,
And wedded fast were we.
Her mother smiled upon her bed
As at its side we knelt to wed,
And the bride rose from her knee
And kissed the smile of her mother dead,
Or ever she kissed me.

‘My page, my page, what grieves thee so,
That the tears run down thy face?’—
‘Alas, alas! mine own sistèr
Was in thy lady’s case!
But *she* laid down the silks she wore
And followed him she wed before,
Disguised as his true servitor,
To the very battle-place.’

And wept the page, but laughed the knight,
A careless laugh laughed he:
‘Well done it were for thy sistèr,
But not for my ladye!
My love, so please you, shall requite
No woman, whether dark or bright,
Unwomaned if she be.’

The page stopped weeping and smiled cold—
‘Your wisdom may declare
That womanhood is proved the best
By golden brooch and glossy vest
The mincing ladies wear;
Yet is it proved, and was of old,
Anear as well, I dare to hold,
By truth, or by despair.’

He smiled no more, he wept no more,
But passionate he spake,—
‘Oh, womanly she prayed in tent,
When none beside did wake!
Oh, womanly she paled in fight,
For one belovèd’s sake!—
And her little hand, defiled with blood,
Her tender tears of womanhood
Most woman-pure did make!’

—‘Well done it were for thy sistèr,
Thou tellest well her tale!
But for my lady, she shall pray
I’ the kirk of Nydesdale.
Not dread for me but love for me
Shall make my lady pale;
No casque shall hide her woman’s tear—
It shall have room to trickle clear
Behind her woman’s veil.’

—‘But what if she mistook thy mind
And followed thee to strife,
Then kneeling did entreat thy love
As Paynims ask for life?’
—‘I would forgive, and evermore
Would love her as my servitor,
But little as my wife.’

(The page now sees the Saracen enemy approaching and bids the knight ride away to safety.)

‘Ere night I shall be near to thee,—
Now ride, my master, ride!
Ere night, as parted spirits cleave
To mortals too beloved to leave,
I shall be at thy side.’
The knight smiled free at the fantasy,
And adown the dell did ride.

Had the knight looked up to the page’s face,
No smile the word had won:
Had the knight looked up to the page’s face,
I ween he had never gone:
Had the knight looked back to the page’s geste,
I ween he had turned anon!
For dread was the woe in the face so young,
And wild was the silent geste that flung
Casque, sword to earth – as the boy down-sprung,
And stood – alone, alone.

He clenched his hands as if to hold
His soul’s great agony—
‘Have I renounced my womanhood,
For wifehood unto *thee*,
And is this the last, last look of thine
That ever I shall see?

‘Yet God thee save, and mayst thou have
A lady to thy mind,
More woman-proud and half as true
As one thou leav’st behind!
And God me take with Him to dwell—
For Him I cannot love too well,
As I have loved my kind.’

She looketh up, in earth’s despair,
The hopeful heavens to seek;
That little cloud still floateth there,
Whereof her loved did speak:
How bright the little cloud appears!
Her eyelids fall upon the tears,
And the tears down either cheek.

The tramp of hoof, the flash of steel—
The Paynims round her coming!
The sound and sight have made her calm,—
False page, but truthful woman!
She stands amid them all unmoved:
A heart once broken by the loved
Is strong to meet the foeman.

‘Ho, Christian page! art keeping sheep,
From pouring wine-cups resting?’—
‘I keep my master’s noble name,
For warring, not for feasting!
And if that here Sir Hubert were,
My master brave, my master dear,
Ye would not stay to question.’

‘Where is thy master, scornful page,
That we may slay or bind him?’—
‘Now search the lea and search the wood,
And see if ye can find him!
Nathless, as hath been often tried,
Your Paynim heroes faster ride
Before him than behind him.’

‘Give smoother answers, lying page,
Or perish in the lying!’—
‘I trow that if the warrior brand
Beside my foot, were in my hand,
’Twere better at replying.’
They cursed her deep, they smote her low,
They cleft her golden ringlets through;
The Loving is the Dying.

She felt the scimitar gleam down,
And met it from beneath
With smile more bright in victory
Than any sword from sheath,—
Which flashed across her lip serene,
Most like the spirit-light between
The darks of life and death.

Notes

Holy war in Palestine – one of the Crusades, expeditions by Christian soldiers against the Saracens, the Muslims occupying Palestine; they took place from the 10th to the 12 centuries.

palmer – a pilgrim who had visited the Holy Land

ye wis – you know

Nydesdale – probably Nithsdale, an area in southern Scotland

casque – helmet

Paynim – pagan, non-Christian

I ween – I think

geste – action, gesture



Lady Geraldine's Courtship (extracts)

A Poet writes to his Friend. PLACE – A Room in Wycombe Hall. TIME –Late in the evening.

Dear my friend and fellow-student, I would lean my spirit o'er you!
Down the purple of this chamber tears should scarcely run at will.
I am humbled who was humble. Friend, I bow my head before you:
You should lead me to my peasants, but their faces are too still.

There's a lady, – an earl's daughter, – she is proud and she is noble,
And she treads the crimson carpet, and she breathes the perfumed air,
And a kingly blood sends glances up her princely eye to trouble,
And the shadow of a monarch's crown is softened in her hair.

She has halls among the woodlands, she has castles by the breakers,
She has farms and she has manors, she can threaten and command:
And the palpitating engines snort in steam across her acres,
As they mark upon the blasted heaven the measure of the land.

There are none of England's daughters who can show a prouder presence;
Upon princely suitors' praying she has looked in her disdain.
She was sprung of English nobles, I was born of English peasants;
What was *I* that I should love her, – save for competence to pain?

I was only a poor poet, made for singing at her casement,
As the finches or the thrushes, while she thought of other things.
Oh, she walked so high above me, she appeared to my abasement,
In her lovely silken murmur, like an angel clad in wings!

* * *

Oh, the blessed woods of Sussex! I can hear them still around me,
With their leafy tide of greenery still rippling up the wind.
Oh, the cursed woods of Sussex! where the hunter's arrow found me,
When a fair face and a tender voice had made me mad and blind!

In that ancient hall of Wycombe thronged the numerous guests invited,
And the lovely London ladies trod the floors with gliding feet;
And their voices low with fashion, not with feeling, softly freighted
All the air about the windows with elastic laughters sweet.

For at eve the open windows flung their light out on the terrace,
Which the floating orbs of curtains did with gradual shadow sweep,
While the swans upon the river, fed at morning by the heiress,
Trembled downward through their snowy wings at music in their sleep.

And there evermore was music, both of instrument and singing,
Till the finches of the shrubberies grew restless in the dark;
But the cedars stood up motionless, each in a moonlight ringing,
And the deer, half in the glimmer, strewed the hollows of the park.

And though sometimes she would bind me with her silver-corded speeches
To commix my words and laughter with the converse and the jest,
Oft I sat apart, and gazing on the river through the beeches,
Heard, as pure the swans swam down it, her pure voice o'erfloat the rest.

In the morning, horn of huntsman, hoof of steed and laugh of rider,
Spread out cheery from the courtyard till we lost them in the hills,
While herself and other ladies, and her suitors left beside her,
Went a-wandering up the gardens through the laurels and abeles.

* * *

'Tis a picture for remembrance. And thus, morning after morning,
Did I follow as she drew me by the spirit to her feet.
Why, her greyhound followed also! Dogs – we both were dogs for scorning—
To be sent back when she pleased it and her path lay through the wheat.

And thus, morning after morning, spite of vows and spite of sorrow,
Did I follow at her drawing, while the week-days passed along,
Just to feed the swans this noontide, or to see the fawns to-morrow,
Or to teach the hill-side echo some sweet Tuscan in a song.

Ay, for sometimes on the hill-side, while we sate down in the gowans,
With the forest green behind us and its shadow cast before,
And the river running under, and across it from the rowans
A brown partridge whirring near us till we felt the air it bore,—

There, obedient to her praying, did I read aloud the poems
Made to Tuscan flutes, or instruments more various of our own;
Read the pastoral parts of Spenser, or the subtle interflowings
Found in Petrarch's sonnets – here's the book, the leaf is folded down!

Or at times a modern volume,— Wordsworth's solemn-thoughted idyl,
Howitt's ballad-verse, or Tennyson's enchanted reverie,—
Or from Browning some 'Pomegranate,' which, if cut deep down the middle,
Shows a heart within blood-tinctured, of a veined humanity.

Or at times I read there, hoarsely, some new poem of my making:
Poets ever fail in reading their own verses to their worth,—
For the echo in you breaks upon the words which you are speaking,
And the chariot wheels jar in the gate through which you drive them forth.

After, when we were grown tired of books, the silence round us flinging
A slow arm of sweet compression, felt with beatings at the breast,
She would break out on a sudden in a gush of woodland singing,
Like a child's emotion in a god – a naiad tired of rest.

(When he overhears Lady Geraldine saying that she will only marry someone noble and wealthy, the poet upbraids her angrily.)

‘What right can you have, God's other works to scorn, despise, revile them
In the gross, as mere men, broadly – not as *noble* men, forsooth,—
As mere Pariahs of the outer world, forbidden to assoil them
In the hope of living, dying, near that sweetness of your mouth?

‘Have you any answer, madam? If my spirit were less earthly,
If its instrument were gifted with a better silver string,
I would kneel down where I stand, and say – Behold me! I am worthy
Of thy loving, for I love thee! I am worthy as a king.

‘As it is – your ermined pride, I swear, shall feel this stain upon her,
That *I*, poor, weak, tost with passion, scorned by me and you again,
Love you, madam – dare to love you – to my grief and your dishonour,
To my endless desolation, and your impotent disdain!’

(Ashamed of his outburst, the poet resolves to leave; but Geraldine comes to his room.)

Ever, evermore the while in a slow silence she kept smiling,
While the silver tears ran faster down the blushing of her cheeks;
Then with both her hands enfolding both of his, she softly told him,
‘Bertram, if I say I love thee, ... ’tis the vision only speaks.’

Softened, quickened to adore her, on his knee he fell before her,
And she whispered low in triumph, ‘It shall be as I have sworn!
Very rich he is in virtues – very noble – noble, certes;
And I shall not blush in knowing that men call him lowly born.’

Notes

palpitating engines - railway trains; this poem was first published in 1844, a decade when railways were expanding rapidly across Britain.

Tuscan – of Tuscany in Northern Italy

gowans – daisies

Spenser – 16th century author of courtly poetry

Petrarch – poet and scholar of 14th century Italy

Wordsworth, Howitt, Tennyson – all 19th century poets. Howitt, nowadays the least well-known, was probably Mary Howitt (1799 – 1888) an eminent poet of her day; her husband William was also a writer, though chiefly of prose.

Browning some “Pomegranate” – refers to the poet Robert Browning, who was to marry Elizabeth Barrett. This poem was published in the year before they met in 1845. Robert Browning had published the first instalment of his collection *Bells and Pomegranates* in 1841.



Lord Walter's Wife

'But why do you go?' said the lady, while both sat under the yew,
And her eyes were alive in their depth, as the kraken beneath the sea-blue.

'Because I fear you,' he answered;— 'because you are far too fair,
And able to strangle my soul in a mesh of your gold-coloured hair.'

'Oh, that,' she said, 'is no reason! Such knots are quickly undone,
And too much beauty, I reckon, is nothing but too much sun.'

'Yet farewell so,' he answered;— 'the sun-stroke's fatal at times.
I value your husband, Lord Walter, whose gallop rings still from the limes.'

'Oh, that,' she said, 'is no reason. You smell a rose through a fence:
If two should smell it, what matter? who grumbles, and where's the pretence?'

'But I,' he replied, 'have promised another, when love was free,
To love her alone, alone, who alone and afar loves me.'

'Why, that,' she said, 'is no reason. Love's always free, I am told.
Will you vow to be safe from the headache on Tuesday, and think it will hold?'

'But you,' he replied, 'have a daughter, a young little child, who was laid
In your lap to be pure; so I leave you: the angels would make me afraid.'

'Oh, that,' she said, 'is no reason. The angels keep out of the way;
And Dora, the child, observes nothing, although you should please me and stay.'

At which he rose up in his anger,— 'Why, now, you no longer are fair!
Why, now, you no longer are fatal, but ugly and hateful, I swear.'

At which she laughed out in her scorn.— 'These men! Oh, these men overnice,
Who are shocked if a colour not virtuous is frankly put on by a vice.'

Her eyes blazed upon him — 'And *you!* You bring us your vices so near
That we smell them! You think in our presence a thought 'twould defame us to hear!

'What reason had you, and what right,— I appeal to your soul from my life,—
To find me too fair as a woman? Why, sir, I am pure, and a wife.

'Is the day-star too fair up above you? It burns you not. Dare you imply
I brushed you more close than the star does, when Walter had set me as high?

'If a man finds a woman too fair, he means simply adapted too much
To uses unlawful and fatal. The praise!— shall I thank you for such?

'Too fair?— not unless you misuse us! and surely if, once in a while,
You attain to it, straightway you call us no longer too fair, but too vile.

‘A moment,– I pray your attention!– I have a poor word in my head
I must utter, though womanly custom would set it down better unsaid.

‘You grew, sir, pale to impertinence, once when I showed you a ring.
You kissed my fan when I dropped it. No matter!– I’ve broken the thing.

‘You did me the honour, perhaps, to be moved at my side now and then
In the senses – a vice, I have heard, which is common to beasts and some men.

‘Love’s a virtue for heroes!– as white as the snow on high hills,
And immortal as every great soul is that struggles, endures, and fulfils.

‘I love my Walter profoundly,– you, Maude, though you faltered a week,
For the sake of... what was it? an eyebrow? or, less still, a mole on a cheek?

‘And since, when all’s said, you’re too noble to stoop to the frivolous cant
About crimes irresistible, virtues that swindle, betray and supplant,

‘I determined to prove to yourself that, whate’er you might dream or avow
By illusion, you wanted precisely no more of me than you have now.

‘There! Look me full in the face!– in the face. Understand, if you can,
That the eyes of such women as I am are clean as the palm of a man.

‘Drop his hand, you insult him. Avoid us for fear we should cost you a scar—
You take us for harlots, I tell you, and not for the women we are.

‘You wronged me: but then I considered... there’s Walter! And so at the end,
I vowed that he should not be mulcted, by me, in the hand of a friend.

‘Have I hurt you indeed? We are quits then. Nay, friend of my Walter, be mine!
Come, Dora, my darling, my angel, and help me to ask him to dine.’

Notes

kraken – legendary sea monster

mulcted – deprived (i.e. of a friend)



Bianca among the Nightingales

The cypress stood up like a church
That night we felt our love would hold,
And saintly moonlight seemed to search
And wash the whole world clean as gold;
The olives crystallized the vales’
Broad slopes until the hills grew strong:
The fire-flies and the nightingales
Throbbled each to either, flame and song.
The nightingales, the nightingales.

Upon the angle of its shade
The cypress stood, self-balanced high;
Half up, half down, as double-made,
Along the ground, against the sky;
And we, too! from such soul-height went
Such leaps of blood, so blindly driven,
We scarce knew if our nature meant
Most passionate earth or intense heaven.
The nightingales, the nightingales.

We paled with love, we shook with love,
We kissed so close we could not vow;
Till Giulio whispered 'Sweet, above
God's Ever guarantees this Now.'
And through his words the nightingales
Drove straight and full their long clear call,
Like arrows through heroic mails,
And love was awful in it all.
The nightingales, the nightingales.

O cold white moonlight of the north,
Refresh these pulses, quench this hell!
O coverture of death drawn forth
Across this garden-chamber ... well!
But what have nightingales to do
In gloomy England, called the free...
(Yes, free to die in!...) when we two
Are sundered, singing still to me?
And still they sing, the nightingales.

I think I hear him, how he cried
'My own soul's life' between their notes.
Each man has but one soul supplied,
And that's immortal. Though his throat's
On fire with passion now, to *her*
He can't say what to me he said!
And yet he moves her, they aver.
The nightingales sing through my head,
The nightingales, the nightingales.

He says to *her* what moves her most.
He would not name his soul within
Her hearing, – rather pays her cost
With praises to her lips and chin.
Man has but one soul, 'tis ordained,
And each soul but one love, I add;
Yet souls are damned and love's profaned.
These nightingales will sing me mad!
The nightingales, the nightingales.

I marvel how the birds can sing.
There's little difference, in their view,
Betwixt our Tuscan trees that spring
As vital flames into the blue,
And dull round blots of foliage meant
Like saturated sponges here
To suck the fogs up. As content
Is *he* too in this land, 'tis clear.
And still they sing, the nightingales.

My native Florence! dear, forgone!
I see across the Alpine ridge
How the last feast-day of Saint John
Shot rockets from Carraia bridge.
The luminous city, tall with fire,
Trode deep down in that river of ours,
While many a boat with lamp and choir
Skimmed birdlike over glittering towers.
I will not hear these nightingales.

I seem to float, *we* seem to float
Down Arno's stream in festive guise;
A boat strikes flame into our boat
And up that lady seems to rise
As then she rose. The shock had flashed
A vision on us! What a head,
What leaping eyeballs!— beauty dashed
To splendour by a sudden dread.
And still they sing, the nightingales.

Too bold to sin, too weak to die;
Such women are so. As for me,
I would we had drowned there, he and I,
That moment, loving perfectly.
He had not caught her with her loosed
Gold ringlets... rarer in the south...
Nor heard the 'Grazie tanto' bruised
To sweetness by her English mouth.
And still they sing, the nightingales.

She had not reached him at my heart
With her fine tongue, as snakes indeed
Kill flies; nor had I, for my part,
Yearned after, in my desperate need,
And followed him as he did her
To coasts left bitter by the tide,
Whose very nightingales, elsewhere
Delighting, torture and deride!
For still they sing, the nightingales.

A worthless woman! mere cold clay
As all false things are! but so fair,
She takes the breath of men away
Who gaze upon her unaware.
I would not play her larcenous tricks
To have her looks! She lied and stole,
And spat into my love's pure pyx
The rank saliva of her soul.
And still they sing, the nightingales.

I would not for her white and pink,
Though such he likes – her grace of limb,
Though such he has praised – nor yet, I think,
For life itself, though spent with him,
Commit such sacrilege, affront
God's nature which is love, intrude
'Twi'xt two affianced souls, and hunt
Like spiders, in the altar's wood.
I cannot bear these nightingales.

If she chose sin, some gentler guise
She might have sinned in, so it seems:
She might have pricked out both my eyes,
And I still seen him in my dreams!
—Or drugged me in my soup or wine,
Nor left me angry afterward:
To die here with his hand in mine,
His breath upon me, were not hard.
(Our Lady hush these nightingales!)

But set a springe for *him*, 'mio ben,'
My only good, my first last love!—
Though Christ knows well what sin is, when
He sees some things done they must move
Himself to wonder. Let her pass.
I think of her by night and day.
Must *I* too join her... out, alas!...
With Giulio, in each word I say?
And evermore the nightingales!

Giulio, my Giulio!— sing they so,
And you be silent? Do I speak,
And you not hear? An arm you throw
Round someone, and I feel so weak?
—Oh, owl-like birds! They sing for spite,
They sing for hate, they sing for doom!
They'll sing through death who sing through night,
They'll sing and stun me in the tomb—
The nightingales, the nightingales!

Notes

heroic mails – chain-mail armour

Feast day of Saint John – 24th June. In medieval Florence this was celebrated by processions, banquets and fireworks.

Carraia bridge spans the river Arno at Florence, in Italy.

“Grazie tanto” – Italian for “Thank you so much”

pyx – vessel in which consecrated bread is kept

springe – a hunter’s trap, snare

‘mio ben’ – “my good”

FRIENDS AND LOVERS

↑

A Man’s Requirements

Love me Sweet, with all thou art,
 Feeling, thinking, seeing,—
Love me in the lightest part,
 Love me in full being.

Love me with thine open youth
 In its frank surrender;
With the vowing of thy mouth,
 With its silence tender.

Love me with thine azure eyes,
 Made for earnest granting!
Taking colour from the skies,
 Can Heaven’s truth be wanting?

Love me with their lids, that fall
 Snow-like at first meeting;
Love me with thine heart, that all
 Neighbours then see beating.

Love me with thine hand stretched out
 Freely – open-minded:
Love me with thy loitering foot,—
 Hearing one behind it.

Love me with thy voice, that turns
 Sudden faint above me;
Love me with thy blush that burns
 When I murmur, *Love me!*

Love me with thy thinking soul—
Break it to love-sighing;
Love me with thy thoughts that roll
On through living – dying.

Love me in thy gorgeous airs,
When the world has crowned thee!
Love me, kneeling at thy prayers,
With the angels round thee.

Love me pure, as musers do,
Up the woodlands shady;
Love me gaily, fast and true,
As a winsome lady.

Through all hopes that keep us brave,
Farther off or nigher,
Love me for the house and grave,—
And for something higher.

Thus, if thou wilt prove me, dear,
Woman's love no fable,
I will love *thee* – half a year—
As a man is able.

↑

My Kate

She was not as pretty as women I know,
And yet all your best made of sunshine and snow
Drop to shade, melt to nought in the long-trodden ways,
While she's still remembered on warm and cold days—
My Kate.

Her air had a meaning, her movements a grace;
You turned from the fairest to gaze on her face:
And when you had once seen her forehead and mouth,
You saw as distinctly her soul and her truth—
My Kate.

Such a blue inner light from her eyelids outbroke,
You looked at her silence and fancied she spoke:
When she did, so peculiar yet soft was the tone,
Though the loudest spoke also, you heard her alone—
My Kate.

I doubt if she said to you much that could act
As a thought or suggestion: she did not attract
In the sense of the brilliant or wise: I infer
'Twas her thinking of others, made you think of her—
My Kate.

She never found fault with you, never implied
Your wrong by her right; and yet men at her side
Grew nobler, girls purer, as through the whole town
The children were gladder that pulled at her gown—
My Kate.

None knelt at her feet confessed lovers in thrall;
They knelt more to God than they used,— that was all:
If you praised her as charming, some asked what you meant,
But the charm of her presence was felt when she went—
My Kate.

The weak and the gentle, the ribald and rude,
She took as she found them, and did them all good;
It always was so with her — see what you have!
She has made the grass greener even here... with her grave—
My Kate.

My dear one!— when thou wast alive with the rest,
I held thee the sweetest and loved thee the best:
And now thou art dead, shall I not take thy part
As thy smiles used to do for thyself, my sweet Heart—
My Kate?

↑

Amy's Cruelty

Fair Amy of the terraced house,
Assist me to discover
Why you who would not hurt a mouse
Can torture so your lover.

You give your coffee to the cat,
You stroke the dog for coming,
And all your face grows kinder at
The little brown bee's humming.

But when *he* haunts your door... the town
Marks coming and marks going...
You seem to have stitched your eyelids down
To that long piece of sewing!

You never give a look, not you,
Nor drop him a 'Good morning,'
To keep his long day warm and blue,
So fretted by your scorning.

She shook her head – 'The mouse and bee
For crumb or flower will linger:
The dog is happy at my knee,
The cat purrs at my finger.

'But *he*... to him, the least thing given
Means great things at a distance;
He wants my world, my sun, my heaven,
Soul, body, whole existence.

'They say love gives as well as takes;
But I'm a simple maiden,—
My mother's first smile when she wakes
I still have smiled and prayed in.

'I only know my mother's love
Which gives all and asks nothing;
And this new loving sets the groove
Too much the way of loathing.

'Unless he gives me all in change,
I forfeit all things by him:
The risk is terrible and strange—
I tremble, doubt,... deny him.

'He's sweetest friend, or hardest foe,
Best angel, or worst devil;
I either hate or... love him so,
I can't be merely civil!

'You trust a woman who puts forth
Her blossoms thick as summer's?
You think she dreams what love is worth,
Who casts it to new-comers?

'Such love's a cowslip-ball to fling,
A moment's pretty pastime;
I give... all me, if anything,
The first time and the last time.

'Dear neighbour of the trellised house,
A man should murmur never,
Though treated worse than dog and mouse,
Till doted on for ever!'



A Year's Spinning

He listened at the porch that day,
To hear the wheel go on, and on;
And then it stopped – ran back away–
While through the door he brought the sun:
But now my spinning is all done.

He sat beside me, with an oath
That love ne'er ended, once begun.
I smiled – believing for us both,
What was the truth for only one.
And now my spinning is all done.

My mother cursed me that I heard
A young man's wooing as I spun:
Thanks, cruel mother, for that word–
For I have, since, a harder known!
And now my spinning is all done.

I thought – O God!– my first-born's cry
Both voices to mine ear would drown.
I listened in mine agony–
It was the *silence* made me groan!
And now my spinning is all done.

Bury me 'twixt my mother's grave
(Who cursed me on her death-bed lone)
And my dead baby's (God it save!)
Who, not to bless me, would not moan.
And now my spinning is all done.

A stone upon my heart and head,
But no name written on the stone!
Sweet neighbours, whisper low instead,
'This sinner was a loving one–
And now her spinning is all done.'

And let the door ajar remain,
In case he should pass by anon;
And leave the wheel out very plain,–
That HE, when passing in the sun,
May see the spinning is all done.

Bertha in the Lane

Put the broidery-frame away,
 For my sewing is all done:
 The last thread is used to-day,
 And I need not join it on.
 Though the clock stands at the noon
 I am weary. I have sewn,
 Sweet, for thee, a wedding-gown.

Sister, help me to the bed,
 And stand near me, Dearest-sweet.
 Do not shrink nor be afraid,
 Blushing with a sudden heat!
 No one standeth in the street?—
 By God's love I go to meet,
 Love I thee with love complete.

Lean thy face down! drop it in
 These two hands, that I may hold
 'Twixt their palms thy cheek and chin,
 Stroking back the curls of gold.
 'Tis a fair, fair face, in sooth—
 Larger eyes and redder mouth
 Than mine were in my first youth.

Thou art younger by seven years—
 Ah!— so bashful at my gaze,
 That the lashes, hung with tears,
 Grow too heavy to upraise?
 I would wound thee by no touch
 Which thy shyness feels as such:
 Dost thou mind me, Dear, so much?

Have I not been nigh a mother
 To thy sweetness — tell me, Dear?
 Have we not loved one another
 Tenderly, from year to year,
 Since our dying mother mild
 Said with accents undefiled,
 'Child, be mother to this child!'

Mother, mother, up in heaven,
 Stand up on the jasper sea,
 And be witness I have given
 All the gifts required of me,—
 Hope that blessed me, bliss that crowned,
 Love, that left me with a wound,
 Life itself, that turneth round!

Mother, mother, thou art kind,
Thou art standing in the room,
In a molten glory shrined
That rays off into the gloom!
But thy smile is bright and bleak
Like cold waves – I cannot speak,
I sob in it, and grow weak.

Ghostly mother, keep aloof
One hour longer from my soul–
For I still am thinking of
Earth's warm-beating joy and dole!
On my finger is a ring
Which I still see glittering,
When the night hides everything.

Little sister, thou art pale!
Ah, I have a wandering brain–
But I lose that fever-bale,
And my thoughts grow calm again.
Lean down closer – closer still!
I have words thine ear to fill,
And would kiss thee at my will.

Dear, I heard thee in the spring,
Thee and Robert – through the trees,–
When we all went gathering
Boughs of May-bloom for the bees.
Do not start so! think instead
How the sunshine overhead
Seemed to trickle through the shade.

What a day it was, that day!
Hills and vales did openly
Seem to heave and throb away
At the sight of the great sky;
And the Silence, as it stood
In the Glory's golden flood,
Audibly did bud – and bud.

Through the winding hedgerows green,
How we wandered, I and you,–
With the bowery tops shut in,
And the gates that showed the view!
How we talked there! thrushes soft
Sang our praises out – or oft
Bleatings took them from the croft:

Till the pleasure grown too strong
Left me muter evermore,
And, the winding road being long,
I walked out of sight, before,
And so, wrapt in musings fond,
Issued (past the wayside pond)
On the meadow-lands beyond.

I sat down beneath the beech
Which leans over to the lane,
And the far sound of your speech
Did not promise any pain;
And I blessed you full and free,
With a smile stooped tenderly
O'er the May-flowers on my knee.

But the sound grew into word
As the speakers drew more near—
Sweet, forgive me that I heard
What you wished me not to hear.
Do not weep so – do not shake—
Oh,— I heard thee, Bertha, make
Good true answers for my sake.

Yes, and HE too! let him stand
In thy thoughts, untouched by blame.
Could he help it, if my hand
He had claimed with hasty claim?
That was wrong perhaps – but then
Such things be – and will, again.
Women cannot judge for men.

Had he seen thee, when he swore
He would love but me alone?
Thou wast absent, sent before
To our kin in Sidmouth town.
When he saw thee who art blest
Past compare, and loveliest,
He but judged thee as the rest.

Could we blame him with grave words,
Thou and I, Dear, if we might?
Thy brown eyes have looks like birds
Flying straightway to the light:
Mine are older.— Hush!— look out—
Up the street! Is none without?
How the poplar swings about!

And that hour – beneath the beech,
When I listened in a dream,
And he said in his deep speech
That he owed me all *esteem*,–
Each word swam in on my brain
With a dim, dilating pain,
Till it burst with that last strain.

I fell flooded with a dark,
In the silence of a swoon.
When I rose, still cold and stark,
There was night,– I saw the moon,
And the stars, each in its place,
And the May-blooms on the grass,
Seemed to wonder what I was.

And I walked as if apart
From myself, when I could stand,
And I pitied my own heart,
As if I held it in my hand–
Somewhat coldly,– with a sense
Of fulfilled benevolence,
And a ‘Poor thing’ negligence.

And I answered coldly too,
When you met me at the door;
And I only heard the dew
Dripping from me to the floor:
And the flowers I bade you see,
Were too withered for the bee,–
As my life, henceforth, for me.

Do not weep so – Dear – heart-warm!
All was best as it befell:
If I say he did me harm,
I speak wild,– I am not well.
All his words were kind and good–
He esteemed me. Only, blood
Runs so faint in womanhood!

Then I always was too grave,–
Like the saddest ballad sung,–
With that look, besides, we have
In our faces, who die young.
I had died, Dear, all the same;
Life’s long, joyous, jostling game
Is too loud for my meek shame.

We are so unlike each other,
Thou and I, that none could guess
We were children of one mother,
But for mutual tenderness.
Thou art rose-lined from the cold,
And meant verily to hold
Life's pure pleasures manifold.

I am pale as crocus grows
Close beside a rose-tree's root;
Whosoe'er would reach the rose,
Treads the crocus underfoot.
I, like May-bloom on thorn-tree,
Thou, like merry summer-bee!
Fit, that I be plucked for thee.

Yet who plucks me?— no one mourns,
I have lived my season out,
And now die of my own thorns
Which I could not live without.
Sweet, be merry! How the light
Comes and goes! If it be night,
Keep the candles in my sight.

Are there footsteps at the door?
Look out quickly. Yea, or nay?
Some one might be waiting for
Some last word that I might say.
Nay? So best!— so angels would
Stand off clear from deathly road,
Not to cross the sight of God.

Colder grow my hands and feet.
When I wear the shroud I made,
Let the folds lie straight and neat,
And the rosemary be spread,
That if any friend should come,
(To see *thee*, Sweet!) all the room
May be lifted out of gloom.

And, dear Bertha, let me keep
On my hand this little ring,
Which at nights, when others sleep,
I can still see glittering:
Let me wear it out of sight,
In the grave,— where it will light
All the dark up, day and night.

On that grave drop not a tear!
Else, though fathom-deep the place,
Through the woollen shroud I wear
I shall feel it on my face.
Rather smile there, blessèd one,
Thinking of me in the sun,
Or forget me – smiling on!

Art thou near me? nearer? so!
Kiss me close upon the eyes,
That the earthly light may go
Sweetly, as it used to rise
When I watched the morning-grey
Strike, betwixt the hills, the way
He was sure to come that day.

So, – no more vain words be said!
The hosannas nearer roll.
Mother, smile now on thy Dead,
I am death-strong in my soul.
Mystic Dove alit on cross,
Guide the poor bird of the snows
Through the snow-wind above loss!

Jesus, Victim, comprehending
Love's divine self-abnegation,
Cleanse my love in its self-spending,
And absorb the poor libation!
Wind my thread of life up higher,
Up, through angels' hands of fire! –
I aspire while I expire.

Notes

dole – grief

libation – offering to God

↑

L.E.L.'s Last Question

'Do you think of me as I think of you?'
—From her poem written during the voyage to the Cape.

'Do you think of me as I think of you,
My friends, my friends?' – She said it from the sea,
The English minstrel in her minstrelsy,
While, under brighter skies than erst she knew,
Her heart grew dark, and groped there, as the blind,
To reach across the waves friends left behind—
'Do you think of me as I think of you?'

It seemed not much to ask – as *I of you?*
We all do ask the same. No eyelids cover
Within the meekest eyes, that question over.
And little in the world the Loving do
But sit (among the rocks?) and listen for
The echo of their own love evermore—
‘Do you think of me as I think of you?’

Love-learnèd she had sung of love and love,—
And like a child that, sleeping with dropt head
Upon the fairy-book he lately read,
Whatever household noises round him move,
Hears in his dream some elfin turbulence,—
Even so, suggestive to her inward sense,
All sounds of life assumed one tune of love.

And when the glory of her dream withdrew,
When knightly gesses and courtly pageantries
Were broken in her visionary eyes
By tears the solemn seas attested true,—
Forgetting that sweet lute beside her hand
She asked not, Do you praise me, O my land?—
But, ‘Think ye of me, friends, as I of you?’

Hers was the hand that played for many a year
Love’s silver phrase for England,— smooth and well.
Would God, her heart’s more inward oracle
In that lone moment might confirm her dear!
For when her questioned friends in agony
Made passionate response, ‘We think of thee,’
Her place was in the dust, too deep to hear.

Could she not wait to catch their answering breath?
Was she content, content, with ocean’s sound,
Which dashed its mocking infinite around
One thirsty for a little love?— beneath
Those stars content, where last her song had gone,—
They mute and cold in radiant life,— as soon
Their singer was to be, in darksome death?

Bring your vain answers – cry, ‘We think of thee!’
How think ye of her? warm in long ago
Delights?— or crowned with budding bays? Not so.
None smile and none are crowned where lieth she,
With all her visions unfulfilled save one,
Her childhood’s – of the palm-trees in the sun—
And lo! their shadow on her sepulchre!

‘Do ye think of me as I think of you?’—
O friends, O kindred, O dear brotherhood
Of all the world! what are we, that we should
For covenants of long affection sue?
Why press so near each other when the touch
Is barred by graves? Not much, and yet too much,
Is this ‘Think of me as I think of you.’

But while on mortal lips I shape anew
A sigh to mortal issues,— verily
Above the unshaken stars that see us die,
A vocal pathos rolls; and He who drew
All life from dust, and for all, tasted death,
By death and life and love, appealing, saith,
Do you think of Me as I think of you?

Notes

L.E.L. – Letitia Elizabeth Landon, (1802-1838) a well-known poet who died of poisoning, either accidental or suicidal, soon after voyaging to South Africa. One of her last poems, *Night at Sea*, contains the lines:

My friends, my absent friends!
Do you think of me, as I think of you?
erst – before, previously
gestes – famous exploits or stories

↑

The Mask

I have a smiling face, she said,
I have a jest for all I meet,
I have a garland for my head
And all its flowers are sweet,—
And so you call me gay, she said.

Grief taught to me this smile, she said,
And Wrong did teach this jesting bold;
These flowers were plucked from garden-bed
While a death-chime was tolled:
And what now will you say? she said.

Behind no prison-grate, she said,
Which slurs the sunshine half a mile,
Live captives so uncomforted
As souls behind a smile.
God’s pity let us pray, she said.

I know my face is bright, she said,—
Such brightness dying suns diffuse;
I bear upon my forehead shed
The sign of what I lose,—
The ending of my day, she said.

If I dared leave this smile, she said,
And take a moan upon my mouth,
And tie a cypress round my head,
And let my tears run smooth,—
It were the happier way, she said.

And since that must not be, she said,
I fain your bitter world would leave.
How calmly, calmly, smile the Dead,
Who do not, therefore, grieve!
The yea of Heaven is yea, she said.

But in your bitter world, she said,
Face-joy's a costly mask to wear.
'Tis bought with pangs long nourishèd,
And rounded to despair.
Grief's earnest makes life's play, she said.

Ye weep for those who weep? she said—
Ah fools! I bid you pass them by.
Go, weep for those whose hearts have bled
What time their eyes were dry.
Whom sadder can I say? she said.

Note

tie a cypress round my head – i.e. a wreath of leaves from a cypress tree, traditionally associated with death



My Heart and I

Enough! we're tired, my heart and I.
We sit beside the headstone thus,
And wish that name were carved for us.
The moss reprints more tenderly
The hard types of the mason's knife,
As heaven's sweet life renews earth's life
With which we're tired, my heart and I.

You see we're tired, my heart and I.
We dealt with books, we trusted men,
And in our own blood drenched the pen,
As if such colours could not fly.
We walked too straight for fortune's end,
We loved too true to keep a friend;
At last we're tired, my heart and I.

How tired we feel, my heart and I!
We seem of no use in the world;
Our fancies hang grey and uncurled
About men's eyes indifferently;
Our voice which thrilled you so, will let
You sleep; our tears are only wet:
What do we here, my heart and I?

So tired, so tired, my heart and I!
It was not thus in that old time
When Ralph sat with me, 'neath the lime
To watch the sunset from the sky.
'Dear love, you're looking tired,' he said;
I, smiling at him, shook my head:
'Tis now we're tired, my heart and I.

So tired, so tired, my heart and I!
Though now none takes me on his arm
To fold me close and kiss me warm
Till each quick breath end in a sigh
Of happy languor. Now, alone,
We lean upon this graveyard stone,
Uncheered, unloved, my heart and I.

Tired out we are, my heart and I.
Suppose the world brought diadems
To tempt us, crusted with loose gems
Of powers and pleasures? Let it try.
We scarcely care to look at even
A pretty child, or God's blue heaven,
We feel so tired, my heart and I.

Yet who complains? My heart and I?
In this abundant earth no doubt
Is little room for things worn out:
Disdain them, break them, throw them by.
And if before the days grew rough
We once were loved, used,— well enough,
I think, we've fared, my heart and I.



Night and the Merry Man (extract)

NIGHT

'Neath my moon what doest thou,
With a somewhat paler brow
Than she giveth to the ocean?
He, without a pulse or motion,
Muttering low before her stands,
Lifting his invoking hands,
Like a seer before a sprite,
To catch her oracles of light:
But thy soul out-trembles now
Many pulses on thy brow!
Where be all thy laughters clear,
Others laughed alone to hear?
Where thy quaint jests, said for fame?
Where thy dances, mixed with game?
Where thy festive companies,
Mooned o'er with ladies' eyes
All more bright for thee, I trow?
'Neath my moon, what doest thou?

THE MERRY MAN

I am digging my warm heart
Till I find its coldest part;
I am digging wide and low,
Further than a spade will go;
Till that, when the pit is deep
And large enough, I there may heap
All my present pain and past
Joy, dead things that look aghast
By the daylight.— Now 'tis done.
Throw them in, by one and one!
I must laugh, at rising sun.

Memories – of fancy's golden
Treasures which my hands have holden,
Till the chillness made them ache;
Of childhood's hopes that used to wake
If birds were in a singing strain,
And for less cause, sleep again;
Of the moss-seat in the wood,
Where I trysted solitude;
Of the hill-top, where the wind
Used to follow me behind,
Then in sudden rush to blind
Both my glad eyes with my hair,

Taken gladly in the snare;
Of the climbing up the rocks,
Of the playing 'neath the oaks,
Which retain beneath them now
Only shadow of the bough;
Of the lying on the grass
While the clouds did overpass,
Only they, so lightly driven,
Seeming betwixt me and Heaven!
Of the little prayers serene,
Murmuring of earth and sin;
Of large-leaved philosophy
Leaning from my childish knee;
Of poetic book sublime,
Soul-kissed for the first dear time,—
Greek or English,— ere I knew
Life was not a poem too.
Throw them in, by one and one!
I must laugh, at rising sun.

The “Merry Man” (better described as “formerly merry”) goes on to say that he wishes to bury not just his childhood hopes but his ambitions and memories of painful love, so that his grave conceals them all without trace.

Thus, whenever saileth by
The Lady World of dainty eye,
Not a grief shall here remain,
Silken shoon to damp or stain:
And while she lisps, ‘I have not seen
Any place more smooth and clean...’
Here she cometh! – Ha, ha! – who
Laughs as loud as I can do?

THE POET’S LIFE

↑

A Reed

I am no trumpet, but a reed:
No flattering breath shall from me lead
A silver sound, a hollow sound:
I will not ring, for priest or king,
One blast that in re-echoing
Would leave a bondsman faster bound.

I am no trumpet, but a reed,—
A broken reed, the wind indeed
Left flat upon a dismal shore;
Yet if a little maid or child
Should sigh within it, earnest-mild,
This reed will answer evermore.

I am no trumpet, but a reed.
Go, tell the fishers, as they spread
Their nets along the river's edge,
I will not tear their nets at all,
Nor pierce their hands, if they should fall:
Then let them leave me in the sedge.

↑

To Flush, my dog

Loving friend, the gift of one
Who her own true faith has run
Through thy lower nature,
Be my benediction said
With my hand upon thy head,
Gentle fellow creature!

Like a lady's ringlets brown,
Flow thy silken ears adown
Either side demurely
Of thy silver-suited breast,
Shining out from all the rest
Of thy body purely.

Darkly brown thy body is,
Till the sunshine striking this
Alchemize its dullness,
When the sleek curls manifold
Flash all over into gold,
With a burnished fullness.

Underneath my stroking hand,
Startled eyes of hazel bland
Kindling, growing larger,
Up thou leapest with a spring,
Full of prank and curveting,
Leaping like a charger.

Leap! thy broad tail waves a light,
Leap! thy slender feet are bright,
 Canopied in fringes;
Leap – those tasselled ears of thine
Flicker strangely, fair and fine,
 Down their golden inches.

Yet, my pretty, sportive friend,
Little is 't to such an end
 That I praise thy rareness!
Other dogs may be thy peers
Haply in these drooping ears
 And this glossy fairness.

But of *thee* it shall be said,
This dog watched beside a bed
 Day and night unwearied, –
Watched within a curtained room,
Where no sunbeam brake the gloom
 Round the sick and dreary.

Roses, gathered for a vase,
In that chamber died apace,
 Beam and breeze resigning;
This dog only, waited on,
Knowing that when light is gone
 Love remains for shining.

Other dogs in thymy dew
Tracked the hares and followed through
 Sunny moor or meadow;
This dog only, crept and crept
Next a languid cheek that slept,
 Sharing in the shadow.

Other dogs of loyal cheer
Bounded at the whistle clear,
 Up the woodside hieing;
This dog only, watched in reach
Of a faintly uttered speech,
 Or a louder sighing.

And if one or two quick tears
Dropped upon his glossy ears
 Or a sigh came double,
Up he sprang in eager haste,
Fawning, fondling, breathing fast
 In a tender trouble.

And this dog was satisfied
If a pale thin hand would glide
 Down his dewlaps sloping,—
Which he pushed his nose within,
After,— platforming his chin
 On the palm left open.

This dog, if a friendly voice
Call him now to blither choice
 Than such chamber-keeping,
'Come out!' praying from the door,—
Presseth backward as before,
 Up against me leaping.

Therefore to this dog will I,
Tenderly not scornfully,
 Render praise and favour:
With my hand upon his head,
Is my benediction said
 Therefore, and for ever.

And because he loves me so,
Better than his kind will do
 Often man or woman,
Give I back more love again
Than dogs often take of men,
 Leaning from my Human.

Blessings on thee, dog of mine,
Pretty collars make thee fine,
 Sugared milk make fat thee!
Pleasures wag on in thy tail,
Hands of gentle motion fail
 Nevermore, to pat thee!

Downy pillow take thy head,
Silken coverlid bestead,
 Sunshine help thy sleeping!
No fly's buzzing wake thee up,
No man break thy purple cup,
 Set for drinking deep in.

Whiskered cats aointed flee,
Sturdy stoppers keep from thee
 Cologne distillations;
Nuts lie in thy path for stones,
And thy feast-day macaroons
 Turn to daily rations!

Mock I thee, in wishing weal?—
Tears are in my eyes to feel
 Thou art made so straitly,
Blessing needs must straiten too,—
Little canst thou joy or do,
 Thou who lovest *greatly*.

Yet be blessèd to the height
Of all good and all delight
 Pervious to thy nature;
Only *loved* beyond that line,
With a love that answers thine,
 Loving fellow creature!

Notes

Flush, the poet's cocker spaniel, lived with her in London and Italy. His life was told in Virginia's Woolf's playful and affectionate novel, *Flush, a Biography* (1933.)

alchemize – transform into gold

arointed – gone, driven away

wishing weal – wishing prosperity and good fortune

straitly – strait means narrow or confined

pervious – accessible

↑

Flush or Faunus

You see this dog. It was but yesterday
I mused forgetful of his presence here
Till thought on thought drew downward tear on tear,
When from the pillow, where wet-cheeked I lay,
A head as hairy as Faunus thrust its way
Right sudden against my face,— two golden-clear
Great eyes astonished mine,— a drooping ear
Did flap me on either cheek to dry the spray!
I started first, as some Arcadian,
Amazed by goatly god in twilight grove;
But as the bearded vision closelier ran
My tears off, I knew Flush, and rose above
Surprise and sadness,— thanking the true PAN,
Who, by low creatures, leads to heights of love.

Notes

Faunus – Roman god of nature and the wild, equivalent to the Greek god Pan, and like him horned and goat-footed.

Arcadian – of Arcady, a rural area in Greece, hence rustic, pastoral

The Sea-Mew

How joyously the young sea-mew
Lay dreaming on the waters blue,
Whereon our little bark had thrown
A little shade, the only one,—
But shadows ever man pursue.

Familiar with the waves and free
As if their own white foam were he,
His heart upon the heart of ocean
Lay learning all its mystic motion,
And throbbing to the throbbing sea.

And such a brightness in his eye,
As if the ocean and the sky
Within him had lit up and nurst
A soul God gave him not at first,
To comprehend their majesty.

We were not cruel, yet did sunder
His white wing from the blue waves under,
And bound it, while his fearless eyes
Shone up to ours in calm surprise,
As deeming us some ocean wonder!

We bore our ocean bird unto
A grassy place, where he might view
The flowers that curtsy to the bees,
The waving of the tall green trees,
The falling of the silver dew.

But flowers of earth were pale to him
Who had seen the rainbow fishes swim;
And when earth's dew around him lay
He thought of ocean's wingèd spray,
And his eye waxèd sad and dim.

The green trees round him only made
A prison with their darksome shade;
And drooped his wing, and mournèd he
For his own boundless glittering sea—
Albeit he knew not they could fade.

Then One her gladsome face did bring,
Her gentle voice's murmuring,
In ocean's stead his heart to move
And teach him what was human love—
He thought it a strange, mournful thing.

He lay down in his grief to die
(First looking to the sea-like sky
That hath no waves) because, alas!
Our human touch did on him pass,
And, with our touch, our agony.

Notes

sea mew – a seagull, especially a Common Gull
waxed – grew

↑

A Sea-side Walk

We walked beside the sea
After a day which perished silently
Of its own glory – like the princess weird
Who, combating the Genius, scorched and seared,
Uttered with burning breath, “Ho! victory!”
And sank adown an heap of ashes pale.
So runs the Arab tale.

The sky above us showed
A universal and unmoving cloud,
On which the cliffs permitted us to see
Only the outline of their majesty,
As master-minds when gazed at by the crowd!
And, shining with a gloom, the water grey
Swang in its moon-taught way.

Nor moon nor stars were out.
They did not dare to tread so soon about,
Though trembling, in the footsteps of the sun;
The light was neither night’s nor day’s, but one
Which, life-like, had a beauty in its doubt,
And Silence’s impassioned breathings round
Seemed wandering into sound.

O solemn-beating heart
Of nature! I have knowledge that thou art
Bound unto man’s by cords he cannot sever—
And, what time they are slackened by him ever,
So to attest his own supernal part,
Still runneth thy vibration fast and strong
The slackened cord along.

For though we never spoke
Of the grey water and the shaded rock,
Dark wave and stone unconsciously were fused
Into the plaintive speaking that we used
Of absent friends and memories unforsook;
And, had we seen each other's face, we had
 Seen haply, each was sad.

Notes

Arab Tale – this refers to a story in *The Arabian Nights*.

swang – swung

supernal – divine, heavenly

Human and Divine

↑

A Rhapsody of Life's Progress (extract)

We are born into life – it is sweet, it is strange.
We lie still on the knee of a mild Mystery,
 Which smiles with a change!
But we doubt not of changes, we know not of spaces,
The Heavens seem as near as our own mother's face is,
And we think we could touch all the stars that we see;
And the milk of our mother is white on our mouth;
And, with small childish hands, we are turning around
The apple of Life which another has found;
It is warm with our touch, not with sun of the south,
And we count, as we turn it, the red side for four.
 O Life, O Beyond,
 Thou art sweet, thou art strange evermore!

Then all things look strange in the pure golden aether;
We walk through the gardens with hands linked together,
 And the lilies look large as the trees;
And, as loud as the birds, sing the bloom-loving bees,
And the birds sing like angels, so mystical-fine,
And the cedars are brushing the archangels' feet,
And time is eternity, love is divine,
 And the world is complete.
Now, God bless the child, – father, mother, respond!
 O Life, O Beyond,
 Thou art strange, thou art sweet.

Then we leap on the earth with the armour of youth,
 And the earth rings again,
And we breathe out 'O Beauty,'— we cry out 'O truth,'
And the bloom of our lips drops with wine,
And our blood runs amazed 'neath the calm hyaline,
The earth cleaves to the foot, the sun burns to the brain,—
What is this exultation? and what this despair?—
The strong pleasure is smiting the nerves into pain,
And we drop from the Fair as we climb to the Fair,
 And we lie in a trance at its feet;
And the breath of an angel cold-piercing the air
 Breathes fresh on our faces in swoon,
And we think him so near he is this side the sun,
And we wake to a whisper self-murmured and fond,
 O Life, O Beyond,
 Thou art strange, thou art sweet!

And the winds and the waters in pastoral measures
Go winding around us, with roll upon roll,
Till the soul lies within in a circle of pleasures
 Which hideth the soul:
And we run with the stag, and we leap with the horse,
And we swim with the fish through the broad watercourse,
And we strike with the falcon, and hunt with the hound,
And the joy which is in us flies out by a wound.
And we shout so aloud, 'We exult, we rejoice,'
That we lose the low moan of our brothers around:
And we shout so adeep down creation's profound,
 We are deaf to God's voice.
And we bind the rose-garland on forehead and ears
 Yet we are not ashamed,
And the dew of the roses that runneth unblamed
 Down our cheeks, is not taken for tears.

Note

aether – ether, upper regions of the atmosphere

hyaline – clear, glass-like sky



Human Life's Mystery

We sow the glebe, we reap the corn,
We build the house where we may rest,
And then, at moments, suddenly,
We look up to the great wide sky,
Enquiring wherefore we were born...
For earnest, or for jest?

The senses folding thick and dark
About the stifled soul within,
We guess diviner things beyond,
And yearn to them with yearning fond;
We strike out blindly to a mark
Believed in, but not seen.

We vibrate to the pant and thrill
Wherewith Eternity has curled
In serpent-twine about God's seat
While, freshening upward to His feet,
In gradual growth His full-leaved will
Expands from world to world.

And, in the tumult and excess
Of act and passion under sun,
We sometimes hear – oh, soft and far,
As silver star did touch with star,
The kiss of Peace and Righteousness
Through all things that are done.

God keeps His holy mysteries
Just on the outside of man's dream.
In diapason slow, we think
To hear their pinions rise and sink,
While they float pure beneath His eyes,
Like swans adown a stream.

Abstractions, are they, from the forms
Of His great beauty?– exaltations
From His great glory?– strong previsions
Of what we shall be?– intuitions
Of what we are – in calms and storms,
Beyond our peace and passions?

Things nameless! Which, in passing so,
Do stroke us with a subtle grace.
We say, 'Who passes?'— they are dumb.
We cannot see them go or come:
Their touches fall soft – cold – as snow
Upon a blind man's face.

Yet, touching so, they draw above
Our common thoughts to Heaven's unknown;
Our daily joy and pain, advance
To a divine significance,—
Our human love – O mortal love,
That light is not its own!

And, sometimes, horror chills our blood
To be so near such mystic Things,
And we wrap round us, for defence,
Our purple manners, moods of sense—
As angels, from the face of God,
Stand hidden in their wings.

And, sometimes, through life's heavy swoon
We grope for them!— with strangled breath
We stretch our hands abroad and try
To reach them in our agony,—
And widen, so, the broad life-wound
Which soon is large enough for death.

Notes

glebe – earth, field

yearning fond – fond can mean foolish, simple as well as affectionate

diapason – a term used in music; a full, harmonious sound

pinions – wings

purple manners – lordly manners

swoon – swoon



Loved Once (extract)

I classed, appraising once,
Earth's lamentable sounds,— the welladay,
The jarring yea and nay,
The fall of kisses on unanswering clay,
The sobbed farewell, the welcome mournfuller,—
But all did leaven the air
With a less bitter leaven of sure despair
Than these words – 'I loved ONCE.'

And who saith 'I loved ONCE?'
Not angels,— whose clear eyes, love, love, foresee,
Love through eternity,
And by To Love, do apprehend To Be.
Not God, called LOVE, his noble crown-name, casting
A light too broad for blasting!
The great God changing not from everlasting,
Saith never 'I loved ONCE.'

Oh, never is 'Loved ONCE'
Thy word, thou Victim-Christ, misprizèd friend
The cross and curse may rend,
But having loved Thou lovest to the end.
This is man's saying — man's. Too weak to move
One spherèd star above,
Man desecrates the eternal God-word Love
With his No More, and Once.

Note

Misprizèd — depised, unappreciated

↑

Only a Curl

Friends of faces unknown and a land
Unvisited over the sea,
Who tell me how lonely you stand
With a single gold curl in the hand
Held up to be looked at by me,—

While you ask me to ponder and say
What a father and mother can do,
With the bright fellow-locks put away
Out of reach, beyond kiss, in the clay
Where the violets press nearer than you.

Shall I speak like a poet, or run
Into weak woman's tears for relief?
Oh, children!— I never lost one,—
Yet my arm's round my own little son,
And Love knows the secret of Grief.

And I feel what it must be and is,
When God draws a new angel so
Through the house of a man up to His,
With a murmur of music, you miss,
And a rapture of light, you forgo.

How you think, staring on at the door,
Where the face of your angel flashed in,
That its brightness, familiar before,
Burns off from you ever the more
For the dark of your sorrow and sin.

‘God lent him and takes him,’ you sigh;
—Nay, there let me break with your pain:
God’s generous in giving, say I,—
And the thing which He gives, I deny
That He ever can take back again.

He gives what He gives. I appeal
To all who bear babes – in the hour
When the veil of the body we feel
Rent round us,— while torments reveal
The motherhood’s advent in power,

And the babe cries!— has each of us known
By apocalypse (God being there
Full in nature) the child is our own,
Life of life, love of love, moan of moan,
Through all changes, all times, everywhere.

He’s ours and for ever. Believe,
O father!— O mother, look back
To the first love’s assurance. To give
Means with God not to tempt or deceive
With a cup thrust in Benjamin’s sack.

He gives what He gives. Be content!
He resumes nothing given,— be sure!
God lend ? Where the usurers lent
In His temple, indignant He went
And scourged away all those impure.

He lends not; but gives to the end,
As He loves to the end. If it seem
That He draws back a gift, comprehend
’Tis to add to it rather,— amend,
And finish it up to your dream,—

Or keep,— as a mother will toys
Too costly, though given by herself,
Till the room shall be stiller from noise,
And the children more fit for such joys,
Kept over their heads on the shelf.

So look up, friends! you, who indeed
Have possessed in your house a sweet piece
Of the Heaven which men strive for, must need
Be more earnest than others are,— speed
Where they loiter, persist where they cease.

You know how one angel smiles there.
Then weep not. 'Tis easy for you
To be drawn by a single gold hair
Of that curl, from earth's storm and despair,
To the safe place above us. Adieu.

Note

With a cup thrust in Benjamin's sack – in the Bible, Benjamin was the youngest of Joseph's brothers. Joseph hid a cup in Benjamin's sack so that he could accuse him of stealing and thus test his brothers. (Genesis ch.44)

[↑](#)

Little Mattie

Dead! Thirteen a month ago!
Short and narrow her life's walk;
Lover's love she could not know
Even by a dream or talk:
Too young to be glad of youth,
Missing honour, labour, rest,
And the warmth of a babe's mouth
At the blossom of her breast.
Must you pity her for this
And for all the loss it is,
You, her mother, with wet face,
Having had all in your case?

Just so young but yesternight,
Now she is as old as death.
Meek, obedient in your sight,
Gentle to a beck or breath
Only on last Monday! Yours,
Answering you like silver bells
Lightly touched! An hour matures:
You can teach her nothing else.
She has seen the mystery hid
Under Egypt's pyramid:
By those eyelids pale and close
Now she knows what Rhameses knows.

Cross her quiet hands, and smooth
Down her patient locks of silk,
Cold and passive as in truth
You your fingers in spilt milk
Drew along a marble floor;
But her lips you cannot wring
Into saying a word more,
‘Yes,’ or ‘No,’ or such a thing:
Though you call and beg and wreak
Half your soul out in a shriek,
She will lie there in default
And most innocent revolt.

Ay, and if she spoke, may be
She would answer like the Son,
‘What is now ’twixt thee and me?’
Dreadful answer! better none.
Yours on Monday, God’s to-day!
Yours, your child, your blood, your heart,
Called... you called her, did you say,
‘Little Mattie’ for your part?
Now already it sounds strange,
And you wonder, in this change,
What He calls His angel-creature,
Higher up than you can reach her.

’T was a green and easy world
As she took it; room to play
(Though one’s hair might get uncurled
At the far end of the day).
What she suffered she shook off
In the sunshine; what she sinned
She could pray on high enough
To keep safe above the wind.
If reproved by God or you,
’Twas to better her, she knew;
And if crossed, she gathered still
’Twas to cross out something ill.

You, you had the right, you thought,
To survey her with sweet scorn,
Poor gay child, who had not caught
Yet the octave-stretch forlorn
Of your larger wisdom! Nay,
Now your places are changed so,
In that same superior way
She regards you dull and low
As you did herself exempt
From life’s sorrows. Grand contempt

Of the spirits risen awhile,
Who look back with such a smile!

There's the sting of't. That, I think,
Hurts the most a thousandfold!
To feel sudden, at a wink,
Some dear child we used to scold,
Praise, love both ways, kiss and tease,
Teach and tumble as our own,
All its curls about our knees,
Rise up suddenly full-grown.
Who could wonder such a sight
Made a woman mad outright?
Show me Michael with the sword
Rather than such angels, Lord!

Notes

Rhamses – Rameses the Great, Egyptian pharaoh who ruled around 1279 -1213 BCE.
Michael with the sword – the archangel Michael, leader of God's armies in the Book of Revelation.

↑

Comfort

Speak low to me, my Saviour, low and sweet
From out the hallelujahs, sweet and low,
Lest I should fear and fall, and miss Thee so
Who art not missed by any that entreat.
Speak to me as to Mary at Thy feet!
And if no precious gums my hands bestow,
Let my tears drop like amber, while I go
In reach of Thy divinest voice complete
In humanest affection – thus, in sooth,
To lose the sense of losing. As a child,
Whose song-bird seeks the wood for evermore,
Is sung to in its stead by mother's mouth,
Till, sinking on her breast, love-reconciled,
He sleeps the faster that he wept before.

Notes

precious gums – ie, as used for anointing
sleeps the faster – he sleeps more soundly



The Soul's Expression

With stammering lips and insufficient sound
I strive and struggle to deliver right
That music of my nature, day and night
With dream and thought and feeling interwound,
And only answering all the senses round
With octaves of a mystic depth and height
Which step out grandly to the infinite
From the dark edges of the sensual ground.
This song of soul I struggle to outbear
Through portals of the sense, sublime and whole,
And utter all myself into the air:
But if I did it,— as the thunder-roll
Breaks its own cloud, my flesh would perish there,
Before that dread apocalypse of soul.



Finite and Infinite

The wind sounds only in opposing straits,
The sea, beside the shore; man's spirit rends
Its quiet only up against the ends
Of wants and oppositions, loves and hates,
Where, worked and worn by passionate debates,
And losing by the loss it apprehends,
The flesh rocks round, and every breath it sends
Is ravelled to a sigh. All tortured states
Suppose a straitened place. Jehovah Lord,
Make room for rest, around me! out of sight
Now float me, of the vexing land abhorred,
Till in deep calms of space my soul may right
Her nature,— shoot large sail on lengthened cord,
And rush exultant on the Infinite.

Notes

ravelled – tangled, knotted

straitened – confined, narrowed

shoot large sail on lengthened cord – sailing terms; large can mean “with the wind”



Patience Taught By Nature

'O dreary life,' we cry, 'O dreary life!
And still the generations of the birds
Sing through our sighing, and the flocks and herds
Serenely live while we are keeping strife
With Heaven's true purpose in us, as a knife
Against which we may struggle! Ocean girds
Unslackened the dry land, savannah-swards
Unweary sweep,— hills watch unworn; and rife
Meek leaves drop yearly from the forest-trees
To show above the unwasted stars that pass
In their old glory. O thou God of old,
Grant me some smaller grace than comes to these!—
But so much patience as a blade of grass
Grows by, contented through the heat and cold.



Perplexed Music

Experience, like a pale musician, holds
A dulcimer of patience in his hand,
Whence harmonies we cannot understand,
Of God's will in His worlds, the strain unfolds
In sad, perplexed minors. Deathly colds
Fall on us while we hear, and countermand
Our sanguine heart back from the fancyland
With nightingales in visionary wolds.
We murmur,— 'Where is any certain tune
Or measured music, in such notes as these?'—
But angels, leaning from the golden seat,
Are not so minded; their fine ear hath won
The issue of completed cadences,
And, smiling down the stars, they whisper — SWEET.

Notes

dulcimer — a stringed musical instrument; its name comes from the Latin for "sweet song"

countermand — recall

wolds — moorland, uncultivated land

cadences — in music, successions of chords.



The Sleep

'He giveth his beloved sleep': Ps. cxxvii. 2.

Of all the thoughts of God that are
Borne inward unto souls afar,
Along the Psalmist's music deep,
Now tell me if that any is,
For gift or grace, surpassing this—
'He giveth His beloved, sleep'?

What would we give to our beloved?
The hero's heart to be unmoved,
The poet's star-tuned harp, to sweep,
The patriot's voice, to teach and rouse,
The monarch's crown, to light the brows?—
He giveth His beloved, sleep.

What do we give to our beloved?
A little faith all undisproved,
A little dust to overweep,
And bitter memories to make
The whole earth blasted for our sake.
He giveth His beloved, sleep.

'Sleep soft, beloved!' we sometimes say,
But have no tune to charm away
Sad dreams that through the eye-lids creep.
But never doleful dream again
Shall break the happy slumber when
He giveth His beloved, sleep.

O earth, so full of dreary noises!
O men, with wailing in your voices!
O delvèd gold, the wailers heap!
O strife, O curse, that o'er it fall!
God strikes a silence through you all,
He giveth His beloved, sleep.

His dews drop mutely on the hill;
His cloud above it saileth still,
Though on its slope men sow and reap.
More softly than the dew is shed,
Or cloud is floated overhead,
He giveth His beloved, sleep.

Aye, men may wonder while they scan
A living, thinking, feeling man
Confirmed in such a rest to keep;
But angels say, and through the word
I think their happy smile is heard—
'He giveth His belovèd, sleep.'

For me, my heart that erst did go
Most like a tired child at a show,
That sees through tears the mummers leap,
Would now its wearied vision close,
Would child-like on His love repose,
Who giveth His belovèd, sleep.

And, friends, dear friends,— when it shall be
That this low breath is gone from me,
And round my bier ye come to weep,
Let One, most loving of you all,
Say, 'Not a tear must o'er her fall;
He giveth His beloved, sleep.'

Notes

Psalmist – author of the Biblical book of Psalms, from which the quotation after the title comes.

erst – previously

mummers – actors in a wordless show

Social Issues



The Cry of the Children

Do ye hear the children weeping, O my brothers,
Ere the sorrow comes with years?
They are leaning their young heads against their mothers,
And *that* cannot stop their tears.
The young lambs are bleating in the meadows,
The young birds are chirping in the nest,
The young fawns are playing with the shadows,
The young flowers are blowing toward the west—
But the young, young children, O my brothers,
They are weeping bitterly!
They are weeping in the playtime of the others,
In the country of the free.

Do you question the young children in the sorrow,
 Why their tears are falling so?
The old man may weep for his to-morrow
 Which is lost in Long Ago;
The old tree is leafless in the forest,
 The old year is ending in the frost,
The old wound, if stricken, is the sorest,
 The old hope is hardest to be lost:
But the young, young children, O my brothers,
 Do you ask them why they stand
Weeping sore before the bosoms of their mothers,
 In our happy Fatherland?

They look up with their pale and sunken faces,
 And their looks are sad to see,
For the man's hoary anguish draws and presses
 Down the cheeks of infancy.
'Your old earth,' they say, 'is very dreary;
 Our young feet,' they say, 'are very weak!
Few paces have we taken, yet are weary—
 Our grave-rest is very far to seek.
Ask the aged why they weep, and not the children;
 For the outside earth is cold;
And we young ones stand without, in our bewildering,
 And the graves are for the old.

'True,' say the children, 'it may happen
 That we die before our time.
Little Alice died last year – her grave is shapen
 Like a snowball, in the rime.
We looked into the pit prepared to take her:
 Was no room for any work in the close clay!
From the sleep wherein she lieth none will wake her,
 Crying, "Get up, little Alice! it is day."
If you listen by that grave, in sun and shower,
 With your ear down, little Alice never cries;
Could we see her face, be sure we should not know her,
 For the smile has time for growing in her eyes:
And merry go her moments, lulled and stilled in
 The shroud by the kirk-chime!
It is good when it happens,' say the children,
 'That we die before our time.'

Alas, alas, the children! they are seeking
 Death in life, as best to have.
They are binding up their hearts away from breaking,
 With a cerement from the grave.
Go out, children, from the mine and from the city,
 Sing out, children, as the little thrushes do.
Pluck you handfuls of the meadow-cowslips pretty.

Laugh aloud, to feel your fingers let them through!
But they answer, 'Are your cowslips of the meadows
Like our weeds anear the mine?
Leave us quiet in the dark of the coal-shadows,
From your pleasure fair and fine!

'For oh,' say the children, 'we are weary,
And we cannot run or leap;
If we cared for any meadows, it were merely
To drop down in them and sleep.
Our knees tremble sorely in the stooping,
We fall on our faces, trying to go;
And, underneath our heavy eyelids drooping,
The reddest flower would look as pale as snow;
For, all day, we drag our burden tiring
Through the coal-dark, underground—
Or, all day, we drive the wheels of iron
In the factories, round and round.

'For, all day, the wheels are droning, turning,—
Their wind comes in our faces,—
Till our hearts turn,— our heads, with pulses burning,
And the walls turn in their places:
Turns the sky in the high window blank and reeling,
Turns the long light that drops adown the wall,
Turn the black flies that crawl along the ceiling,
All are turning, all the day, and we with all.
And all day, the iron wheels are droning,
And sometimes we could pray,
"O ye wheels" (breaking out in a mad moaning)
"Stop! be silent for to-day!"

Ay! be silent! Let them hear each other breathing
For a moment, mouth to mouth!
Let them touch each other's hands, in a fresh wreathing
Of their tender human youth!
Let them feel that this cold metallic motion
Is not all the life God fashions or reveals:
Let them prove their living souls against the notion
That they live in you, or under you, O wheels!—
Still, all day, the iron wheels go onward,
Grinding life down from its mark;
And the children's souls, which God is calling sunward,
Spin on blindly in the dark.

Now tell the poor young children, O my brothers,
To look up to Him and pray;
So the blessèd One who blesseth all the others,
Will bless them another day.

They answer, 'Who is God that He should hear us,
While the rushing of the iron wheels is stirred?
When we sob aloud, the human creatures near us
Pass by, hearing not, or answer not a word.
And *we* hear not (for the wheels in their resounding)
Strangers speaking at the door.
Is it likely God, with angels singing round Him,
Hears our weeping any more?

'Two words, indeed, of praying we remember,
And at midnight's hour of harm,
"Our Father," looking upward in the chamber,
We say softly for a charm.
We know no other words except "Our Father,"
And we think that, in some pause of angels' song,
God may pluck them with the silence sweet to gather,
And hold both within His right hand which is strong.
"Our Father!" If He heard us, He would surely
(For they call Him good and mild)
Answer, smiling down the steep world very purely,
"Come rest with me. my child."'

'But, no!' say the children, weeping faster,
'He is speechless as a stone;
And they tell us, of His image is the master
Who commands us to work on.
Go to!' say children,— 'up in Heaven,
Dark, wheel-like, turning clouds are all we find.
Do not mock us; grief has made us unbelieving—
We look up for God, but tears have made us blind.'
Do you hear the children weeping and disproving,
O my brothers, what ye preach?
For God's possible is taught by His world's loving,
And the children doubt of each.

And well may the children weep before you!
They are weary ere they run;
They have never seen the sunshine, nor the glory
Which is brighter than the sun.
They know the grief of man, without its wisdom;
They sink in man's despair, without its calm;
Are slaves, without the liberty in Christdom,
Are martyrs, by the pang without the palm,—
Are worn, as if with age, yet unretrievingly
The harvest of its memories cannot reap,—
Are orphans of the earthly love and heavenly.
Let them weep! let them weep!

They look up, with their pale and sunken faces,
 And their look is dread to see,
 For they mind you of the angels in high places
 With eyes turned on Deity!—
 ‘How long,’ they say, ‘how long, O cruel nation,
 Will you stand, to move the world, on a child’s heart,—
 Stifle down with a mailed heel its palpitation,
 And tread onward to your throne amid the mart?
 Our blood splashes upward, O gold-heaper,
 And your purple shows your path!
 But the child’s sob in the silence curses deeper
 Than the strong man in his wrath.’

Notes

In 1842–43, a parliamentary commission investigated the conditions of child workers in mines and factories. The commission’s report was written by R. H. Horne, who was a friend of Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

The Factory Act of 1833 had banned the employment of children under 9 in mines and factories. However, children aged 9 to 13 could still work for 9 hours a day, and older children for 12 hours a day, often in appalling conditions.

cerement – grave-clothes



A Song for the Ragged School of London (extracts)

Ragged children, hungry-eyed,
 Huddled up out of the coldness
 On your doorsteps, side by side,
 Till your footman damns their boldness.

In the alleys, in the squares,
 Begging, lying little rebels;
 In the noisy thoroughfares,
 Struggling on with piteous trebles.

Patient children – think what pain
 Makes a young child patient – ponder!
 Wronged too commonly to strain
 After right, or wish, or wonder.

Wicked children, with peaked chins,
 And old foreheads! there are many
 With no pleasures except sins,
 Gambling with a stolen penny.

Sickly children, that whine low
 To themselves and not their mothers,
 From mere habit,— never so
 Hoping help or care from others.

Healthy children, with those blue
English eyes, fresh from their Maker,
Fierce and ravenous, staring through
At the brown loaves of the baker.

* * *

O my sisters, not so much
Are we asked for – not a blossom
From our children's nosegay, such
As we gave it from our bosom,–

Not the milk left in their cup,
Not the lamp while they are sleeping,
Not the little cloak hung up
While the coat's in daily keeping,–

But a place in RAGGED SCHOOLS,
Where the outcasts may to-morrow
Learn by gentle words and rules
Just the uses of their sorrow.

O my sisters! children small,
Blue-eyed, wailing through the city–
Our own babes cry in them all:
Let us take them into pity.

Note

Ragged Schools were charitable schools for the poor who would otherwise receive no education, even in Sunday Schools. Ragged Schools opened in Britain's cities in the 1840's onwards. They were run by volunteer teachers, and while not always effective, laid the ground for future universal education.

[↑](#)

Christmas Gifts

The Pope on Christmas Day
Sits in Saint Peter's chair;
But the peoples murmur and say,
'Our souls are sick and forlorn,
And who will show us where
Is the stable where Christ was born?'

The star is lost in the dark;
The manger is lost in the straw;
The Christ cries faintly... hark!
Through bands that swaddle and strangle–
But the Pope in the chair of awe
Looks down the great quadrangle.

The Magi kneel at his foot,
Kings of the East and West,
But, instead of the angels, (mute
Is the 'Peace on earth' of their song),
The peoples, perplexed and opprest,
Are sighing, 'How long, how long?'

And, instead of the kine, bewilder in
Shadow of aisle and dome,
The bear who tore up the children,
The fox who burnt up the corn,
And the wolf who suckled at Rome
Brothers to slay and to scorn.

Cardinals left and right of him,
Worshippers round and beneath,
The silver trumpets at sight of him
Thrill with a musical blast:
But the people say through their teeth,
'Trumpets? we wait for the Last!'

He sits in the place of the Lord,
And asks for the gifts of the time;
Gold, for the haft of a sword
To win back Romagna averse,
Incense, to sweeten a crime,
And myrrh, to embitter a curse.

Then a king of the West said, 'Good!—
I bring thee the gifts of the time;
Red, for the patriot's blood,
Green, for the martyr's crown,
White, for the dew and the rime,
When the morning of God comes down.'

— O mystic tricolour bright!
The Pope's heart quailed like a man's;
The cardinals froze at the sight,
Bowing their tonsures hoary:
And the eyes of the peacock-fans
Winked at the alien glory.

But the peoples exclaimed in hope,
'Now blessed be he who has brought
These gifts of the time to the Pope,
When our souls were sick and forlorn.
— And *here* is the star we sought,
To show us where Christ was born!'

Note

This poem was published in 1860, a year after the Second Italian War of Independence. Pope Pius IX was opposed to the Nationalists.
mystic tricolour – red, green and white are the colours of the Italian national flag.



The Cry of the Human (extract)

‘There is no God,’ the foolish saith,
 But none, ‘There is no sorrow,’
And nature oft the cry of faith
 In bitter need will borrow:
Eyes, which the preacher could not school,
 By wayside graves are raised,
And lips say, ‘God be pitiful,’
 Who ne’er said, ‘God be praised.’
 Be pitiful, O God!

The tempest stretches from the steep
 The shadow of its coming,
The beasts grow tame and near us creep,
 As help were in the human;
Yet, while the cloud-wheels roll and grind,
 We spirits tremble under—
The hills have echoes, but we find
 No answer for the thunder.
 Be pitiful, O God!

The battle hurtles on the plains,
 Earth feels new scythes upon her;
We reap our brothers for the wains,
 And call the harvest – honour:
Draw face to face, front line to line,
 Our image all inherit,—
Then kill, curse on, by that same sign,
 Clay – clay,— and spirit, spirit.
 Be pitiful, O God!

The plague runs festering through the town,
 And never a bell is tolling,
And corpses, jostled ’neath the moon,
 Nod to the dead-cart’s rolling.
The young child calleth for the cup,
 The strong man brings it weeping,
The mother from her babe looks up,
 And shrieks away its sleeping.
 Be pitiful, O God!

The plague of gold strikes far and near,
And deep and strong it enters;
This purple chimar which we wear,
Makes madder than the centaur's:
Our thoughts grow blank, our words grow strange,
We cheer the pale gold-diggers –
Each soul is worth so much on 'Change,
And marked, like sheep, with figures.
Be pitiful, O God!

The curse of gold upon the land
The lack of bread enforces;
The rail-cars snort from strand to strand,
Like more of Death's white horses!
The rich preach 'rights' and future days,
And hear no angel scoffing, –
The poor die mute, with starving gaze
On corn-ships in the offing.
Be pitiful, O God!

We meet together at the feast,
To private mirth betake us;
We stare down in the winecup, lest
Some vacant chair should shake us:
We name delight, and pledge it round–
'It shall be ours to-morrow!'
God's seraphs, do your voices sound
As sad, in naming sorrow?
Be pitiful, O God!

We sit together, with the skies,
The steadfast skies, above us,
We look into each other's eyes,
'And how long will you love us?'–
The eyes grow dim with prophecy,
The voices, low and breathless,–
'Till death us part!'– O words, to be
Our best, for love the deathless!
Be pitiful, O God!

Notes

wains – hay-carts

chimar – chimere, bishop's robe

centaur – mythical creature, part man, part horse, which was driven mad by wine.

'*Change* – the Stock Exchange

Death's white horses – Death, as one of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, was depicted riding a white horse.



Hiram Powers' "Greek Slave"

They say Ideal Beauty cannot enter
The house of anguish. On the threshold stands
An alien Image with enshackled hands,
Called the Greek Slave! as if the artist meant her
(That passionless perfection which he lent her,
Shadowed not darkened where the sill expands)
To, so, confront man's crimes in different lands
With man's ideal sense. Pierce to the centre,
Art's fiery finger!— and break up ere long
The serfdom of this world! appeal, fair stone,
From God's pure heights of beauty against man's wrong!
Catch up in thy divine face, not alone
East griefs but west,— and strike and shame the strong,
By thunders of white silence, overthrown.

Note

The American sculptor, Hiram Powers, was a friend of the Brownings when they lived in Florence. His statue of a Greek slave resembles a Venus in shackles, and remains an acclaimed and popular work.



The Runaway Slave At Pilgrim's Point

I stand on the mark beside the shore
Of the first white pilgrim's bended knee,
Where exile turned to ancestor,
And God was thanked for liberty;
I have run through the night, my skin is as dark,
I bend my knee down on this mark...
I look on the sky and the sea.

O pilgrim-souls, I speak to you!
I see you come out proud and slow
From the land of the spirits pale as dew,
And round me and round me ye go!
O pilgrims, I have gasped and run
All night long from the whips of one
Who in your names works sin and woe.

And thus I thought that I would come
And kneel here where I knelt before,
And feel your souls around me hum
In undertone to the ocean's roar;
And lift my black face, my black hand,
Here, in your names, to curse this land
Ye blessed in freedom's, evermore.

I am black, I am black!
And yet God made me, they say.
But if He did so, smiling back
He must have cast His work away
Under the feet of His white creatures,
With a look of scorn,— that the dusky features
Might be trodden again to clay.

And yet He has made dark things
To be glad and merry as light:
There's a little dark bird sits and sings;
There's a dark stream ripples out of sight;
And the dark frogs chant in the safe morass,
And the sweetest stars are made to pass
O'er the face of the darkest night.

But *we* who are dark, we are dark!
Ah, God, we have no stars!
About our souls in care and cark
Our blackness shuts like prison bars:
The poor souls crouch so far behind,
That never a comfort can they find
By reaching through the prison-bars.

Indeed, we live beneath the sky,
That great smooth Hand of God stretched out
On all His children fatherly,
To bless them from the fear and doubt
Which would be, if, from this low place,
All opened straight up to His face
Into the grand eternity.

And still God's sunshine and His frost,
They make us hot, they make us cold,
As if we were not black and lost:
And the beasts and birds, in wood and fold,
Do fear and take us for very men!
Could the weep-poor-will or the cat of the glen
Look into my eyes and be bold?

I am black, I am black!—
But, once, I laughed in girlish glee;
For one of my colour stood in the track
Where the drivers drove, and looked at me,
And tender and full was the look he gave—
Could a slave look so at another slave?—
I look at the sky and the sea.

And from that hour our spirits grew
As free as if unsold, unbought:
Oh, strong enough, since we were two
To conquer the world, we thought!
The drivers drove us day by day;
We did not mind, we went one way,
And no better a freedom sought.

In the sunny ground between the canes,
He said 'I love you' as he passed:
When the shingle-roof rang sharp with the rains,
I heard how he vowed it fast;
While others shook he smiled in the hut,
As he carved me a bowl of the coco-nut
Through the roar of the hurricanes.

I sang his name instead of a song;
Over and over I sang his name—
Upward and downward I drew it along
My various notes,— the same, the same!
I sang it low, that the slave-girls near
Might never guess from aught they could hear,
It was only a name — a name.

I look on the sky and the sea.
We were two to love, and two to pray,—
Yes, two, O God, who cried to Thee,
Though nothing didst Thou say.
Coldly Thou sat'st behind the sun!
And now I cry who am but one,
Thou wilt not speak to-day.—

We were black, we were black,
We had no claim to love and bliss,
What marvel, if each went to wrack?
They wrung my cold hands out of his,—
They dragged him... where?... I crawled to touch
His blood's mark in the dust!... not much,
Ye pilgrim-souls,... though plain as *this*!

Wrong, followed by a deeper wrong!
Mere grief's too good for such as I;
So the white men brought the shame ere long
To strangle the sob of my agony.
They would not leave me for my dull
Wet eyes!— it was too merciful
To let me weep pure tears and die.

I am black, I am black!
I wore a child upon my breast...
An amulet that hung too slack,
And, in my unrest, could not rest.
Thus we went moaning, child and mother,
One to another, one to another,
Until all ended for the best:

For hark ! I will tell you low... low...
I am black, you see,–
And the babe who lay on my bosom so,
Was far too white... too white for me;
As white as the ladies who scorned to pray
Beside me at church but yesterday,
Though my tears had washed a place for my knee.

My own, own child! I could not bear
To look in his face, it was so white;
I covered him up with a kerchief there;
I covered his face in close and tight:
And he moaned and struggled, as well might be,
For the white child wanted his liberty–
Ha, ha! he wanted his master right.

He moaned and beat with his head and feet,
His little feet that never grew–
He struck them out, as it was meet,
Against my heart to break it through.
I might have sung and made him mild–
But I dared not sing to the white-faced child
The only song I knew.

I pulled the kerchief very close:
He could not see the sun, I swear,
More, then, alive, than now he does
From between the roots of the mango... where?
...I know where. Close! a child and mother
Do wrong to look at one another,
When one is black and one is fair.

Why, in that single glance I had
Of my child's face,... I tell you all,
I saw a look that made me mad...
The *master's* look, that used to fall
On my soul like his lash... or worse!–
And so, to save it from my curse,
I twisted it round in my shawl.

And he moaned and trembled from foot to head,
He shivered from head to foot;
Till, after a time, he lay instead
Too suddenly still and mute.
I felt, beside, a stiffening cold:
I dared to lift up just a fold...
As in lifting a leaf of the mango-fruit.

But *my* fruit... ha, ha!— there, had been
(I laugh to think on't at this hour!)
Your fine white angels, (who have seen
Nearest the secret of God's power)
And plucked my fruit to make them wine,
And sucked the soul of that child of mine,
As the humming-bird sucks the soul of the flower.

Ha, ha, for the trick of the angels white!
They freed the white child's spirit so.
I said not a word, but, day and night,
I carried the body to and fro,
And it lay on my heart like a stone... as chill.
—The sun may shine out as much as he will:
I am cold, though it happened a month ago.

From the white man's house, and the black man's hut,
I carried the little body on;
The forest's arms did round us shut,
And silence through the trees did run:
They asked no question as I went,—
They stood too high for astonishment,—
They could see God sit on His throne.

My little body, kerchiefed fast,
I bore it on through the forest... on:
And when I felt it was tired at last,
I scooped a hole beneath the moon.
Through the forest-tops the angels far,
With a white sharp finger from every star,
Did point and mock at what was done.

Yet when it was all done aright,...
Earth, 'twixt me and my baby, strewed...
All, changed to black earth,... nothing white,...
A dark child in the dark!— ensued
Some comfort, and my heart grew young:
I sate down smiling there and sung
The song I learnt in my maidenhood.

And thus we two were reconciled,
The white child and black mother, thus:
For, as I sang it, soft and wild,
The same song, more melodious,
Rose from the grave whereon I sate:
It was the dead child singing that,
To join the souls of both of us.

I look on the sea and the sky!
Where the pilgrims' ships first anchored lay,
The free sun rideth gloriously,
But the pilgrim-ghosts have slid away
Through the earliest streaks of the morn.
My face is black, but it glares with a scorn
Which they dare not meet by day.

Ah!— in their stead, their hunter sons!
Ah, ah! they are on me — they hunt in a ring—
Keep off! I brave you all at once—
I throw off your eyes like snakes that sting!
You have killed the black eagle at nest, I think:
Did you never stand still in your triumph, and shrink
From the stroke of her wounded wing?

(Man, drop that stone you dared to lift!—)
I wish you, who stand there five a-breast,
Each, for his own wife's joy and gift,
A little corpse as safely at rest
As mine in the mangos!— Yes, but *she*
May keep live babies on her knee,
And sing the song she liketh best.

I am not mad: I am black.
I see you staring in my face—
I know you, staring, shrinking back,
Ye are born of the Washington-race,
And this land is the free America,
And this mark on my wrist... (I prove what I say)
Ropes tied me up here to the flogging-place.

You think I shrieked then? Not a sound!
I hung, as a gourd hangs in the sun;
I only cursed them all around
As softly as I might have done
My very own child.— From these sands
Up to the mountains, lift your hands,
O slaves, and end what I begun!

Whips, curses; these must answer those!
For in this UNION, you have set
Two kinds of men in adverse rows,
Each loathing each: and all forget
The seven wounds in Christ's body fair;
While HE sees gaping everywhere
Our countless wounds that pay no debt.

Our wounds are different. Your white men
Are, after all, not gods indeed,
Nor able to make Christs again
Do good with bleeding. *We* who bleed...
(Stand off!) we help not in our loss!
We are too heavy for our cross,
And fall and crush you and your seed.

I fall, I swoon! I look at the sky:
The clouds are breaking on my brain.
I am floated along, as if I should die
Of liberty's exquisite pain.
In the name of the white child waiting for me
In the death-dark where we may kiss and agree,
White men, I leave you all curse-free
In my broken heart's disdain!

Note

This poem was written for an American abolitionist magazine, *The Liberty Bell*, although Barrett Browning thought they would probably refuse to publish it because of its themes of rape and infanticide. However, the magazine published it in 1847. Slavery was not abolished in America until 1865.

morass – swamp

cark – burden

[↑](#)

A Curse For A Nation

I heard an angel speak last night,
And he said 'Write!
Write a Nation's curse for me,
And send it over the Western Sea.'

I faltered, taking up the word:
'Not so, my lord!
If curses must be, choose another
To send thy curse against my brother.

‘For I am bound by gratitude,
By love and blood,
To brothers of mine across the sea,
Who stretch out kindly hands to me.’

‘Therefore,’ the voice said, ‘shalt thou write
My curse to-night.
From the summits of love a curse is driven,
As lightning is from the tops of heaven.’

‘Not so,’ I answered. ‘Evermore
My heart is sore
For my own land’s sins: for little feet
Of children bleeding along the street:

‘For parked-up honours that gainsay
The right of way:
For almsgiving through a door that is
Not open enough for two friends to kiss:

‘For love of freedom which abates
Beyond the Straits:
For patriot virtue starved to vice on
Self-praise, self-interest, and suspicion:

‘For an oligarchic parliament,
And bribes well-meant.
What curse to another land assign,
When heavy-souled for the sins of mine?’

‘Therefore,’ the voice said, ‘shalt thou write
My curse to-night.
Because thou hast strength to see and hate
A foul thing done within thy gate.’

‘Not so,’ I answered once again.
‘To curse, choose men.
For I, a woman, have only known
How the heart melts and the tears run down.’

‘Therefore,’ the voice said, ‘shalt thou write
My curse to-night.
Some women weep and curse, I say
(And no one marvels), night and day.

‘And thou shalt take their part to-night,
Weep and write.
A curse from the depths of womanhood
Is very salt, and bitter, and good.’

So thus I wrote, and mourned indeed,
 What all may read.
And thus, as was enjoined on me,
I send it over the Western Sea.

The Curse

Because ye have broken your own chain
 With the strain
Of brave men climbing a Nation's height,
Yet thence bear down with brand and thong
On souls of others, – for this wrong
 This is the curse. Write.

Because yourselves are standing straight
 In the state
Of Freedom's foremost acolyte,
Yet keep calm footing all the time
On writhing bond-slaves, – for this crime
 This is the curse. Write.

Because ye prosper in God's name,
 With a claim
To honour in the old world's sight,
Yet do the fiend's work perfectly
In strangling martyrs, – for this lie
 This is the curse. Write.

Ye shall watch while kings conspire
Round the people's smouldering fire,
 And, warm for your part,
Shall never dare – O shame!
To utter the thought into flame
 Which burns at your heart.
 This is the curse. Write.

Ye shall watch while nations strive
With the bloodhounds, die or survive,
 Drop faint from their jaws,
Or throttle them backward to death,
And only under your breath
 Shall favour the cause.
 This is the curse. Write.

Ye shall watch while strong men draw
The nets of feudal law
 To strangle the weak;
And, counting the sin for a sin,

Your soul shall be sadder within
Than the word ye shall speak.
This is the curse. Write.

When good men are praying erect
That Christ may avenge His elect
And deliver the earth,
The prayer in your ears, said low,
Shall sound like the tramp of a foe
That's driving you forth.
This is the curse. Write.

When wise men give you their praise,
They shall praise in the heat of the phrase,
As if carried too far.
When ye boast your own charters kept true,
Ye shall blush;— for the thing which ye do
Derides what ye are.
This is the curse. Write.

When fools cast taunts at your gate,
Your scorn ye shall somewhat abate
As ye look o'er the wall,
For your conscience, tradition, and name
Explode with a deadlier blame
Than the worst of them all.
This is the curse. Write.

Go, wherever ill deeds shall be done,
Go, plant your flag in the sun
Beside the ill-doers!
And recoil from clenching the curse
Of God's witnessing Universe
With a curse of yours.
This is the curse. Write.

Note

This poem of 1855 addresses America, in particular in response to its proposal to annex Cuba as a slave state. Like *The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point*, it was published in *The Liberty Bell*, an American abolitionist magazine.
oligarchic – ruled by only a few

Sonnets from the Portuguese

(Note: The poet's husband Robert Browning called his wife "the little Portuguese" because she was small and dark. Barrett Browning used this title for her volume of love sonnets to imply that they were translated from Portuguese. This was in order to protect her privacy; for in fact the poems were very personal. They were written in 1846, before her marriage, and published in 1850.)

↑

I.

I thought once how Theocritus had sung
Of the sweet years, the dear and wished-for years,
Who each one in a gracious hand appears
To bear a gift for mortals, old or young:
And, as I mused it in his antique tongue,
I saw, in gradual vision through my tears,
The sweet, sad years, the melancholy years,
Those of my own life, who by turns had flung
A shadow across me. Straightway I was 'ware,
So weeping, how a mystic Shape did move
Behind me, and drew me backward by the hair;
And a voice said in mastery, while I strove,..
"Guess now who holds thee?"—"Death," I said. But, there,
The silver answer rang,.. "Not Death, but Love."

Note

Theocritus – ancient writer of Greek pastoral poetry

↑

III.

Unlike are we, unlike, O princely Heart!
Unlike our uses and our destinies.
Our ministering two angels look surprise
On one another, as they strike athwart
Their wings in passing. Thou, bethink thee, art
A guest for queens to social pageantries,
With gages from a hundred brighter eyes
Than tears even can make mine, to ply thy part
Of chief musician. What hast *thou* to do
With looking from the lattice-lights at me,
A poor, tired, wandering singer,.. singing through
The dark, and leaning up a cypress tree?
The chrism is on thine head,—on mine, the dew,—
And Death must dig the level where these agree.

Notes

athwart – across, from side to side

gages – pledges

cypress tree – a symbol of mourning

chrism – oil used for anointing

↑

IV.

Thou hast thy calling to some palace-floor,
Most gracious singer of high poems! where
The dancers will break footing, from the care
Of watching up thy pregnant lips for more.
And dost thou lift this house's latch too poor
For hand of thine? and canst thou think and bear
To let thy music drop here unaware
In folds of golden fullness at my door?
Look up and see the casement broken in,
The bats and owlets builders in the roof!
My cricket chirps against thy mandolin.
Hush, call no echo up in further proof
Of desolation! there's a voice within
That weeps... as thou must sing... alone, aloof.

↑

VI.

Go from me. Yet I feel that I shall stand
Henceforward in thy shadow. Nevermore
Alone upon the threshold of my door
Of individual life, I shall command
The uses of my soul, nor lift my hand
Serenely in the sunshine as before,
Without the sense of that which I forbore,...
Thy touch upon the palm. The widest land
Doom takes to part us, leaves thy heart in mine
With pulses that beat double. What I do
And what I dream include thee, as the wine
Must taste of its own grapes. And when I sue
God for myself, He hears that name of thine,
And sees within my eyes the tears of two.

↑

VII.

The face of all the world is changed, I think,
Since first I heard the footsteps of thy soul
Move still, oh, still, beside me, as they stole
Betwixt me and the dreadful outer brink
Of obvious death, where I, who thought to sink,
Was caught up into love, and taught the whole
Of life in a new rhythm. The cup of dole
God gave for baptism, I am fain to drink,
And praise its sweetness, Sweet, with thee anear.
The names of country, heaven, are changed away
For where thou art or shalt be, there or here;
And this... this lute and song... loved yesterday,
(The singing angels know) are only dear,
Because thy name moves right in what they say.

Note

dole – grief

↑

IX.

Can it be right to give what I can give?
To let thee sit beneath the fall of tears
As salt as mine, and hear the sighing years
Re-sighing on my lips renunciative
Through those infrequent smiles which fail to live
For all thy adjurations? O my fears,
That this can scarce be right! We are not peers,
So to be lovers; and I own, and grieve,
That givers of such gifts as mine are, must
Be counted with the ungenerous. Out, alas!
I will not soil thy purple with my dust,
Nor breathe my poison on thy Venice-glass,
Nor give thee any love ... which were unjust.
Beloved, I only love thee! let it pass.

Notes

adjurations – pleas, earnest requests

thy purple – purple robes, as worn by emperors and kings

Venice-glass – Venetian glass was delicate and expensive; glass can also mean mirror

↑

XII.

Indeed this very love which is my boast,
And which, when rising up from breast to brow,
Doth crown me with a ruby large enow
To draw men's eyes and prove the inner cost,..
This love even, all my worth, to the uttermost,
I should not love withal, unless that thou
Hadst set me an example, shown me how,
When first thine earnest eyes with mine were crossed,
And love called love. And thus, I cannot speak
Of love even, as a good thing of my own.
Thy soul hath snatched up mine all faint and weak,
And placed it by thee on a golden throne,—
And that I love (O soul, we must be meek!)
Is by thee only, whom I love alone.

↑

XIV.

If thou must love me, let it be for nought
Except for love's sake only. Do not say
'I love her for her smile... her look... her way
Of speaking gently, .. for a trick of thought
That falls in well with mine, and certes brought
A sense of pleasant ease on such a day'—
For these things in themselves, Belovèd, may
Be changed, or change for thee,— and love, so wrought,
May be unwrought so. Neither love me for
Thine own dear pity's wiping my cheeks dry,—
A creature might forget to weep, who bore
Thy comfort long, and lose thy love thereby!
But love me for love's sake, that evermore
Thou mayst love on, through love's eternity.

Note

certes – certainly

↑

XV.

Accuse me not, beseech thee, that I wear
Too calm and sad a face in front of thine;
For we two look two ways, and cannot shine
With the same sunlight on our brow and hair.
On me thou lookest, with no doubting care,
As on a bee shut in a crystalline,—
Since sorrow hath shut me safe in love's divine,
And to spread wing and fly in the outer air
Were most impossible failure, if I strove
To fail so. But I look on thee... on thee...
Beholding, besides love, the end of love,
Hearing oblivion beyond memory!
As one who sits and gazes from above,
Over the rivers to the bitter sea.

Note

a crystalline – a glass vessel

↑

XVI.

And yet, because thou overcomest so,
Because thou art more noble and like a king,
Thou canst prevail against my fears and fling
Thy purple round me, till my heart shall grow
Too close against thine heart, henceforth to know
How it shook when alone. Why, conquering
May prove as lordly and complete a thing
In lifting upward, as in crushing low!
And as a vanquished soldier yields his sword
To one who lifts him from the bloody earth,—
Even so, Belovèd, I at last record,
Here ends my strife. If *thou* invite me forth,
I rise above abasement at the word.
Make thy love larger to enlarge my worth.

Note

thy purple – regal robes

↑

XXII.

When our two souls stand up erect and strong,
Face to face, silent, drawing nigh and nigher,
Until the lengthening wings break into fire
At either curvèd point,— what bitter wrong
Can the earth do to us, that we should not long
Be here contented? Think. In mounting higher,
The angels would press on us, and aspire
To drop some golden orb of perfect song
Into our deep, dear silence. Let us stay
Rather on earth, Belovèd, — where the unfit
Contrarious moods of men recoil away
And isolate pure spirits, and permit
A place to stand and love in for a day,
With darkness and the death-hour rounding it.

↑

XXVI.

I lived with visions for my company,
Instead of men and women, years ago,
And found them gentle mates, nor thought to know
A sweeter music than they played to me.
But soon their trailing purple was not free
Of this world's dust,— their lutes did silent grow,
And I myself grew faint and blind below
Their vanishing eyes. Then *thou* didst come... to be,
Belovèd, what they seemed. Their shining fronts,

Their songs, their splendours (better, yet the same,
As river-water hallowed into fountains),
Met in thee, and from out thee overcame
My soul with satisfaction of all wants—
Because God's gifts put man's best dreams to shame.

Note

fronts – faces

↑

XXIX.

I think of thee! –my thoughts do twine and bud
About thee, as wild vines, about a tree,
Put out broad leaves, and soon there's nought to see
Except the straggling green which hides the wood.
Yet, O my palm-tree, be it understood
I will not have my thoughts instead of thee
Who art dearer, better! rather instantly
Renew thy presence, As a strong tree should,
Rustle thy boughs and set thy trunk all bare,
And let these bands of greenery which insphere thee
Drop heavily down,.. burst, shattered, everywhere!
Because, in this deep joy to see and hear thee
And breathe within thy shadow a new air,
I do not think of thee – I am too near thee.

↑

XXXV.

If I leave all for thee, wilt thou exchange
And be all to me? Shall I never miss
Home-talk and blessing and the common kiss
That comes to each in turn, nor count it strange,
When I look up, to drop on a new range
Of walls and floors... another home than this?
Nay, wilt thou fill that place by me which is
Filled by dead eyes too tender to know change?
That's hardest. If to conquer love, has tried,
To conquer grief, tries more... as all things prove;
For grief indeed is love and grief beside.
Alas, I have grieved so I am hard to love.
Yet love me – wilt thou? Open thine heart wide,
And fold within, the wet wings of thy dove.

Note

to conquer love, has tried – to conquer love has been difficult and taxing

↑

XXXVIII.

First time he kissed me, he but only kissed
The fingers of this hand wherewith I write;
And ever since, it grew more clean and white,..
Slow to world-greetings... quick with its 'Oh, list,'
When the angels speak. A ring of amethyst
I could not wear here, plainer to my sight,
Than that first kiss. The second passed in height
The first, and sought the forehead, and half missed,
Half falling on the hair. Oh, beyond meed!
That was the chrism of love, which love's own crown,
With sanctifying sweetness, did precede.
The third upon my lips was folded down
In perfect, purple state; since when, indeed,
I have been proud and said, "My love, my own."

Notes

beyond meed – beyond what I deserve

chrism – anointing- oil

purple state – royal state

↑

XXXIX.

Because thou hast the power and own'st the grace
To look through and behind this mask of me
(Against which years have beat thus blanchingly
With their rains), and behold my soul's true face,
The dim and weary witness of life's race!—
Because thou hast the faith and love to see,
Through that same soul's distracting lethargy,
The patient angel waiting for a place
In the new heavens! because nor sin nor woe,
Nor God's infliction, nor death's neighbourhood,
Nor all which others viewing, turn to go,..
Nor all which makes me tired of all, self-viewed,..
Nothing repels thee,.. Dearest, teach me so
To pour out gratitude, as thou dost, good.

↑

XLIII.

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
For the ends of Being and ideal Grace.
I love thee to the level of every day's
Most quiet need, by sun and candlelight.
I love thee freely, as men strive for Right;
I love thee purely, as they turn from Praise.
I love thee with the passion put to use
In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith.
I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
With my lost saints,— I love thee with the breath,
Smiles, tears, of all my life!— and, if God choose,
I shall but love thee better after death.

↑

XLIV.

Belovèd, thou hast brought me many flowers
Plucked in the garden, all the summer through
And winter, and it seemed as if they grew
In this close room, nor missed the sun and showers.
So, in the like name of that love of ours,
Take back these thoughts which here unfolded too,
And which on warm and cold days I withdrew
From my heart's ground. Indeed, those beds and bowers
Be overgrown with bitter weeds and rue,
And wait thy weeding; yet here's eglantine,
Here's ivy!— take them, as I used to do
Thy flowers, and keep them where they shall not pine.
Instruct thine eyes to keep their colours true,
And tell thy soul, their roots are left in mine.

Casa Guidi Windows (extracts)

Casa Guidi was the house where the Brownings lived in Florence, Italy. The poem was inspired by political events in the surrounding province, Tuscany, which since 1737 had been owned by Austria. In the mid 19th century Italian nationalism gained support: in September 1847, Leopold II, Grand Duke of Tuscany, promised to support the Florentine civic guard despite having allegiances to Austria. In 1849 Leopold fled and renewed his alliance with Franz Joseph of Austria. The Austrian army occupied Florence and the infant Tuscan republic fell.

NB. The extracts below follow the text of the Collected Poems of 1890, which differs in some respects from the original 1851 edition.

↑

PART I.

I heard last night a little child go singing
 'Neath Casa Guidi windows, by the church,
 “*O bella libertà, O bella!*” stringing
 The same words still on notes he went in search
So high for, you concluded the upspringing
 Of such a nimble bird to sky from perch
Must leave the whole bush in a tremble green,
 And that the heart of Italy must beat,
While such a voice had leave to rise serene
 'Twixt church and palace of a Florence street:
A little child, too, who not long had been
 By mother's finger steadied on his feet,
And still *O bella libertà* he sang.

* * *

Behold, instead,
Void at Verona, Juliet's marble trough:
 And void as that is, are all images
Men set between themselves and actual wrong,
 To catch the weight of pity, meet the stress
Of conscience, – since 'tis easier to gaze long
 On mournful masks and sad effigies
Than on real, live, weak creatures crushed by strong.

For me who stand in Italy to-day,
Where worthier poets stood and sang before,
 I kiss their footsteps yet their words gainsay.
I can but muse in hope upon this shore
 Of golden Arno as it shoots away
Through Florence' heart beneath her bridges four...

* * *

Perhaps a truth
Is so far plain in this, that Italy,
Long trammelled with the purple of her youth
Against her age's ripe activity,
Sits still upon her tombs, without death's ruth
But also without life's brave energy.
"Now tell us what is Italy?" men ask:
And others answer, "Virgil, Cicero,
Catullus, Cæsar." What beside? to task
The memory closer – "Why, Boccaccio,
Dante, Petrarca," – and if still the flask
Appears to yield its wine by drops too slow,—
"Angelo, Raffael, Pergolese," – all
Whose strong hearts beat through stone, or charged again
The paints with fire of souls electrical,
Or broke up heaven for music. What more then?
Why, then, no more. The chaplet's last beads fall
In naming the last saintship within ken,
And, after that, none prayeth in the land.
Alas, this Italy has too long swept
Heroic ashes up for hour-glass sand...

* * *

O Dead, ye shall no longer cling to us
With rigid hands of desiccating praise,
And drag us backward by the garment thus,
To stand and laud you in long-drawn virelays!
We will not henceforth be oblivious
Of our own lives, because ye lived before,
Nor of our acts, because ye acted well.
We thank you that ye first unlatched the door,
But will not make it inaccessible
By thankings on the threshold any more.
We hurry onward to extinguish hell
With our fresh souls, our younger hope, and God's
Maturity of purpose...

* * *

.... We, who are the seed
Of buried creatures, if we turned and spat
Upon our antecedents, we were vile.
Bring violets rather. If these had not walked
Their furlong, could we hope to walk our mile?
Therefore bring violets. Yet if we self-baulked
Stand still, a-strewing violets all the while,
These moved in vain, of whom we have vainly talked.
So rise up henceforth with a cheerful smile,

And having strewn the violets, reap the corn,
And having reaped and garnered, bring the plough
And draw new furrows 'neath the healthy morn,
And plant the great Hereafter in this Now.

* * *

The same blue waters where the dolphins swim
Suggest the tritons. Through the blue Immense
Strike out, all swimmers! cling not in the way
Of one another, so to sink; but learn
The strong man's impulse, catch the freshening spray
He throws up in his motions, and discern
By his clear westering eye, the time of day.
Thou, God, hast set us worthy gifts to earn
Besides Thy heaven and Thee! and when I say
There's room here for the weakest man alive
To live and die, there's room too, I repeat,
For all the strongest to live well, and strive
Their own way, by their individual heat,—
Like some new bee-swarm leaving the old hive,
Despite the wax which tempts so violet-sweet.

* * *

Shall I say
What made my heart beat with exulting love
A few weeks back?—
The day was such a day
As Florence owes the sun. The sky above,
Its weight upon the mountains seemed to lay,
And palpitate in glory, like a dove
Who has flown too fast, full-hearted – take away
The image! for the heart of man beat higher
That day in Florence, flooding all her streets
And piazzas with a tumult and desire.
The people, with accumulated heats
And faces turned one way, as if one fire
Both drew and flushed them, left their ancient beats
And went up toward the palace-Pitti wall
To thank their Grand-duke who, not quite of course,
Had graciously permitted, at their call,
The citizens to use their civic force
To guard their civic homes. So, one and all,
The Tuscan cities streamed up to the source
Of this new good at Florence, taking it
As good so far, presageful of more good,—
The first torch of Italian freedom, lit
To toss in the next tiger's face who should
Approach too near them in a greedy fit,—

The first pulse of an even flow of blood
To prove the level of Italian veins
Towards rights perceived and granted. How we gazed
From Casa Guidi windows while, in trains
Of orderly procession – banners raised,
And intermittent bursts of martial strains
Which died upon the shout, as if amazed
By gladness beyond music – they passed on!
The Magistracy, with insignia, passed,—
And all the people shouted in the sun...

* * *

And all the people who went up to let
Their hearts out to that Duke, as has been told—
Where guess ye that the living people met,
Kept tryst, formed ranks, chose leaders, first unrolled
Their banners?

 In the Loggia? where is set
Cellini's godlike Perseus, bronze or gold,
(How name the metal, when the statue flings
Its soul so in your eyes?) with brow and sword
Superbly calm, as all opposing things,
Slain with the Gorgon, were no more abhorred
Since ended?

 No, the people sought no wings
From Perseus in the Loggia, nor implored
An inspiration in the place beside
From that dim bust of Brutus, jagged and grand,
Where Buonarroti passionately tried
From out the close-clenched marble to demand
The head of Rome's sublimest homicide,
Then dropt the quivering mallet from his hand,
Despairing he could find no model-stuff
Of Brutus in all Florence where he found
The gods and gladiators thick enough.
Nor there! the people chose still holier ground:
The people, who are simple, blind and rough,
Know their own angels, after looking round.
Whom chose they then? where met they?

 On the stone

Called Dante's, —a plain flat stone scarce discerned
From others in the pavement,—whereupon
He used to bring his quiet chair out, turned
To Brunelleschi's church, and pour alone
The lava of his spirit when it burned...

* * *

...how to fill a breach
With olive-branches, —how to quench a lie
With truth, and smite a foe upon the cheek
With Christ's most conquering kiss. Why, these are things
Worth a great nation's finding, to prove weak
The "glorious arms" of military kings.
And so with wide embrace, my England, seek
To stifle the bad heat and flickerings
Of this world's false and nearly expended fire!
Draw palpitating arrows to the wood,
And twang abroad thy high hopes and thy higher
Resolves, from that most virtuous altitude!
Till nations shall unconsciously aspire
By looking up to thee, and learn that good
And glory are not different. Announce law
By freedom; exalt chivalry by peace;
Instruct how clear calm eyes can overawe,
And how pure hands, stretched simply to release
A bond-slave, will not need a sword to draw
To be held dreadful. O my England, cease
Thy purple with no alien agonies,
No struggles toward encroachment, no vile war!

* * *

Rise up, teacher! here's
A crowd to make a nation! —best begin
By making each a man, till all be peers
Of earth's true patriots and pure martyrs in
Knowing and daring. Best unbar the doors
Which Peter's heirs keep locked so overclose
They only let the mice across the floors,
While every churchman dangles, as he goes,
The great key at his girdle, and abhors
In Christ's name, meekly. Open wide the house,
Concede the entrance with Christ's liberal mind,
And set the tables with His wine and bread.

* * *

Come, appear, be found,
If pope or peasant, come! we hear the cock,
The courtier of the mountains when first crowned
With golden dawn; and orient glories flock
To meet the sun upon the highest ground.
Take voice and work! we wait to hear thee knock
At some one of our Florentine nine gates,
On each of which was imaged a sublime
Face of a Tuscan genius, which, for hate's

And love's sake, both, our Florence in her prime
Turned boldly on all comers to her states,
As heroes turned their shields in antique time
Emblazoned with honourable acts. And though
The gates are blank now of such images,
And Petrarch looks no more from Nicolo
Toward dear Arezzo, 'twixt the acacia-trees,
Nor Dante, from gate Gallo —still we know,
Despite the razing of the blazonries,
Remains the consecration of the shield:
The dead heroic faces will start out
On all these gates, if foes should take the field...

* * *

...let all the far ends of the world
Breathe back the deep breath of their old delight,
To swell the Italian banner just unfurled.
Help, lands of Europe! for, if Austria fight,
The drums will bar your slumber. Had ye curled
The laurel for your thousand artists' brows,
If these Italian hands had planted none?
Can any sit down idle in the house
Nor hear appeals from Buonarroti's stone
And Raffael's canvas, rousing and to rouse?

* * *

And Vallombrosa, we two went to see
Last June, beloved companion,—where sublime
The mountains live in holy families,
And the slow pinewoods ever climb and climb
Half up their breasts, just stagger as they seize
Some grey crag, drop back with it many a time,
And straggle blindly down the precipice.
The Vallombrosan brooks were strewn as thick
That June-day, knee-deep with dead beechen leaves,
As Milton saw them ere his heart grew sick
And his eyes blind...

* * *

O waterfalls

And forests! sound and silence! mountains bare
That leap up peak by peak and catch the palls
Of purple and silver mist to rend and share
With one another, at electric calls
Of life in the sunbeams, —till we cannot dare
Fix your shapes, count your number! we must think
Your beauty and your glory helped to fill

The cup of Milton's soul so to the brink,
He never more was thirsty when God's will
Had shattered to his sense the last chain-link
By which he had drawn from Nature's visible
The fresh well-water. Satisfied by this,
He sang of Adam's paradise and smiled,
Remembering Vallombrosa. Therefore is
The place divine to English man and child,
And pilgrims leave their souls here in a kiss.

* * *

Therefore let us all
Refreshed in England or in other land,
By visions, with their fountain-rise and fall,
Of this earth's darling, —we, who understand
A little how the Tuscan musical
Vowels do round themselves as if they planned
Eternities of separate sweetness, —we,
Who loved Sorrento vines in picture-book,
Or ere in wine-cup we pledged faith or glee,—
Who loved Rome's wolf with demi-gods at suck,
Or ere we loved truth's own divinity,—
Who loved, in brief, the classic hill and brook,
And Ovid's dreaming tales and Petrarch's song,
Or ere we loved Love's self even,—let us give
The blessing of our souls (and wish them strong
To bear it to the height where prayers arrive,
When faithful spirits pray against a wrong,)
To this great cause of southern men who strive
In God's name for man's rights, and shall not fail.
Behold, they shall not fail. The shouts ascend
Above the shrieks, in Naples, and prevail.
Rows of shot corpses, waiting for the end
Of burial, seem to smile up straight and pale
Into the azure air and apprehend
That final gun-flash from Palermo's coast
Which lightens their apocalypse of death.
So let them die! The world shows nothing lost;
Therefore, not blood. Above or underneath,
What matter, brothers, if ye keep your post
On duty's side? As sword returns to sheath,
So dust to grave, but souls find place in Heaven.

Notes to Part I

O bella libertà – 'Oh beautiful freedom'

void at Verona, Juliet's marble trough – at Verona the tomb, supposedly of

Shakespeare's heroine, was turned into a drinking trough in 1500.

golden Arno – the river in Florence.

Virgil, Cicero, Catullus, Cæsar – all statesmen or writers of classical Rome.

Boccaccio, Dante, Petrarca – Italian writers and poets of the 13th - 14th centuries.
Angelo, Raffael, Pergolese – Michelangelo, sculptor and painter 1475 – 1564;
 Raphael, painter 1483 – 1520; Pergolesi, Italian composer 1710 – 1736.
chaplet – prayer-beads
virelay – type of lyric poem
tritons – in Greek myth, sea-gods with fishes' tails.
Loggia – open pillared area by the Uffizzi gallery in Florence, with many antique and Renaissance statues.
Buonarroti – Michelangelo
Dante's stone – used to be in Florence's Piazza Duomo but is there no longer.
Brunelleschi – architect of the dome (completed in 1436) which tops the church of Santa Maria del Fiore in Florence, known as the Duomo.
Nicolo – Tower and gate of San Niccolo, Florence.
Gallo – a gate in Florence close to the church.
Blazonries – heraldic devices.
Vallombrosa – monastery in the hills outside Florence. The poet John Milton referred to it in his poem *Paradise Lost*.
Rome's wolf – according to legend, the founders of Rome, Romulus and Remus, were cared for by a she-wolf.
Ovid – poet of classical Rome.

* * *

↑

PART II.

I wrote a meditation and a dream,
 Hearing a little child sing in the street:
 I leant upon his music as a theme,
 Till it gave way beneath my heart's full beat
 Which tried at an exultant prophecy
 But dropped before the measure was complete—
 Alas, for songs and hearts! O Tuscany,
 O Dante's Florence, is the type too plain?
 Didst thou, too, only sing of liberty
 As little children take up a high strain
 With unintentioned voices, and break off
 To sleep upon their mothers' knees again?
 Couldst thou not watch one hour? then, sleep enough—
 That sleep may hasten manhood and sustain
 The faint pale spirit with some muscular stuff.

* * *

From Casa Guidi windows I looked forth,
 And saw ten thousand eyes of Florentines
 Flash back the triumph of the Lombard north,—
 Saw fifty banners, freighted with the signs
 And exultations of the awakened earth,
 Float on above the multitude in lines,

Straight to the Pitti. So, the vision went.
And so, between those populous rough hands
Raised in the sun, Duke Leopold outleant,
And took the patriot's oath which henceforth stands
Among the oaths of perjurers, eminent
To catch the lightnings ripened for these lands.
Why swear at all, thou false Duke Leopold?

* * *

I saw the man among his little sons,
His lips were warm with kisses while he swore;
And I, because I am a woman—I,
Who felt my own child's coming life before
The prescience of my soul, and held faith high,—
I could not bear to think, whoever bore,
That lips, so warmed, could shape so cold a lie.
From Casa Guidi windows I looked out,
Again looked, and beheld a different sight.
The Duke had fled before the people's shout
“Long live the Duke!”

* * *

Long live the people! How they lived! and boiled
And bubbled in the cauldron of the street:
How the young blustered, nor the old recoiled,
And what a thunderous stir of tongues and feet
Trode flat the palpitating bells and foiled
The joy-guns of their echo, shattering it!
How down they pulled the Duke's arms everywhere!
How up they set new café-signs, to show
Where patriots might sip ices in pure air—
(The fresh paint smelling somewhat)! To and fro
How marched the civic guard, and stopped to stare
When boys broke windows in a civic glow!

* * *

...How we shouted
(Especially the boys did), boldly planting
That tree of liberty, whose fruit is doubted,
Because the roots are not of nature's granting!
A tree of good and evil: none, without it,
Grow gods; alas and, with it, men are wanting!
O holy knowledge, holy liberty,
O holy rights of nations! If I speak
These bitter things against the jugglery
Of days that in your names proved blind and weak,
It is that tears are bitter. When we see

The brown skulls grin at death in churchyards bleak,
We do not cry "This Yorick is too light,"
For death grows deathlier with that mouth he makes.
So with my mocking: bitter things I write
Because my soul is bitter for your sakes,
O freedom! O my Florence!

Men who might

Do greatly in a universe that breaks
And burns, must ever know before they do.
Courage and patience are but sacrifice;
And sacrifice is offered for and to
Something conceived of. Each man pays a price
For what himself counts precious, whether true
Or false the appreciation it implies.
But here, —no knowledge, no conception, nought!
Desire was absent, that provides great deeds
From out the greatness of prevenient thought:
And action, action, like a flame that needs
A steady breath and fuel, being caught
Up, like a burning reed from other reeds,
Flashed in the empty and uncertain air,
Then wavered, then went out.

* * *

From Casa Guidi windows gazing, then,
I saw and witness how the Duke came back.
The regular tramp of horse and tread of men
Did smite the silence like an anvil black
And sparkless. With her wide eyes at full strain,
Our Tuscan nurse exclaimed "Alack, alack,
Signora! these shall be the Austrians." "Nay,
Be still," I answered, "do not wake the child!"
—For so, my two-months' baby sleeping lay
In milky dreams upon the bed and smiled,
And I thought "He shall sleep on, while he may,
Through the world's baseness: not being yet defiled,
Why should he be disturbed by what is done?"
Then, gazing, I beheld the long-drawn street
Live out, from end to end, full in the sun,
With Austria's thousand; sword and bayonet,
Horse, foot, artillery,— cannons rolling on
Like blind slow storm-clouds gestant with the heat
Of undeveloped lightnings, each bestrode
By a single man, dust-white from head to heel,
Indifferent as the dreadful thing he rode,
Like a sculptured Fate serene and terrible.
As some smooth river which has overflowed
Will slow and silent down its current wheel
A loosened forest, all the pines erect,

So swept, in mute significance of storm,
The marshalled thousands; not an eye deflect
To left or right, to catch a novel form
Of Florence city adorned by architect
And carver, or of Beauties live and warm
Scared at the casements,—all, straightforward eyes
And faces, held as steadfast as their swords,
And cognizant of acts, not imageries.

* * *

Silently

Our noisy Tuscans watched the invading foe;
They had learnt silence. Pressed against the wall,
And grouped upon the church-steps opposite,
A few pale men and women stared at all.
God knows what they were feeling, with their white
Constrained faces, they, so prodigal
Of cry and gesture when the world goes right,
Or wrong indeed. But here was depth of wrong,
And here, still water; they were silent here;
And through that sentient silence, struck along
That measured tramp from which it stood out clear,
Distinct the sound and silence, like a gong
At midnight, each by the other awfuller,—
While every soldier in his cap displayed
A leaf of olive. Dusty, bitter thing!

* * *

Annihilated Poland, stifled Rome,
Dazed Naples, Hungary fainting 'neath the thong,
And Austria wearing a smooth olive-leaf
On her brute forehead, while her hoofs outpress
The life from these Italian souls, in brief.
O Lord of Peace, who art Lord of Righteousness,
Constrain the anguished worlds from sin and grief,
Pierce them with conscience, purge them with redress,
And give us peace which is no counterfeit!
But wherefore should we look out any more
From Casa Guidi windows? Shut them straight,
And let us sit down by the folded door,
And veil our saddened faces and, so, wait
What next the judgment-heavens make ready for.

* * *

O Magi of the east and of the west,
Your incense, gold and myrrh are excellent!—
What gifts for Christ, then, bring ye with the rest?
Your hands have worked well: is your courage spent
In handwork only? Have you nothing best,
Which generous souls may perfect and present,
And He shall thank the givers for? no light
Of teaching, liberal nations, for the poor
Who sit in darkness when it is not night?
No cure for wicked children? Christ,—no cure!
No help for women sobbing out of sight
Because men made the laws? no brothel-lure
Burnt out by popular lightnings? Hast thou four
No remedy, my England, for such woes?
No outlet, Austria, for the scourged and bound,
No entrance for the exiled? no repose,
Russia, for knouted Poles worked underground,
And gentle ladies bleached among the snows?
No mercy for the slave, America?
No hope for Rome, free France, chivalric France?
Alas, great nations have great shames, I say.
No pity, O world, no tender utterance
Of benediction, and prayers stretched this way
For poor Italia, baffled by mischance?

* * *

Still Niobe! still fainting in the sun,
By whose most dazzling arrows violate
Her beauteous offspring perished! has she won
Nothing but garlands for the graves, from Fate?
Nothing but death-songs?— Yes, be it understood
Life throbs in noble Piedmont! while the feet
Of Rome's clay image, dabbled soft in blood,
Grow flat with dissolution and, as meet,
Will soon be shovelled off like other mud,
To leave the passage free in church and street.
And I, who first took hope up in this song,
Because a child was singing one ... behold,
The hope and omen were not, haply, wrong!
Poets are soothsayers still, like those of old
Who studied flights of doves; and creatures young
And tender, mighty meanings may unfold.
The sun strikes, through the windows, up the floor;
Stand out in it, my own young Florentine,
Not two years old, and let me see thee more!
It grows along thy amber curls, to shine
Brighter than elsewhere. Now, look straight before,
And fix thy brave blue English eyes on mine,

And from my soul, which fronts the future so,
With unabashed and unabated gaze,
Teach me to hope for, what the angels know
When they smile clear as thou dost. Down God's ways
With just alighted feet, between the snow
And snowdrops, where a little lamb may graze,
Thou hast no fear, my lamb, about the road,
Albeit in our vain-glory we assume
That, less than we have, thou hast learnt of God.
Stand out, my blue-eyed prophet!—thou, to whom
The earliest world-day light that ever flowed,
Through Casa Guidi Windows chanced to come!

* * *

Notes to Part II

Lombard – Lombardy is the area of Northern Italy around Milan.

Pitti – the Pitti Piazza and palace are just south of the river Arno in Florence.

Yorick – a reference to Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*, in which Prince Hamlet addresses the skull of the jester Yorick.

Niobe – in Greek mythology, the mother of 14 children. When she boasted of them, the gods killed them all in anger.

Piedmont – the area of Northern Italy around Turin.

Aurora Leigh (extracts)

↑

First Book

Of writing many books there is no end;
And I who have written much in prose and verse
For others' uses, will write now for mine,—
Will write my story for my better self,
As when you paint your portrait for a friend,
Who keeps it in a drawer and looks at it
Long after he has ceased to love you, just
To hold together what he was and is.

I, writing thus, am still what men call young;
I have not so far left the coasts of life
To travel inland, that I cannot hear
That murmur of the outer Infinite
Which unweaned babies smile at in their sleep
When wondered at for smiling; not so far,
But still I catch my mother at her post
Beside the nursery-door, with finger up,
'Hush, hush – here's too much noise!' while her sweet eyes
Leap forward, taking part against her word
In the child's riot. Still I sit and feel
My father's slow hand, when she had left us both,
Stroke out my childish curls across his knee;
And hear Assunta's daily jest (she knew
He liked it better than a better jest)
Inquire how many golden scudi went
To make such ringlets. O my father's hand,
Stroke the poor hair down, stroke it heavily,—
Draw, press the child's head closer to thy knee!
I'm still too young, too young, to sit alone.

(Aurora recounts how her Italian mother died when she was four. Her father, a reserved Englishman who had settled in Florence, moved away into the mountains with Aurora and the old servant Assunta. Growing up, Aurora thought and wondered much about her mother, while gazing at her portrait.)

And while I stared away my childish wits
Upon my mother's picture, (ah, poor child!)
My father, who through love had suddenly
Thrown off the old conventions, broken loose
From chin-bands of the soul, like Lazarus,
Yet had no time to learn to talk and walk
Or grow anew familiar with the sun,—
Who had reached to freedom, not to action, lived,
But lived as one entranced, with thoughts, not aims,—
Whom love had unmade from a common man

But not completed to an uncommon man,—
My father taught me what he had learnt the best
Before he died and left me,— grief and love.
And, seeing we had books among the hills,
Strong words of counselling souls, confederate
With vocal pines and waters,— out of books
He taught me all the ignorance of men,
And how God laughs in heaven when any man
Says ‘Here I’m learned; this, I understand;
In that, I am never caught at fault or doubt.’
He sent the schools to school demonstrating
A fool will pass for such through one mistake,
While a philosopher will pass for such,
Through said mistakes being ventured in the gross
And heaped up to a system.

I am like,
They tell me, my dear father. Broader brows
Howbeit, upon a slenderer undergrowth
Of delicate features,— paler, near as grave;
But then my mother’s smile breaks up the whole,
And makes it better sometimes than itself.

So, nine full years, our days were hid with God
Among his mountains. I was just thirteen,
Still growing like the plants from unseen roots
In tongue-tied Springs,— and suddenly awoke
To full life and its needs and agonies,
With an intense, strong, struggling heart beside
A stone-dead father. Life, struck sharp on death,
Makes awful lightning. His last word was, ‘Love—’
‘Love, my child, love, love!’— (then he had done with grief)
‘Love, my child.’ Ere I answered he was gone,
And none was left to love in all the world.

(A stranger comes and takes Aurora on a ship to England, leaving Assumpta behind.)

Ten nights and days we voyaged on the deep;
Ten nights and days, without the common face
Of any day or night; the moon and sun
Cut off from the green reconciling earth,
To starve into a blind ferocity
And glare unnatural; the very sky
(Dropping its bell-net down upon the sea
As if no human heart should ’scape alive,)
Bedraggled with the desolating salt,
Until it seemed no more that holy heaven
To which my father went. All new, and strange—
The universe turned stranger, for a child.

Then, land! – then, England! oh, the frosty cliffs
Looked cold upon me. Could I find a home
Among those mean red houses through the fog?

* * *

I think I see my father's sister stand
Upon the hall-step of her country-house
To give me welcome. She stood straight and calm,
Her somewhat narrow forehead braided tight
As if for taming accidental thoughts
From possible pulses; brown hair pricked with grey
By frigid use of life, (she was not old,
Although my father's elder by a year)
A nose drawn sharply, yet in delicate lines;
A close mild mouth, a little soured about
The ends, through speaking unrequited loves,
Or peradventure niggardly half-truths;
Eyes of no colour,— once they might have smiled,
But never, never have forgot themselves
In smiling; cheeks, in which was yet a rose
Of perished summers, like a rose in a book,
Kept more for ruth than pleasure,—if past bloom,
Past fading also.

 She had lived, we'll say,
A harmless life, she called a virtuous life,
A quiet life, which was not life at all,
(But that, she had not lived enough to know)...

(Aurora clings to her aunt: but...)

 ...with some strange spasm
Of pain and passion, she wrung loose my hands
Imperiously, and held me at arm's length,
And with two grey-steel naked-bladed eyes
Searched through my face,— ay, stabbed it through and through,
Through brows and cheeks and chin, as if to find
A wicked murderer in my innocent face,
If not here, there perhaps. Then, drawing breath,
She struggled for her ordinary calm,
And missed it rather,— told me not to shrink,
As if she had told me not to lie or swear,—
'She loved my father, and would love me too
As long as I deserved it.' Very kind.

I understood her meaning afterward;
She thought to find my mother in my face,
And questioned it for that. For she, my aunt,
Had loved my father truly, as she could,
And hated, with the gall of gentle souls,

My Tuscan mother, who had fooled away
A wise man from wise courses...

* * *

... And I, I was a good child on the whole,
A meek and manageable child. Why not?
I did not live, to have the faults of life:
There seemed more true life in my father's grave
Than in all England. Since *that* threw me off
Who fain would cleave, (his latest will, they say,
Consigned me to his land) I only thought
Of lying quiet there where I was thrown
Like sea-weed on the rocks, and suffer her
To prick me to a pattern with her pin
Fibre from fibre, delicate leaf from leaf,
And dry out from my drowned anatomy
The last sea-salt left in me.

(In her aunt's care, Aurora acquires dry learning and feminine accomplishments.)

I danced the polka and Cellarius,
Spun glass, stuffed birds, and modelled flowers in wax,
Because she liked accomplishments in girls.
I read a score of books on womanhood
To prove, if women do not think at all,
They may teach thinking, (to a maiden-aunt
Or else the author) – books demonstrating
Their right of comprehending husband's talk
When not too deep, and even of answering
With pretty 'may it please you,' or 'so it is,'—
Their rapid insight and fine aptitude,
Particular worth and general missionariness,
As long as they keep quiet by the fire
And never say 'no' when the world says 'ay,'
For that is fatal...

* * *

... At first,
I felt no life which was not patience,— did
The thing she bade me, without heed to a thing
Beyond it, sate in just the chair she placed,
With back against the window, to exclude
The sight of the great lime-tree on the lawn,
Which seemed to have come on purpose from the woods
To bring the house a message,— ay, and walked
Demurely in her carpeted low rooms,
As if I should not, harkening my own steps,
Misdoubt I was alive. I read her books,

Was civil to her cousin, Romney Leigh,
Gave ear to her vicar, tea to her visitors,
And heard them whisper, when I changed a cup,
(I blushed for joy at that)– ‘The Italian child,
For all her blue eyes and her quiet ways,
Thrives ill in England: she is paler yet
Than when we came the last time; she will die.’

‘Will die.’ My cousin, Romney Leigh, blushed too,
With sudden anger, and approaching me
Said low between his teeth, ‘You’re wicked now?
You wish to die and leave the world a-dusk
For others, with your naughty light blown out?’
I looked into his face defyingly.
He might have known, that, being what I was,
’Twas natural to like to get away
As far as dead folk can; and then indeed
Some people make no trouble when they die.
He turned and went abruptly, slammed the door
And shut his dog out.

Romney, Romney Leigh.

I have not named my cousin hitherto,
And yet I used him as a sort of friend;
My elder by few years, but cold and shy
And absent ... tender, when he thought of it,
Which scarcely was imperative, grave betimes,
As well as early master of Leigh Hall,
Whereof the nightmare sate upon his youth
Repressing all its seasonable delights,
And agonising with a ghastly sense
Of universal hideous want and wrong
To incriminate possession. ...

(Romney grows attached to Aurora:)

We came so close, we saw our differences
Too intimately. Always Romney Leigh
Was looking for the worms, I for the gods.
A godlike nature his; the gods look down,
Incurious of themselves; and certainly
’Tis well I should remember, how, those days,
I was a worm too, and he looked on me.

A little by his act perhaps, yet more
By something in me, surely not my will,
I did not die. But slowly, as one in swoon,
To whom life creeps back in the form of death,
With a sense of separation, a blind pain
Of blank obstruction, and a roar i’ the ears
Of visionary chariots which retreat

As earth grows clearer ... slowly, by degrees,
I woke, rose up ... where was I? in the world;
For uses, therefore, I must count worth while.

I had a little chamber in the house,
As green as any privet-hedge a bird
Might choose to build in, though the nest itself
Could show but dead-brown sticks and straws; the walls
Were green, the carpet was pure green, the straight
Small bed was curtained greenly, and the folds
Hung green about the window, which let in
The out-door world with all its greenery.
You could not push your head out and escape
A dash of dawn-dew from the honeysuckle,
But so you were baptised into the grace
And privilege of seeing....

First, the lime,
(I had enough, there, of the lime, be sure,—
My morning-dream was often hummed away
By the bees in it;) past the lime, the lawn,
Which, after sweeping broadly round the house,
Went trickling through the shrubberies in a stream
Of tender turf, and wore and lost itself
Among the acacias...

* * *

Not a grand nature. Not my chestnut-woods
Of Vallombrosa, cleaving by the spurs
To the precipices. Not my headlong leaps
Of waters, that cry out for joy or fear
In leaping through the palpitating pines,
Like a white soul tossed out to eternity
With thrills of time upon it. Not indeed
My multitudinous mountains, sitting in
The magic circle, with the mutual touch
Electric, panting from their full deep hearts
Beneath the influent heavens, and waiting for
Communion and commission. Italy
Is one thing, England one.

On English ground
You understand the letter, — ere the fall
How Adam lived in a garden. All the fields
Are tied up fast with hedges, nosegay-like;
The hills are crumpled plains, the plains parterres,
The trees, round, woolly, ready to be clipped;
And if you seek for any wilderness
You find, at best, a park.

* * *

I sate alone, and drew the blessing in
Of all that nature. With a gradual step,
A stir among the leaves, a breath, a ray,
It came in softly, while the angels made
A place for it beside me. The moon came,
And swept my chamber clean of foolish thoughts.
The sun came, saying, 'Shall I lift this light
Against the lime-tree, and you will not look?
I make the birds sing – listen! but, for you,
God never hears your voice, excepting when
You lie upon the bed at nights and weep.'

Then, something moved me. Then, I wakened up
More slowly than I verily write now,
But wholly, at last, I wakened, opened wide
The window and my soul, and let the airs
And out-door sights sweep gradual gospels in,
Regenerating what I was.

(Left largely alone, Aurora reads widely.)

Books, books, books!
I had found the secret of a garret-room
Piled high with cases in my father's name;
Piled high, packed large,—where, creeping in and out
Among the giant fossils of my past,
Like some small nimble mouse between the ribs
Of a mastodon, I nibbled here and there
At this or that box, pulling through the gap,
In heats of terror, haste, victorious joy,
The first book first. And how I felt it beat
Under my pillow, in the morning's dark,
An hour before the sun would let me read!
My books! At last, because the time was ripe,
I chanced upon the poets.

* * *

O delight
And triumph of the poet, – who would say
A man's mere 'yes,' a woman's common 'no,'
A little human hope of that or this,
And says the word so that it burns you through
With a special revelation, shakes the heart
Of all the men and women in the world,
As if one came back from the dead and spoke,
With eyes too happy, a familiar thing
Become divine i' the utterance! while for him
The poet, the speaker, he expands with joy;

The palpitating angel in his flesh
Thrills inly with consenting fellowship
To those innumerable spirits who sun themselves
Outside of time.

O life, O poetry,
—Which means life in life!

(Aurora tries to write poetry herself)

In those days, though, I never analysed,
Not even myself. Analysis comes late.
You catch a sight of Nature, earliest,
In full front sun-face, and your eyelids wink
And drop before the wonder of't; you miss
The form, through seeing the light. I lived, those days,
And wrote because I lived – unlicensed else:
My heart beat in my brain.

* * *

... And so, like most young poets, in a flush
Of individual life, I poured myself
Along the veins of others, and achieved
Mere lifeless imitations of live verse,
And made the living answer for the dead,
Profaning Nature.

* * *

...For me, I wrote
False poems, like the rest, and thought them true,
Because myself was true in writing them.
I, peradventure, have writ true ones since
With less complacence.

But I could not hide
My quickening inner life from those at watch.
They saw a light at a window now and then,
They had not set there.: who had set it there?
My father's sister started when she caught
My soul agaze in my eyes. She could not say
I had no business with a sort of soul,
But plainly she objected...

(Her aunt sets her to household tasks, but Aurora leads an inner life. She continues to walk in the countryside alone or with her cousin Romney, sometimes accompanied by Romney's friend, a painter called Vincent Carrington.)

Often we walked only two
If cousin Romney pleased to walk with me.
We read, or talked, or quarrelled, as it chanced.

We were not lovers, nor even friends well-matched—
Say rather, scholars upon different tracks,
And thinkers disagreed, he, overfull
Of what is, and I, haply, overbold
For what might be.

But then the thrushes sang,
And shook my pulses and the elms' new leaves;
At which I turned, and held my finger up,
And bade him mark that, howsoe'er the world
Went ill, as he related, certainly
The thrushes still sang in it. At the word
His brow would soften, – and he bore with me
In melancholy patience, not unkind,
While, breaking into voluble ecstasy
I flattered all the beauteous country round,
As poets use, the skies, the clouds, the fields,
The happy violets hiding from the roads
The primroses run down to, carrying gold;
The tangled hedgerows, where the cows push out
Impatient horns and tolerant churning mouths
'Twixt dripping ash-boughs, – hedgerows all alive
With birds and gnats and large white butterflies
Which look as if the May-flower had caught life
And palpitated forth upon the wind;
Hills, vales, woods, netted in a silver mist,
Farms, granges, doubled up among the hills;
And cattle grazing in the watered vales,
And cottage-chimneys smoking from the woods,
And cottage-gardens smelling everywhere,
Confused with smell of orchards. 'See,' I said,
'And see! is God not with us on the earth?
And shall we put Him down by aught we do?
Who says there's nothing for the poor and vile
Save poverty and wickedness? behold!'
And ankle-deep in English grass I leaped,
And clapped my hands, and called all very fair.

In the beginning when God called all good,
Even then, was evil near us, it is writ.
But we, indeed, who call things good and fair,
The evil is upon us while we speak;
Deliver us from evil, let us pray.

Notes to First Book

scudi – old Italian coinage

chin-bands... *Lazarus* – chin bands were strips of cloth used to bind the head of a corpse. In the Bible, the body of Lazarus, bound in linen bands, was raised from the dead by Jesus.

the polka and Cellarius – Henri Cellarius was a well-known teacher of an alternative version of the fashionable dance, the polka, in the 1840's.
Vallombrosa – rural area of Tuscany around an old monastery.

↑

Second Book

Times followed one another. Came a morn
I stood upon the brink of twenty years,
And looked before and after, as I stood
Woman and artist, – either incomplete,
Both credulous of completion. There I held
The whole creation in my little cup,
And smiled with thirsty lips before I drank,
'Good health to you and me, sweet neighbour mine,
And all these peoples.'

I was glad, that day;
The June was in me, with its multitudes
Of nightingales all singing in the dark,
And rosebuds reddening where the calyx split.
I felt so young, so strong, so sure of God!
So glad, I could not choose be very wise!
And, old at twenty, was inclined to pull
My childhood backward in a childish jest
To see the face of't once more, and farewell!
In which fantastic mood I bounded forth
At early morning, – would not wait so long
As even to snatch my bonnet by the strings,
But, brushing a green trail across the lawn
With my gown in the dew, took will and way
Among the acacias of the shrubberies,
To fly my fancies in the open air
And keep my birthday, till my aunt awoke
To stop good dreams.

(Aurora picks ivy to make herself a wreath)

I drew a wreath
Drenched, blinding me with dew, across my brow,
And fastening it behind so, ... turning faced
... My public! – cousin Romney – with a mouth
Twice graver than his eyes.

I stood there fixed,—
My arms up, like the caryatid, sole
Of some abolished temple, helplessly
Persistent in a gesture which derides
A former purpose. Yet my blush was flame,
As if from flax, not stone.

‘Aurora Leigh,
The earliest of Auroras!’
Hand stretched out
I clasped, as shipwrecked men will clasp a hand,
Indifferent to the sort of palm. The tide
Had caught me at my pastime, writing down
My foolish name too near upon the sea
Which drowned me with a blush as foolish. ‘You,
My cousin!’

The smile died out in his eyes
And dropped upon his lips, a cold dead weight,
For just a moment. ‘Here’s a book I found!
No name writ on it – poems, by the form;
Some Greek upon the margin, – lady’s Greek,
Without the accents. Read it? Not a word.
I saw at once the thing had witchcraft in’t
Whereof the reading calls up dangerous spirits;
I rather bring it to the witch.’

‘My book.
You found it...’

(Romney believes that it is not a woman’s part to write poetry. He says:)

‘Aurora, let’s be serious, and throw by
This game of head and heart. Life means, be sure,
Both heart and head, – both active, both complete,
And both in earnest. Men and women make
The world, as head and heart make human life.
Work man, work woman, since there’s work to do
In this beleaguered earth, for head and heart,
And thought can never do the work of love:
But work for ends, I mean for uses; not
For such sleek fringes (do you call them ends,
Still less God’s glory?) as we sew ourselves
Upon the velvet of those baldaquins
Held ’twixt us and the sun. That book of yours,
I have not read a page of; but I toss
A rose up – it falls calyx down, you see!
The chances are that, being a woman, young,
And pure, with such a pair of large, calm eyes,
You write as well ... and ill ... upon the whole,
As other women. If as well, what then?
If even a little better, ... still, what then?
We want the Best in art now, or no art.

(Romney continues:)

‘There it is!—
You play beside a death-bed like a child,
Yet measure to yourself a prophet’s place

To teach the living. None of all these things,
Can women understand. You generalise
Oh, nothing! – not even grief! Your quick-breathed hearts,
So sympathetic to the personal pang,
Close on each separate knife-stroke, yielding up
A whole life at each wound, incapable
Of deepening, widening a large lap of life
To hold the world-full woe. The human race
To you means, such a child, or such a man,
You saw one morning waiting in the cold,
Beside that gate, perhaps. You gather up
A few such cases, and, when strong, sometimes
Will write of factories and of slaves, as if
Your father were a negro, and your son
A spinner in the mills. All's yours and you,
All, coloured with your blood, or otherwise
Just nothing to you. Why, I call you hard
To general suffering.

* * *

‘Therefore, this same world
Uncomprehended by you, must remain
Uninfluenced by you. – Women as you are,
Mere women, personal and passionate,
You give us doating mothers, and perfect wives,
Sublime Madonnas, and enduring saints!
We get no Christ from you, – and verily
We shall not get a poet, in my mind.’

*(Romney is much concerned with the world's social injustice and practical solutions.
He continues:)*

‘May I choose indeed
But vow away my years, my means, my aims,
Among the helpers, if there's any help
In such a social strait? The common blood
That swings along my veins, is strong enough
To draw me to this duty.’

Then I spoke.

‘I have not stood long on the strand of life,
And these salt waters have had scarcely time
To creep so high up as to wet my feet:
I cannot judge these tides – I shall, perhaps.
A woman's always younger than a man
At equal years, because she is disallowed
Maturing by the outdoor sun and air,
And kept in long-clothes past the age to walk.
Ah well, I know you men judge otherwise!
You think a woman ripens as a peach,

‘What you love,
Is not a woman, Romney, but a cause:
You want a helpmate, not a mistress, sir,
A wife to help your ends – in her no end!
Your cause is noble, your ends excellent,
But I, being most unworthy of these and that,
Do otherwise conceive of love. Farewell.’

‘Farewell, Aurora? you reject me thus?’
He said.

‘Sir, you were married long ago.
You have a wife already whom you love,
Your social theory. Bless you both, I say.’

(Aurora adds indignantly.)

‘You forget too much
That every creature, female as the male,
Stands single in responsible act and thought
As also in birth and death. Whoever says
To a loyal woman, “Love and work with me,”
Will get fair answers, if the work and love,
Being good themselves, are good for her – the best
She was born for. Women of a softer mood,
Surprised by men when scarcely awake to life,
Will sometimes only hear the first word, love,
And catch up with it any kind of work,
Indifferent, so that dear love go with it:
I do not blame such women, though, for love,
They pick much oakum; earth’s fanatics make
Too frequently heaven’s saints. But *me* your work
Is not the best for, – nor your love the best,
Nor able to commend the kind of work
For love’s sake merely. Ah, you force me, sir,
To be over-bold in speaking of myself;
I, too, have my vocation, – work to do,
The heavens and earth have set me, since I changed
My father’s face for theirs, and, though your world
Were twice as wretched as you represent,
Most serious work, most necessary work,
As any of the economists’.

* * *

He,
His eyes, the motions in his silent mouth,
Were fiery points on which my words were caught,
Transfixed for ever in my memory
For his sake, not their own. And yet I know
I did not love him ... nor he me ... that’s sure....

A fine young man
Is Romney Leigh; although the sun of youth
Has shone too straight upon his brain, I know,
And fevered him with dreams of doing good
To good-for-nothing people. But a wife
Will put all right, and stroke his temples cool
With healthy touches...'

* * *

She seized my hands with both hers, strained them fast,
And drew her probing and unscrupulous eyes
Right through me, body and heart. 'Yet, foolish Sweet,
You love this man. I have watched you when he came,
And when he went, and when we've talked of him:
I am not old for nothing; I can tell
The weather-signs of love – you love this man.'

Girls blush sometimes because they are alive,
Half wishing they were dead to save the shame.
The sudden blush devours them, neck and brow;
They have drawn too near the fire of life, like gnats,
And flare up bodily, wings and all. What then?
Who's sorry for a gnat... or girl?

I blushed.

I feel the brand upon my forehead now
Strike hot, sear deep, as guiltless men may feel
The felon's iron, say, and scorn the mark
Of what they are not. Most illogical
Irrational nature of our womanhood,
That blushes one way, feels another way,
And prays, perhaps, another! After all,
We cannot be the equal of the male,
Who rules his blood a little.

For although
I blushed indeed, as if I loved the man,
And her incisive smile, accrediting
That treason of false witness in my blush,
Did bow me downward like a swathe of grass
Below its level that struck me, – I attest
The conscious skies and all their daily suns,
I think I loved him not, – nor then, nor since,
Nor ever.

(Aurora denies any love for Romney, weeping. Her aunt, disgusted at her passionate outburst, says she shall be asked again in a month. For the next few weeks, her aunt is cold, and Aurora lives in suspense. Then one evening she hears a scream: her aunt is dead, and her body, holding an unopened letter, has just been found by her maid. After the funeral, Romney tells Aurora:)

‘We have read
A will, which gives you all the personal goods
And funded monies of your aunt.’

‘I thank
Her memory for it. With three hundred pounds
We buy in England even, clear standing-room
To stand and work in. Only two hours since,
I fancied I was poor.’

‘And, cousin, still
You’re richer than you fancy. The will says,
*Three hundred pounds, and any other sum
Of which the said testatrix dies possessed.*
I say she died possessed of other sums.’

(Romney goes on to say that Aurora has inherited thirty thousand pounds. Aurora does not believe it, for her aunt never possessed such a large sum of money. Romney tells her that the money was given by him to her aunt for this express purpose, so that Aurora might be wealthy and free:)

‘The day before her death-day,’ he replied,
‘The gift was in her hands. We’ll find that deed,
And certify that date to you.’

As one
Who has climbed a mountain-height and carried up
His own heart climbing, panting in his throat
With the toil of the ascent, takes breath at last,
Looks back in triumph – so I stood and looked:
‘Dear cousin Romney, we have reached the top
Of this steep question, and may rest, I think.
But first, – I pray you pardon, that the shock
And surge of natural feeling and event
Had made me oblivious of acquainting you
That this, this letter, (unread, mark, still sealed)
Was found enfolded in the poor dead hand:
That spirit of hers had gone beyond the address,
Which could not find her though you wrote it clear,—
I know your writing, Romney, – recognise
The open-hearted *A*, the liberal sweep
Of the *G*. Now listen, – let us understand;
You will not find that famous deed of gift,
Unless you find it in the letter here,
Which, not being mine, I give you back.’

(Aurora explains that the gift made by Romney had not been accepted by her aunt, and was therefore not valid. She tears the letter up, to Romney’s dismay.)

I’m thinking how his eyes looked, his,
With what despondent and surprised reproach!
I think the tears were in them, as he looked;
I think the manly mouth just trembled. Then

He broke the silence.

‘I may ask, perhaps,
Although no stranger ... only Romney Leigh,
Which means still less ... than Vincent Carrington...
Your plans in going hence, and where you go.
This cannot be a secret.’

‘All my life
Is open to you, cousin. I go hence
To London, to the gathering-place of souls,
To live mine straight out, vocally, in books...’

(Romney says that he himself intends to work on behalf of the poor, supporting almshouses, hospitals and schools.)

He smiled as men smile when they will not speak
Because of something bitter in the thought;
And still I feel his melancholy eyes
Look judgment on me. It is seven years since:
I know not if ’twas pity or ’twas scorn
Has made them so far-reaching: judge it ye
Who have had to do with pity more than love.
And scorn than hatred. I am used, since then,
To other ways, from equal men. But so,
Even so, we let go hands, my cousin and I,
And, in between us, rushed the torrent-world
To blanch our faces like divided rocks,
And bar for ever mutual sight and touch
Except through swirl of spray and all that roar.

Notes to Second Book

calyx – outer case of flower-bud

caryatid – female figure in stone, used as a column in ancient Greece to prop up a roof.

baldaquins – canopies

pick much oakum – picking oakum (cleaning ropes) was a tedious task, sometimes done by prisoners.



Third Book

‘To-day thou girdest up thy loins thyself,
And goest where thou wouldest: presently
Others shall gird thee,’ said the Lord, ‘to go
Where thou would’st not.’ He spoke to Peter thus,
To signify the death which he should die
When crucified head downwards.

If He spoke
To Peter then, He speaks to us the same;
The word suits many different martyrdoms,

And signifies a multiform of death,
Although we scarcely die apostles, we,
And have mislaid the keys of heaven and earth.

For 'tis not in mere death that men die most;
And, after our first girding of the loins
In youth's fine linen and fair broidery,
To run up hill and meet the rising sun,
We are apt to sit tired, patient as a fool,
While others gird us with the violent bands
Of social figments, feints, and formalisms,
Reversing our straight nature, lifting up
Our base needs, keeping down our lofty thoughts,
Head downward on the cross-sticks of the world.

Yet He can pluck us from that shameful cross.
God, set our feet low and our forehead high,
And show us how a man was made to walk!

Leave the lamp, Susan, and go up to bed.
The room does very well; I have to write
Beyond the stroke of midnight. Get away;
Your steps, for ever buzzing in the room,
Tease me like gnats. Ah, letters! throw them down
At once, as I must have them, to be sure,
Whether I bid you never bring me such
At such an hour, or bid you. No excuse.
You choose to bring them, as I choose perhaps
To throw them in the fire. Now, get to bed,
And dream, if possible, I am not cross.

Why what a pettish, petty thing I grow,—
A mere, mere woman, a mere flaccid nerve,—
A kerchief left out all night in the rain,
Turned soft so,—overtasked and overstrained
And overlived in this close London life!
And yet I should be stronger.

Never burn

Your letters, poor Aurora! for they stare
With red seals from the table, saying each,
'Here's something that you know not.' Out alas,
'Tis scarcely that the world's more good and wise
Or even straighter and more consequent
Since yesterday at this time—yet, again,
If but one angel spoke from Ararat,
I should be very sorry not to hear:
So open all the letters! let me read.
Blanche Ord, the writer in the 'Lady's Fan,'
Requests my judgment on ... that, afterwards.
Kate Ward desires the model of my cloak,

And signs, 'Elisha to you.' Pringle Sharpe
Presents his work on 'Social Conduct,' craves
A little money for his pressing debts...
From me, who scarce have money for my needs...

* * *

... My critic Stokes objects to abstract thoughts;
'Call a man, John, a woman, Joan,' says he,
'And do not prate so of *humanities*:'
Whereat I call my critic, simply, Stokes.
My critic Jobson recommends more mirth,
Because a cheerful genius suits the times...

* * *

Ha,— this from Vincent Carrington,— 'Dear friend,
I want good counsel. Will you lend me wings
To raise me to the subject, in a sketch
I'll bring to-morrow — may I? at eleven?
A poet's only born to turn to use:
So save you! for the world ... and Carrington.'
'(Writ after.) Have you heard of Romney Leigh,
Beyond what's said of him in newspapers,
His phalansteries there, his speeches here,
His pamphlets, pleas, and statements, everywhere?
He dropped me long ago...'

* * *

Kind Vincent Carrington. I'll let him come.
He talks of Florence,— and may say a word
Of something as it chanced seven years ago,
A hedgehog in the path, or a lame bird,
In those green country walks, in that good time,
When certainly I was so miserable ...
I seem to have missed a blessing ever since.

The music soars within the little lark,
And the lark soars. It is not thus with men.
We do not make our places with our strains,—
Content, while they rise, to remain behind,
Alone on earth instead of so in heaven.
No matter — I bear on my broken tale.

When Romney Leigh and I had parted thus,
I took a chamber up three flights of stairs
Not far from being as steep as some larks climb,
And, in a certain house in Kensington,
Three years I lived and worked. Get leave to work

In this world,— 'tis the best you get at all;
For God, in cursing, gives us better gifts
Than men in benediction. God says, 'Sweat
For foreheads;' men say 'crowns;' and so we are crowned,—
Ay, gashed by some tormenting circle of steel
Which snaps with a secret spring. Get work, get work;
Be sure 'tis better than what you work to get.
Serene and unafraid of solitude,
I worked the short days out,— and watched the sun
On lurid morns or monstrous afternoons,
(Like some Druidic idol's fiery brass,
With fixed unflickering outline of dead heat,
In which the blood of wretches pent inside
Seemed oozing forth to incarnadine the air)
Push out through fog with his dilated disk,
And startle the slant roofs and chimney-pots
With splashes of fierce colour. Or I saw
Fog only, the great tawny weltering fog,
Involve the passive city, strangle it
Alive, and draw it off into the void,
Spires, bridges, streets, and squares, as if a sponge
Had wiped out London...

* * *

...I worked with patience, which means almost power.
I did some excellent things indifferently,
Some bad things excellently. Both were praised,
The latter loudest. And by such a time
That I myself had set them down as sins
Scarce worth the price of sackcloth, week by week
Arrived some letter through the sedulous post,
Like these I've read, and yet dissimilar,
With pretty maiden seals,— initials twined
Of lilies, or a heart marked *Emily*
(Convicting Emily of being all heart);
Or rarer tokens from young bachelors...

* * *

And he ... my cousin Romney ... did not write.
I felt the silent finger of his scorn
Prick every bubble of my frivolous fame
As my breath blew it, and resolve it back
To the air it came from. Oh, I justified
The measure he had taken of my height:
The thing was plain — he was not wrong a line;
I played at art, made thrusts with a toy-sword,
Amused the lads and maidens.

Came a sigh

Deep, hoarse with resolution,— I would work
To better ends, or play in earnest. ‘Heavens,
I think I should be almost popular
If this went on!’ – I ripped my verses up,
And found no blood upon the rapier’s point;
The heart in them was just an embryo’s heart,
Which never yet had beat, that it should die;
Just gasps of make-believe galvanic life;
Mere tones, inorganised to any tune.

(Aurora works harder at her writing: failing to make money from verse, she turns to prose articles and stories, developing her skills.)

Having bread

For just so many days, just breathing room
For body and verse, I stood up straight and worked
My veritable work. And as the soul
Which grows within a child, makes the child grow,—
Or as the fiery sap, the touch from God,
Careering through a tree, dilates the bark
And roughs with scale and knob, before it strikes
The summer foliage out in a green flame—
So life, in deepening with me, deepened all
The course I took, the work I did. Indeed,
The academic law convinced of sin;
The critics cried out on the falling off,
Regretting the first manner. But I felt
My heart’s life throbbing in my verse to show
It lived...

(One day a lady calls, introducing herself as Lady Waldemar:)

...She bent

Her head, as queens may mock,— then lifting up
Her eyelids with a real grave queenly look,
Which ruled, and would not spare, not even herself,—
‘I think you have a cousin:— Romney Leigh.’

‘You bring a word from *him?*’— my eyes leapt up
To the very height of hers,— ‘a word from *him?*’

‘I bring a word about him, actually.
But first, (she pressed me with her urgent eyes)
‘You do not love him,— you?’
‘You’re frank at least
In putting questions, madam,’ I replied.
‘I love my cousin cousinly — no more.’

‘I guessed as much. I’m ready to be frank
In answering also, if you’ll question me,
Or even with something less. You stand outside,
You artist women, of the common sex;
You share not with us, and exceed us so
Perhaps by what you’re mulcted in, your hearts
Being starved to make your heads: so run the old
Traditions of you. I can therefore speak,
Without the natural shame which creatures feel
When speaking on their level, to their like.’”

(Lady Waldemar goes on to say that she is a widow, and is in love with Romney, somewhat against her own will:)

...As for him,
He’s best. Indeed he builds his goodness up
So high, it topples down to the other side
And makes a sort of badness; there’s the worst
I have to say against your cousin’s best!
And so be mild, Aurora, with my worst
For his sake, if not mine.’

‘I own myself
Incredulous of confidence like this
Availing him or you.’

‘And I, myself,
Of being worthy of him with any love;
In your sense I am not so – let it pass.
And yet I save him if I marry him;
Let that pass too.’

‘Pass, pass! we play police
Upon my cousin’s life, to indicate
What may or may not pass?’ I cried. ‘He knows
What’s worthy of him; the choice remains with *him*;
And what he chooses, act or wife, I think
I shall not call unworthy, I, for one.’

‘’Tis somewhat rashly said,’ she answered slow.
‘Now let’s talk reason, though we talk of love.
Your cousin Romney Leigh’s a monster; there,
The word’s out fairly, let me prove the fact.
We’ll take, say, that most perfect of antiques,
They call the Genius of the Vatican,
(Which seems too beautiful to endure itself
In this mixed world,) and fasten it for once
Upon the torso of the Drunken Fawn,
(Who might limp surely, if he did not dance,)
Instead of Buonarroti’s mask: what then?
We show the sort of monster Romney is,
With god-like virtues and heroic aims
Subjoined to limping possibilities

Of mismade human nature. Grant the man
Twice god-like, twice heroic,— still he limps,
And here's the point we come to.'

'Pardon me,
But, Lady Waldemar, the point's the thing
We never come to.'

'Caustic, insolent
At need! I like you' — (there, she took my hands)
'And now my lioness, help Androcles,
For all your roaring. Help me! for myself
I would not say so — but for him. He limps
So certainly, he'll fall into the pit
A week hence,— so I lose him — so he is lost!
And when he's fairly married, he a Leigh,
To a girl of doubtful life, undoubtful birth,
Starved out in London till her coarse-grained hands
Are whiter than her morals,— even you
May call his choice unworthy.'

'Married! lost!
He, ... Romney!'

(Lady Waldemar wants to take Aurora to see Romney's betrothed: Marian Erle, a drover's daughter who lives at St. Margaret's Court. Lady Waldemar thinks Aurora will tell Romney not to marry, as the marriage is unsuitable even if he loves Marian. Aurora retorts:)

'Loved!' I cried;
'Who tells you that he wants a wife to love?
He gets a horse to use, not love, I think:
There's work for wives as well,— and after, straw,
When men are liberal. For myself, you err
Supposing power in me to break this match.
I could not do it, to save Romney's life,
And would not, to save mine.'

(Nevertheless, Aurora goes to see Marian for herself:)

Two hours afterward,
Within St. Margaret's Court I stood alone,
Close-veiled. A sick child, from an ague-fit,
Whose wasted right hand gambled 'gainst his left
With an old brass button in a blot of sun,
Jeered weakly at me as I passed across
The uneven pavement; while a woman, rouged
Upon the angular cheek-bones, kerchief torn,
Thin dangling locks, and flat lascivious mouth,
Cursed at a window, both ways, in and out,
By turns some bed-rid creature and myself,—
'Lie still there, mother! liker the dead dog
You'll be to-morrow. What, we pick our way,

Fine madam, with those damnable small feet!
 We cover up our face from doing good,
 As if it were our purse! What brings you here,
 My lady? is't to find my gentleman
 Who visits his tame pigeon in the eaves?
 Our cholera catch you with its cramps and spasms,
 And tumble up your good clothes, veil and all,
 And turn your whiteness dead-blue.' I looked up;
 I think I could have walked through hell that day,
 And never flinched. 'The dear Christ comfort you,'
 I said, 'you must have been most miserable
 To be so cruel,' – and I emptied out
 My purse upon the stones: when, as I had cast
 The last charm in the cauldron, the whole court
 Went boiling, bubbling up, from all its doors
 And windows, with a hideous wail of laughs
 And roar of oaths, and blows perhaps ... I passed
 Too quickly for distinguishing ... and pushed
 A little side-door hanging on a hinge,
 And plunged into the dark, and groped and climbed
 The long, steep, narrow stair 'twixt broken rail
 And mildewed wall that let the plaster drop
 To startle me in the blackness. Still, up, up!
 So high lived Romney's bride. I paused at last
 Before a low door in the roof, and knocked;
 There came an answer like a hurried dove—
 'So soon? can that be Mister Leigh? so soon?'
 And as I entered, an ineffable face
 Met mine upon the threshold. 'Oh, not you,
 Not you!' ... the dropping of the voice implied,
 'Then, if not you, for me not any one.'
 I looked her in the eyes, and held her hands,
 And said, 'I am his cousin,— Romney Leigh's;
 And here I'm come to see my cousin too.'
 She touched me with her face and with her voice,
 This daughter of the people. Such soft flowers,
 From such rough roots? the people, under there,
 Can sin so, curse so, look so, smell so ... faugh!
 Yet have such daughters?

No wise beautiful

Was Marian Erle. She was not white nor brown,
 But could look either, like a mist that changed
 According to being shone on more or less...

(Marian tells her story: born into poverty, with a drunken father and violent mother, she had little education other than Sunday School.)

And so passed Marian's life from year to year.
 Her parents took her with them when they tramped,
 Dodged lanes and heaths, frequented towns and fairs,

And once went farther and saw Manchester,
And once the sea, that blue end of the world,
That fair scroll-finis of a wicked book,—
And twice a prison,— back at intervals,
Returning to the hills. Hills draw like heaven,
And stronger sometimes, holding out their hands
To pull you from the vile flats up to them.
And though, perhaps, these strollers still strolled back,
As sheep do, simply that they knew the way,
They certainly felt bettered unawares
Emerging from the social smut of towns
To wipe their feet clean on the mountain-turf,
In which long wanderings, Marian lived and learned,
Endured and learned. The people on the roads
Would stop and ask her how her eyes outgrew
Her cheeks, and if she meant to lodge the birds
In all that hair; and then they lifted her,
The miller in his cart, a mile or twain,
The butcher's boy on horseback. Often, too,
The pedlar stopped, and tapped her on the head
With absolute forefinger, brown and ringed,
And asked if peradventure she could read;
And when she answered 'ay,' would toss her down
Some stray odd volume from his heavy pack,
A Thomson's Seasons, mulcted of the Spring,
Or half a play of Shakspeare's, torn across,
(She had to guess the bottom of a page
By just the top sometimes,— as difficult,
As, sitting on the moon, to guess the earth!)

* * *

Her parents called her a strange, sickly child,
Not good for much, and given to sulk and stare,
And smile into the hedges and the clouds,
And tremble if one shook her from her fit
By any blow, or word even. Out-door jobs
Went ill with her; and household quiet work
She was not born to. Had they kept the north,
They might have had their pennyworth out of her,
Like other parents, in the factories,
(Your children work for you, not you for them,
Or else they better had been choked with air
The first breath drawn;) but, in this tramping life,
Was nothing to be done with such a child
But tramp and tramp. And yet she knitted hose
Not ill, and was not dull at needlework;
And all the country people gave her pence
For darning stockings past their natural age,
And patching petticoats from old to new,

And other light work done for thrifty wives.

One day, said Marian,— the sun shone that day—
Her mother had been badly beat, and felt
The bruises sore about her wretched soul,
(That must have been): she came in suddenly,
And snatching, in a sort of breathless rage,
Her daughter's headgear comb, let down the hair
Upon her, like a sudden waterfall,
And drew her drenched and passive, by the arm,
Outside the hut they lived in. When the child
Could clear her blinded face from all that stream
Of tresses ... there, a man stood, with beast's eyes
That seemed as they would swallow her alive
Complete in body and spirit, hair and all,—
With burning stertorous breath that hurt her cheek,
He breathed so near. The mother held her tight,
Saying hard between her teeth — 'Why wench, why wench,
The squire speaks to you now — the squire's too good;
He means to set you up, and comfort us.
Be mannerly at least.' The child turned round,
And looked up piteous in the mother's face,
(Be sure that mother's death-bed will not want
Another devil to damn, than such a look)
'Oh, mother!' then, with desperate glance to heaven,
'God, free me from my mother,' she shrieked out,
'These mothers are too dreadful.' And, with force
As passionate as fear, she tore her hands
Like lilies from the rocks, from hers and his,
And sprang down, bounded headlong down the steep,
Away from both — away, if possible,
As far as God, — away! They yelled at her,
As famished hounds at a hare. She heard them yell,
She felt her name hiss after her from the hills,
Like shot from guns. On, on. And now she had cast
The voices off with the uplands. On. Mad fear
Was running in her feet and killing the ground;
The white roads curled as if she burnt them up,
The green fields melted, wayside trees fell back
To make room for her. Then her head grew vexed,
Trees, fields, turned on her, and ran after her;
She heard the quick pants of the hills behind,
Their keen air pricked her neck; she had lost her feet,
Could run no more, yet somehow went as fast,
The horizon red 'twixt steeples in the east
So sucked her forward, forward, while her heart
Kept swelling, swelling, till it swelled so big
It seemed to fill her body.— when it burst
And overflowed the world and swamped the light,
'And now I am dead and safe,' thought Marian Erle—.

She had dropped, she had fainted.

As the sense returned,
The night had passed – not life's night. She was 'ware
Of heavy tumbling motions, creaking wheels,
The driver shouting to the lazy team
That swung their rankling bells against her brain;
While, through the waggon's coverture and chinks,
The cruel yellow morning pecked at her
Alive or dead, upon the straw inside,—
At which her soul ached back into the dark
And prayed, 'no more of that.' A waggoner
Had found her in a ditch beneath the moon,
As white as moonshine, save for the oozing blood.
At first he thought her dead; but when he had wiped
The mouth and heard it sigh, he raised her up,
And laid her in his waggon in the straw,
And so conveyed her to the distant town
To which his business called himself, and left
That heap of misery at the hospital.

(Although ill for weeks, Marian recovers under the quiet care of the hospital, until to her dismay she is told that she must leave. Then a man comes to visit the sick: it is Romney Leigh.)

And when it was her turn to have the face
Upon her, all those buzzing pallid lips
Being satisfied with comfort – when he changed
To Marian, saying 'And *you?* you're going, where?'—
She, moveless as a worm beneath a stone
Which some one's stumbling foot has spurned aside,
Writhed suddenly, astonished with the light,
And breaking into sobs cried, 'Where I go?
None asked me till this moment. Can I say
Where I go? when it has not seemed worth while
To God himself, who thinks of every one,
To think of me, and fix where I shall go?'

'So young,' he gently asked her, 'you have lost
Your father and your mother?'

'Both,' she said,
'Both lost! my father was burnt up with gin
Or ever I sucked milk, and so is lost.
My mother sold me to a man last month,
And so my mother's lost, 'tis manifest.
And I, who fled from her for miles and miles,
As if I had caught sight of the fires of hell
Through some wild gap, (she was my mother, sir)
It seems I shall be lost too, presently,
And so we end, all three of us.'

‘Poor child,’
He said,— with such a pity in his voice,
It soothed her more than her own tears,— ‘poor child!
’Tis simple that betrayal by mother’s love
Should bring despair of God’s too. Yet be taught;
He’s better to us than many mothers are,
And children cannot wander beyond reach
Of the sweep of his white raiment. Touch and hold!
And if you weep still, weep where John was laid
While Jesus loved him.’

‘She could say the words,’
She told me, ‘exactly as he uttered them
A year back, since, in any doubt or dark
They came out like the stars, and shone on her
With just their comfort. Common words, perhaps;
The ministers in church might say the same;
But *he*, he made the church with what he spoke,—
The difference was the miracle,’ said she.

Then catching up her smile to rapture,
She added quickly, ‘I repeat his words,
But not his tones: can any one repeat
The music of an organ, out of church?
And when he said ‘poor child,’ I shut my eyes
To feel how tenderly his voice broke through,
As the ointment-box broke on the Holy feet
To let out the rich medicative nard.’

She told me how he had raised and rescued her
With reverent pity, as, in touching grief,
He touched the wounds of Christ,— and made her feel
More self-respecting. Hope, he called, belief
In God, — work, worship — therefore let us pray!
And thus, to snatch her soul from atheism,
And keep it stainless from her mother’s face,
He sent her to a famous sempstress-house
Far off in London, there to work and hope.

With that, they parted. She kept sight of Heaven,
But not of Romney. He had good to do
To others: through the days and through the nights,
She sewed and sewed and sewed. She drooped sometimes,
And wondered, while, along the tawny light,
She struck the new thread into her needle’s eye,
How people without mothers on the hills
Could choose the town to live in! — then she drew
The stitch, and mused how Romney’s face would look,
And if ’twere likely he’d remember hers
When they two had their meeting after death.

Who made the sun – a puzzled blush, that grew,
Then broke off in a rapid radiant smile
Of sure solution. ‘Loves me! he loves all,—
And me, of course. He had not asked me else
To work with him for ever and be his wife.’

Her words reproved me. This perhaps was love—
To have its hands too full of gifts to give,
For putting out a hand to take a gift;
To love so much, the perfect round of love
Includes, in strict conclusion, being loved;
As Eden-dew went up and fell again,
Enough for watering Eden. Obviously
She had not thought about his love at all:
The cataracts of her soul had poured themselves,
And risen self-crowned in rainbow: would she ask
Who crowned her?— it sufficed that she was crowned.
With women of my class ’tis otherwise:
We haggle for the small change of our gold,
And so much love, accord, for so much love,
Rialto-prices...

* * *

...I sate there, musing, till she touched my hand
With hers, as softly as a strange white bird
She feared to startle in touching. ‘You are kind.
But are you, peradventure, vexed at heart
Because your cousin takes me for a wife?
I know I am not worthy – nay, in truth,
I’m glad on’t, since, for that, he chooses me.
He likes the poor things of the world the best;
I would not therefore, if I could, be rich.
It pleasures him to stoop for buttercups;
I would not be a rose upon the wall
A queen might stop at, near the palace-door,
To say to a courtier, “Pluck that rose for me,
‘It’s prettier than the rest.” O Romney Leigh!
I’d rather far be trodden by his foot,
Than lie in a great queen’s bosom.

* * *

‘Ah, dearest lady, serge will outweigh silk
For winter-wear, when bodies feel a-cold,
And I’ll be a true wife to your cousin Leigh.’

Before I answered he was there himself.
I think he had been standing in the room
And listened probably to half her talk,

Arrested, turned to stone,— as white as stone.
Will tender sayings make men look so white?
He loves her then profoundly.

‘You are here,
Aurora? Here I meet you!’—We clasped hands.

‘Even so, dear Romney. Lady Waldemar
Has sent me in haste to find a cousin of mine
Who shall be.’

‘Lady Waldemar is good.’

‘Here’s one, at least, who is good,’ I sighed, and touched
Poor Marian’s happy head, as, doglike, she
Most passionately patient, waited on,
A-tremble for her turn of greeting words;
‘I’ve sate a full hour with your Marian Erle,
And learnt the thing by heart,— and from my heart
Am therefore competent to give you thanks
For such a cousin.’

‘You accept at last
A gift from me, Aurora, without scorn?
At last I please you?’— How his voice was changed.

‘You cannot please a woman against her will,
And once you vexed me. Shall we speak of that?
We’ll say, then, you were noble in it all,
And I not ignorant — let it pass! And now,
You please me, Romney, when you please yourself;
So, please you, be fanatical in love,
And I’m well pleased. Ah, cousin! at the old hall
Among the gallery portraits of our Leighs,
We shall not find a sweeter signory
Than this pure forehead’s.’

Not a word he said.

How arrogant men are!— Even philanthropists,
Who try to take a wife up in the way
They put down a subscription-cheque,— if once
She turns and says, ‘I will not tax you so,
Most charitable sir,’— feel ill at ease,
As though she had wronged them somehow. I suppose
We women should remember what we are,
And not throw back an obolus inscribed
With Caesar’s image, lightly. I resumed.

‘It strikes me, some of those sublime Vandykes
Were not too proud to make good saints in heaven;
And if so, then they’re not too proud to-day
To bow down (now the ruffs are off their necks)
And own this good, true, noble Marian, yours,
And mine, I’ll say! — For poets (bear the word)

Half-poets even, are still whole democrats,—
Oh, not that we're disloyal to the high,
But loyal to the low, and cognisant
Of the less scrutable majesties. For me,
I comprehend your choice, I justify
Your right in choosing.'

'No, no, no,' he sighed,
With a sort of melancholy impatient scorn,
As some grown man, who never had a child,
Puts by some child who plays at being a man;
'You did not, do not, cannot comprehend
My choice, my ends, my motives, nor myself:
No matter now: we'll let it pass, you say.
I thank you for your generous cousinship
Which helps this present; I accept for her
Your favourable thoughts. We're fallen on days,
We two, who are not poets, when to wed
Requires less mutual love than common love,
For two together to bear out at once
Upon the loveless many. Work in pairs,
In galley-couplings or in marriage-rings,
The difference lies in the honour, not the work,—
And such we're bound to, I and she. But love,
(You poets are benighted in this age;
The hour's too late for catching even moths,
You've gnats instead,) love!— love's fool-paradise
Is out of date, like Adam's. Set a swan
To swim the Trenton, rather than true love
To float its fabulous plumage safely down
The cataracts of this loud transition-time,—
Whose roar for ever henceforth, in my ears,
Must keep me deaf to music.'

There, I turned
And kissed poor Marian, out of discontent.
The man had baffled, chafed me, till I flung
For refuge to the woman,— as, sometimes,
Impatient of some crowded room's close smell,
You throw a window open and lean out
To breathe a long breath in the dewy night
And cool your angry forehead. She, at least,
Was not built up, as walls are, brick by brick;
Each fancy squared, each feeling ranged by line,
The very heat of burning youth applied
To indurate forms and systems! excellent bricks,
A well-built wall,— which stops you on the road,
And, into which, you cannot see an inch
Although you beat your head against it — pshaw!

(Aurora bids them farewell, but Romney accompanies her through the area for safety's sake. The two talk on the way:)

We talked on fast, while every common word
Seemed tangled with the thunder at one end,
And ready to pull down upon our heads
A terror out of sight. And yet to pause
Were surelier mortal: we tore greedily up
All silence, all the innocent breathing-points,
As if, like pale conspirators in haste,
We tore up papers where our signatures
Imperilled us to an ugly shame or death.

I cannot tell you why it was. 'Tis plain
We had not loved nor hated: wherefore dread
To spill gunpowder on ground safe from fire?
Perhaps we had lived too closely, to diverge
So absolutely: leave two clocks, they say,
Wound up to different hours, upon one shelf,
And slowly, through the interior wheels of each,
The blind mechanic motion sets itself
A-throb to feel out for the mutual time.
It was not so with us, indeed: while he
Struck midnight, I kept striking six at dawn,
While he marked judgment, I, redemption-day;
And such exception to a general law,
Imperious upon inert matter even,
Might make us, each to either, insecure,
A beckoning mystery or a troubling fear.

I mind me, when we parted at the door,
How strange his good-night sounded,— like good-night
Beside a deathbed, where the morrow's sun
Is sure to come too late for more good-days.
And all that night I thought.... 'Good-night,' said he.

And so, a month passed. Let me set it down
At once,— I have been wrong, I have been wrong.

* * *

...What drew me back
From telling Romney plainly the designs
Of Lady Waldemar, as spoken out
To me... me? had I any right, ay, right,
With womanly compassion and reserve
To break the fall of woman's impudence?—
To stand by calmly, knowing what I knew,
And hear him call her *good*?

Distrust that word.

* * *

....We all have known
Good critics who have stamped out poet's hope,
Good statesmen who pulled ruin on the state,
Good patriots who for a theory risked a cause,
Good kings who disembowelled for a tax'
Good popes, who brought all good to jeopardy,
Good Christians who sate still in easy chairs
And damned the general world for standing up.—
Now, may the good God pardon all good men!

(Romney and Marion's marriage day arrives. The church fills up with poor people, who are despised by the gentry present:)

They clogged the street, they oozed into the church
In a dark slow stream, like blood. To see that sight,
The noble ladies stood up in their pews,
Some pale for fear, a few as red for hate,
Some simply curious, some just insolent,
And some in wondering scorn,— 'What next? what next?'
These crushed their delicate rose-lips from the smile
That misbecame them in a holy place,
With brodered hems of perfumed handkerchiefs;
Those passed the salts, with confidence of eyes
And simultaneous shiver of moiré silk:
While all the aisles, alive and black with heads,
Crawled slowly toward the altar from the street,
As bruised snakes crawl and hiss out of a hole
With shuddering involutions, swaying slow
From right to left, and then from left to right,
In pants and pauses. What an ugly crest
Of faces rose upon you everywhere
From that crammed mass! you did not usually
See faces like them in the open day:
They hide in cellars, not to make you mad
As Romney Leigh is.— Faces! — O my God,
We call those, faces? men's and women's ... ay,
And children's; — babies, hanging like a rag
Forgotten on their mother's neck, — poor mouths,
Wiped clean of mother's milk by mother's blow
Before they are taught her cursing. Faces?... phew,
We'll call them vices, festering to despairs,
Or sorrows, petrifying to vices: not
A finger-touch of God left whole on them,
All ruined, lost — the countenance worn out
As the garments, the will dissolute as the act,
The passions loose and draggling in the dirt
To trip the foot up at the first free step!

(Time passes, and yet the bride does not appear at the church.)

‘Here, Miss Leigh!’
‘Lord Howe,
You’re Romney’s friend. What’s all this waiting for?’

‘I cannot tell. The bride has lost her head
(And way, perhaps!) to prove her sympathy
With the bridegroom.’

‘What,— you also, disapprove!’

‘Oh, *I* approve of nothing in the world,’
He answered; ‘not of you, still less of me,
Nor even of Romney — though he’s worth us both.
We’re all gone wrong. The tune in us is lost:
And whistling in back alleys to the moon,
Will never catch it.’

Let me draw Lord Howe.

A born aristocrat, bred radical,
And educated socialist, who still
Goes floating, on traditions of his kind,
Across the theoretic flood from France,
Though, like a drenched Noah on a rotten deck,
Scarce safer for his place there. He, at least,
Will never land on Ararat, he knows,
To recommence the world on the old plan:
Indeed, he thinks, said world had better end,
He sympathises rather with the fish
Outside, than with the drowned paired beasts within
Who cannot couple again or multiply,—
And that’s the sort of Noah he is, Lord Howe.
He never could be anything complete,
Except a loyal, upright gentleman.

* * *

‘We’re all gone wrong,’
Said he, ‘and Romney, that dear friend of ours,
Is no-wise right. There’s one true thing on earth,
That’s love! he takes it up, and dresses it,
And acts a play with it, as Hamlet did,
To show what cruel uncles we have been,
And how we should be uneasy in our minds
While he, Prince Hamlet, weds a pretty maid
(Who keeps us too long waiting, we’ll confess)
By symbol, to instruct us formally
To fill the ditches up ’twixt class and class,
And live together in phalansteries.
What then?— he’s mad, our Hamlet! clap his play,
And bind him.’

‘Ah Lord Howe, this spectacle
Pulls stronger at us than the Dane’s. See there!
The crammed aisles heave and strain and steam with life—
Dear Heaven, what life!’

(Romney, very pale, announces to the crowd that there will be no wedding: Marian has disappeared. Some of the poor in the crowd are sceptical. One woman shouts,)

‘I did misdoubt, at first,
The fine lord meant no good by her, or us.
He, maybe, got the upper hand of her
By holding up a wedding-ring, and then ...
A choking finger on her throat, last night,
And just a clever tale to keep us still,
As she is, poor lost innocent. “Disappear!”
Who ever disappears except a ghost?
And who believes a story of a ghost?
I ask you,— would a girl go off, instead
Of staying to be married? a fine tale!
A wicked man, I say, a wicked man!
For my part I would rather starve on gin
Than make my dinner on his beef and beer.’—
At which a cry rose up— ‘We’ll have our rights.
We’ll have the girl, the girl! Your ladies there
Are married safely and smoothly every day,
And *she* shall not drop through into a trap
Because she’s poor and of the people: shame!
We’ll have no tricks played off by gentlefolks;
We’ll see her righted.’

Through the rage and roar
I heard the broken words which Romney flung
Among the turbulent masses, from the ground
He held still, with his masterful pale face,—
As huntsmen throw the ration to the pack,
Who, falling on it headlong, dog on dog
In heaps of fury, rend it, swallow it up
With yelling hound-jaws,— his indignant words,
His suppliant words, his most pathetic words,
Whereof I caught the meaning here and there
By his gesture ... torn in morsels, yelled across,
And so devoured. From end to end, the church
Rocked round us like the sea in storm, and then
Broke up like the earth in earthquake. Men cried out
‘Police’— and women stood and shrieked for God,
Or dropt and swooned; or, like a herd of deer,
(For whom the black woods suddenly grow alive,
Unleashing their wild shadows down the wind
To hunt the creatures into corners, back
And forward) madly fled, or blindly fell,
Trod screeching underneath the feet of those

Who fled and screeched.

The last sight left to me
Was Romney's terrible calm face above
The tumult!— the last sound was 'Pull him down!
Strike – kill him!' Stretching my unreasoning arms,
As men in dreams, who vainly interpose
'Twixt gods and their undoing, with a cry
I struggled to precipitate myself
Head-foremost to the rescue of my soul
In that white face,... till some one caught me back,
And so the world went out,— I felt no more.

What followed, was told after by Lord Howe,
Who bore me senseless from the strangling crowd
In church and street, and then returned alone
To see the tumult quelled.

(Marian has sent Romney a letter, asking for forgiveness. The letter speaks of Lady Waldemar and Aurora; Marian writes:)

'Very kind,
I pray you mark, was Lady Waldemar.
She came to see me nine times, rather ten—
So beautiful, she hurts me like the day
Let suddenly on sick eyes.

'Most kind of all,
Your cousin!— ah, most like you! Ere you came
She kissed me mouth to mouth: I felt her soul
Dip through her serious lips in holy fire.
God help me, but it made me arrogant;
I almost told her that you would not lose
By taking me to wife: though, ever since,
I've pondered much a certain thing she asked ...
'He loves you, Marian?' ... in a sort of mild
Derisive sadness ... as a mother asks
Her babe, 'You'll touch that star, you think?'

'Farewell!

I know I never touched it.

'This is worst:
Babes grow, and lose the hope of things above;
A silver threepence sets them leaping high—
But no more stars! mark that.

'I've writ all night,
Yet told you nothing. God, if I could die,
And let this letter break off innocent
Just here! But no – for your sake ...

'Here's the last:

I never could be happy as your wife,
I never could be harmless as your friend,
I never will look more into your face,

Till God says, "Look!" I charge you, seek me not,
Nor vex yourself with lamentable thoughts
That peradventure I have come to grief;
Be sure I'm well, I'm merry, I'm at ease,
But such a long way, long way, long way off,
I think you'll find me sooner in my grave,
And that's my choice, observe. For what remains,
An over-generous friend will care for me,
And keep me happy... happier....

'There's a blot!

This ink runs thick... we light girls lightly weep...
And keep me happier... was the thing to say,...
Than as your wife I could be! – O, my star,
My saint, my soul! For surely you're my soul,
Through whom God touched me!

(Aurora muses long on what can have happened to Marian.)

And Romney sought her many days and weeks:
He sifted all the refuse of the town,
Explored the trains, enquired among the ships,
And felt the country through from end to end;
No Marian – Though I hinted what I knew,—
A friend of his had reasons of her own
For throwing back the match – he would not hear:
The lady had been ailing ever since,
The shock had harmed her. Something in his tone
Repressed me; something in me shamed my doubt
To a sigh repressed too. He went on to say
That, putting questions where his Marian lodged,
He found she had received for visitors,
Besides himself and Lady Waldemar
And, that once, me – a dubious woman dressed
Beyond us both: the rings upon her hands
Had dazed the children when she threw them pence;
'She wore her bonnet as the queen might hers,
To show the crown,' they said,— 'a scarlet crown
Of roses that had never been in bud.'

(Aurora is sure that Marian remains pure; Romney, though pitying Marian, does not believe it. He thinks Aurora has led a life protected from reality, saying:)

... 'Better take a trade
And be of use! 'twere cheaper for your youth.'

'Of use!' I softly echoed, 'there's the point
We sweep about for ever in argument;
Like swallows, which the exasperate, dying year
Sets spinning in black circles, round and round,
Preparing for far flights o'er unknown seas.

And we, where tend we?’

‘Where?’ he said, and sighed.

‘The whole creation, from the hour we are born,
Perplexes us with questions. Not a stone
But cries behind us, every weary step,
‘Where, where?’ I leave stones to reply to stones.
Enough for me and for my fleshly heart
To harken the invocations of my kind,
When men catch hold upon my shuddering nerves
And shriek, ‘What help? what hope? what bread i’ the house,
What fire i’ the frost?’ There must be some response,
Though mine fail utterly. This social Sphinx
Who sits between the sepulchres and stews,
Makes mock and mow against the crystal heavens,
And bullies God,— exacts a word at least
From each man standing on the side of God,
However paying a sphinx-price for it.
We pay it also if we hold our peace,
In pangs and pity. Let me speak and die.
Alas, you’ll say I speak and kill instead.’

I pressed in there; ‘The best men, doing their best,
Know peradventure least of what they do:
Men usefulest i’ the world, are simply used;
The nail that holds the wood, must pierce it first,
And He alone who wields the hammer sees
The work advanced by the earliest blow. Take heart.’

‘Ah, if I could have taken yours!’ he said,
‘But that’s past now.’ Then rising,— ‘I will take
At least your kindness and encouragement.
I thank you. Dear, be happy. Sing your songs,
If that’s your way! but sometimes slumber too,
Nor tire too much with following, out of breath,
The rhymes upon your mountains of Delight.
Reflect, if Art be in truth the higher life,
You need the lower life to stand upon
In order to reach up unto that higher;
And none can stand a-tiptoe in the place
He cannot stand in with two stable feet.
Remember then! — for Art’s sake, hold your life.’

We parted so. I held him in respect.
I comprehended what he was in heart
And sacrificial greatness. Ay, but he
Supposed me a thing too small to deign to know:
He blew me, plainly, from the crucible
As some intruding, interrupting fly
Not worth the pains of his analysis
Absorbed on nobler subjects. Hurt a fly!

He would not for the world: he's pitiful
To flies even. 'Sing,' says he, 'and tease me still,
If that's your way, poor insect.' That's your way!

Notes to Fourth Book

Rialto-prices – The Rialto is the commercial area of Venice

signory (or seignory) – lordship, authority

obolus – an ancient coin

Vandykes – Anthony Van Dyke was a 17th century Flemish artist who painted many court portraits.

the Trenton – probably means the Trent, a major river in England

indurate – hard, unfeeling

the theoretic flood from France – the flow of Revolutionary ideas

sphinx – riddling creature of Greek myth

stews – brothels

mock and mow – grimaces

sphinx-prices – death; if a traveller could not answer the sphinx's riddles, she killed him.

↑

Fifth Book

Aurora Leigh, be humble. Shall I hope
To speak my poems in mysterious tune
With man and nature?– with the lava-lymph
That trickles from successive galaxies
Still drop by drop adown the finger of God
In still new worlds?– with summer-days in this
That scarce dare breathe they are so beautiful?
With spring's delicious trouble in the ground,
Tormented by the quickened blood of roots,
And softly pricked by golden crocus-sheaves
In token of the harvest-time of flowers?
With winters and with autumns,– and beyond
With the human heart's large seasons, when it hopes
And fears, joys, grieves, and loves?– with all that strain
Of sexual passion, which devours the flesh
In a sacrament of souls? with mother's breasts
Which, round the new-made creatures hanging there,
Throb luminous and harmonious like pure spheres?—
With multitudinous life, and finally
With the great escapings of ecstatic souls,
Who, in a rush of too long prisoned flame,
Their radiant faces upward, burn away
This dark of the body, issuing on a world
Beyond our mortal?

* * *

There it is;
We women are too apt to look to one,
Which proves a certain impotence in art.
We strain our natures at doing something great,
Far less because it's something great to do,
Than haply that we, so, commend ourselves
As being not small, and more appreciable
To some one friend....

* * *

Yet, so, I will not.—This vile woman's way
Of trailing garments, shall not trip me up:
I'll have no traffic with the personal thought
In art's pure temple. Must I work in vain,
Without the approbation of a man?
It cannot be; it shall not.

* * *

Shall I fail?
The Greeks said grandly in their tragic phrase,
'Let no one be called happy till his death.'
To which I add — Let no one till his death
Be called unhappy. Measure not the work
Until the day's out and the labour done;
Then bring your gauges. If the day's work's scant,
Why, call it scant; affect no compromise;
And, in that we have nobly striven at least,
Deal with us nobly, women though we be,
And honour us with truth if not with praise.

* * *

Ay, but every age
Appears to souls who live in 't (ask Carlyle)
Most unheroic. Ours, for instance, ours:
The thinkers scout it, and the poets abound
Who scorn to touch it with a finger-tip:
A pewter age,— mixed metal, silver-washed;
An age of scum, spooned off the richer past;
An age of patches for old gaberdines,
An age of mere transition, meaning nought
Except that what succeeds must shame it quite
If God please. That's wrong thinking, to my mind,
And wrong thoughts make poor poems.

* * *

But poets should
Exert a double vision; should have eyes
To see near things as comprehensively
As if afar they took their point of sight,
And distant things as intimately deep
As if they touched them. Let us strive for this.
I do distrust the poet who discerns
No character or glory in his times,
And trundles back his soul five hundred years,
Past moat and drawbridge, into a castle-court,
To sing – oh, not of lizard or of toad
Alive i' the ditch there, – 'twere excusable,
But of some black chief, half knight, half sheep-lifter,
Some beauteous dame, half chattel and half queen,
As dead as must be, for the greater part,
The poems made on their chivalric bones;
And that's no wonder: death inherits death.

Nay, if there's room for poets in the world
A little overgrown, (I think there is)
Their sole work is to represent the age,
Their age, not Charlemagne's, – this live, throbbing age,
That brawls, cheats, maddens, calculates, aspires,
And spends more passion, more heroic heat,
Betwixt the mirrors of its drawing-rooms,
Than Roland with his knights, at Roncesvalles.

* * *

Alas, I still see something to be done,
And what I do, falls short of what I see,
Though I waste myself on doing. Long green days,
Worn bare of grass and sunshine, – long calm nights,
From which the silken sleeps were fretted out,
Be witness for me, with no amateur's
Irreverent haste and busy idleness
I've set myself to art! What then? what's done?
What's done, at last?

Behold, at last, a book.
If life-blood's necessary, which it is, –
(By that blue vein athrob on Mahomet's brow,
Each prophet-poet's book must show man's blood!)
If life-blood's fertilising, I wrung mine
On every leaf of this, – unless the drops
Slid heavily on one side and left it dry.

* * *

But I am sad:
I cannot thoroughly love a work of mine,

Since none seems worthy of my thought and hope
More highly mated. He has shot them down,
My Phœbus Apollo, soul within my soul,
Who judges, by the attempted, what's attained,
And with the silver arrow from his height,
Has struck down all my works before my face,
While I said nothing. Is there aught to say?
I called the artist but a greatened man.
He may be childless also, like a man.

I laboured on alone. The wind and dust
And sun of the world beat blistering in my face;
And hope, now for me, now against me, dragged
My spirits onward, as some fallen balloon,
Which, whether caught by blossoming tree or bare,
Is torn alike. I sometimes touched my aim,
Or seemed,— and generous souls cried out, 'Be strong,
Take courage; now you're on our level,— now!
The next step saves you!' I was flushed with praise,
But, pausing just a moment to draw breath,
I could not choose but murmur to myself
'Is this all? all that's done? and all that's gained?
If this then be success, 'tis dimmer
Than any failure.'

* * *

(Two years pass. While Aurora writes, dissatisfied with her poetry, Romney is busy with good works. Then Aurora visits Lord Howe's house, where she sees Lady Waldemar among the company; she looks unchanged but for one single grey hair.)

I heard
The young man with the German student's look—
A sharp face, like a knife in a cleft stick,
Which shot up straight against the parting line
So equally dividing the long hair,—
Say softly to his neighbour, (thirty-five
And mediæval) 'Look that way, Sir Blaise.
She's Lady Waldemar — to the left,— in red—
Whom Romney Leigh, our ablest man just now,
Is soon about to marry.'

Then replied
Sir Blaise Delorme, with quiet, priestlike voice,
Too used to syllable damnations round
To make a natural emphasis worth while:
'Is Leigh your ablest man? the same, I think,
Once jilted by a recreant pretty maid
Adopted from the people? Now, in change,
He seems to have plucked a flower from the other side
Of the social hedge.'

‘A flower, a flower,’ exclaimed
My German student,— his own eyes full-blown
Bent on her. He was twenty, certainly.

Sir Blaise resumed with gentle arrogance,
As if he had dropped his alms into a hat,
And had the right to counsel,— ‘My young friend,
I doubt your ablest man’s ability
To get the least good or help meet for him,
For pagan phalanstery or Christian home,
From such a flowery creature.’

‘Beautiful!’

My student murmured, rapt,— ‘Mark how she stirs!
Just waves her head, as if a flower indeed,
Touched far off by the vain breath of our talk.’

At which that bilious Grimwald, (he who writes
For the Renovator) who had seemed absorbed
Upon the table-book of autographs,
(I dare say mentally he crunched the bones
Of all those writers, wishing them alive
To feel his tooth in earnest) turned short round
With low carnivorous laugh,— ‘A flower, of course!
She neither sews nor spins,— and takes no thought
Of her garments... falling off.’

The student flinched;

Sir Blaise, the same; then both, drawing back their chairs
As if they spied black-beetles on the floor,
Pursued their talk, without a word being thrown
To the critic.

(The student insists that Romney Leigh might choose Lady Waldemar as a wife not because of her beauty, but because she is involved in his social projects. She has visited Leigh Hall, which Romney has turned into almshouses:)

...‘There, they say, she has tarried half a week,
And milked the cows, and churned, and pressed the curd,
And said “my sister” to the lowest drab
Of all the assembled castaways; such girls!
Ay, sided with them at the washing-tub—
Conceive, Sir Blaise, those naked perfect arms,
Round glittering arms, plunged elbow-deep in suds,
Like wild swans hid in lilies all a-shake.’

Lord Howe came up. ‘What, talking poetry
So near the image of the unfavouring Muse?
That’s you, Miss Leigh: I’ve watched you half an hour,
Precisely as I watched the statue called
A Pallas in the Vatican;— you mind
The face, Sir Blaise? — intensely calm and sad,

As wisdom cut it off from fellowship,—
But *that* spoke louder. Not a word from *you!*
And these two gentlemen were bold, I marked,
And unabashed by even your silence.’

‘Ah,’

Said I, ‘my dear Lord Howe, you shall not speak
To a printing woman who has lost her place,
(The sweet safe corner of the household fire
Behind the heads of children) compliments,
As if she were a woman. We who have clipt
The curls before our eyes, may see at least
As plain as men do. Speak out, man to man,
No compliments, beseech you.’

‘Friend to friend,

Let that be....’

(Lord Howe goes on to speak of a land-owner named John Eglington:)

‘An excellent landlord of the olden stamp,
If somewhat slack in new philanthropies;
Who keeps his birthdays with a tenants’ dance,
Is hard upon them when they miss the church
Or keep their children back from catechism,
But not ungentle when the aged poor
Pick sticks at hedge-sides...

* * *

... ‘in short,’ he said,
‘I have a letter, which he urged me so
To bring you ... I could scarcely choose but yield;
Insisting that a new love, passing through
The hand of an old friendship, caught from it
Some reconciling perfume.’

‘Love, you say?

My lord, I cannot love: I only find
The rhymes for love,— and that’s not love, my lord.
Take back your letter.’

‘Pause: you’ll read it first?’

‘I will not read it: it is stereotyped;
The same he wrote to,— anybody’s name...’

Lord Howe urges Aurora to consider Eglington’s offer; for she is poor, and marriage would give her a comfortable life. She replies:)

‘I will not bate
One artist-dream on straw or down, my lord,
Nor pinch my liberal soul, though I be poor,
Nor cease to love high, though I live thus low.’

So speaking, with less anger in my voice
Than sorrow, I rose quickly to depart;
While he, thrown back upon the noble shame
Of such high-stumbling natures, murmured words,
The right words after wrong ones.

(As Aurora leaves, Lady Waldemar stops her and speaks to her of Romney, saying:)

‘He might have been a poet if he would,
But then he saw the higher thing at once
And climbed to it. I think he looks well now,
Has quite got over that unfortunate...
Ah, ah... I know it moved you. Tender-heart!
You took a liking to the wretched girl.
Perhaps you thought the marriage suitable,
Who knows? a poet hankers for romance,
And so on. As for Romney Leigh, ’tis sure
He never loved her,— never. By the way,
You have not heard of *her*...? quite out of sight,
And out of saving? lost in every sense?’

She might have gone on talking half-an-hour,
And I stood still, and cold, and pale, I think,
As a garden-statue a child pelts with snow
For pretty pastime. Every now and then
I put in ‘yes’ or ‘no,’ I scarce knew why;
The blind man walks wherever the dog pulls,
And so I answered. Till Lord Howe broke in;
‘What penance takes the wretch who interrupts
The talk of charming women? I, at last,
Must brave it. Pardon, Lady Waldemar!
The lady on my arm is tired, unwell,
And loyally I’ve promised she shall say
No harder word this evening, than... goodnight;
The rest her face speaks for her.’— Then we went.

And I breathe large at home. I drop my cloak,
Unclasp my girdle, loose the band that ties
My hair... now could I but unloose my soul!
We are sepulchred alive in this close world,
And want more room.

The charming woman there—
This reckoning up and writing down her talk
Affects me singularly. How she talked
To pain me! woman’s spite.— You wear steel-mail;
A woman takes a housewife from her breast,
And plucks the delicatest needle out
As ’twere a rose, and pricks you carefully
’Neath nails, ’neath eyelids, in your nostrils,— say,

A beast would roar so tortured,— but a man,
A human creature, must not, shall not flinch,
No, not for shame.

What vexes, after all,
Is just that such as she, with such as I,
Knows how to vex. Sweet heaven, she takes me up
As if she had fingered me and dog-eared me
And spelled me by the fireside half a life!
She knows my turns, my feeble points.— What then?
The knowledge of a thing implies the thing;
Of course, she found *that* in me, she saw *that*,
Her pencil underscored *this* for a fault,
And I, still ignorant. Shut the book up,— close!
And crush that beetle in the leaves.

O heart,
At last we shall grow hard too, like the rest,
And call it self-defence because we are soft.

And after all, now,... why should I be pained,
That Romney Leigh, my cousin, should espouse
This Lady Waldemar? And, say, she held
Her newly-blossomed gladness in my face,...
'Twas natural surely, if not generous,
Considering how, when winter held her fast,
I helped the frost with mine, and pained her more
Than she pains me. Pains me! — but wherefore pained?
'Tis clear my cousin Romney wants a wife,—
So, good!— The man's need of the woman, here,
Is greater than the woman's of the man,
And easier served; for where the man discerns
A sex, (ah, ah, the man can generalise,
Said he) we see but one, ideally
And really: where we yearn to lose ourselves
And melt like white pearls in another's wine,
He seeks to double himself by what he loves,
And make his drink more costly by our pearls.
At board, at bed, at work and holiday,
It is not good for man to be alone,
And that's his way of thinking, first and last;
And thus my cousin Romney wants a wife.

* * *

Once he thought,
For charitable ends set duly forth
In Heaven's white judgment-book, to marry... ah,
We'll call her name Aurora Leigh, although
She's changed since then!— and once, for social ends,
Poor Marian Erle, my sister Marian Erle,
My woodland sister, sweet maid Marian,

Whose memory moans on in me like the wind
Through ill-shut casements, making me more sad
Than ever I find reasons for. Alas,
Poor pretty plaintive face, embodied ghost...

(Back at home, Aurora writes a note of congratulation to Lady Waldemar, telling her that she herself plans to leave England soon, as she has been overworking. Aurora tells herself:)

And now I come, my Italy,
My own hills! Are you 'ware of me, my hills,
How I burn toward you? do you feel to-night
The urgency and yearning of my soul,
As sleeping mothers feel the sucking babe
And smile? Nay, not so much as when in heat
Vain lightnings catch at your inviolate tops
And tremble while ye are stedfast. Still ye go
Your own determined, calm, indifferent way
Toward sunrise, shade by shade, and light by light;
Of all the grand progression nought left out,
As if God verily made you for yourselves
And would not interrupt your life with ours.

Notes to Fifth Book

Carlyle – Thomas Carlyle 1795 – 1881, essayist and author of *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and The Heroic in History*.

gaberdines – woollen coats

Charlemagne (742 - 814) – King of France and Emperor of Rome.

Roland with his knights, at Roncesvalles – The Battle of Roncevaux Pass in 778 was described in the epic poem *The Song Of Roland*.

Phæbus Apollo – Greek God of prophecy, the sun and archery.

A woman takes a housewife from her breast – *housewife* here means a case for needle and thread.

↑

Sixth Book

(Aurora travels to Paris. Wandering through the streets there, she muses on poetry's role in life:)

...Plant a poet's word even, deep enough
In any man's breast, looking presently
For offshoots, you have done more for the man
Than if you dressed him in a broad-cloth coat
And warmed his Sunday potage at your fire.
Yet Romney leaves me....

God! what face is that?

O Romney, O Marian!

Walking on the quays
And pulling thoughts to pieces leisurely,
As if I caught at grasses in a field,
And bit them slow between my absent lips,
And shred them with my hands....

What face is that?

What a face, what a look, what a likeness! Full on mine
The sudden blow of it came down, till all
My blood swam, my eyes dazzled. Then I sprang...

It was as if a meditative man
Were dreaming out a summer afternoon
And watching gnats a-prick upon a pond,
When something floats up suddenly, out there,
Turns over ... a dead face, known once alive...
So old, so new! It would be dreadful now
To lose the sight and keep the doubt of this:
He plunges— ha! he has lost it in the splash.

I plunged – I tore the crowd up, either side,
And rushed on, forward, forward, after her.
Her? whom?

(Aurora thinks she has seen Marian, yet cannot find her in the crowd. It is time for her to move on to Italy; but the image of Marian persists:)

I remember perfectly

Those eyes, to-day,— how overlarge they seemed,
As if some patient passionate despair
(Like a coal dropt and forgot on tapestry,
Which slowly burns a widening circle out)
Had burnt them larger, larger. And those eyes
To-day, I do remember, saw me too,
As I saw them, with conscious lids astrain
In recognition. Now, a fantasy,
A simple shade or image of the brain,
Is merely passive, does not retro-act,
Is seen, but sees not.

'Twas a real face,
Perhaps a real Marian.

Which being so,
I ought to write to Romney, 'Marian's here.
Be comforted for Marian.'

My pen fell,
My hands struck sharp together, as hands do
Which hold at nothing. Can I write to *him*
A half-truth? can I keep my own soul blind
To the other half,... the worse?

(The 'worse' is that Marian was carrying a child in her arms. Although Aurora tells herself that the child may not be Marian's, she feels unable to write to Romney about her. She turns to the police for help in finding her but without success. Then, after some weeks, she comes upon Marian by chance, in the market-place.)

‘Marian, Marian!’— face to face—
‘Marian! I find you. Shall I let you go?’
I held her two slight wrists with both my hands;
‘Ah Marian, Marian, can I let you go?’
—She fluttered from me like a cyclamen,
As white, which, taken in a sudden wind,
Beats on against the palisade.— ‘Let pass,’
She said at last. ‘I will not,’ I replied;
‘I lost my sister Marian many days,
And sought her ever in my walks and prayers,
And, now I find her... do we throw away
The bread we worked and prayed for,— crumble it
And drop it,... to do even so by thee
Whom still I’ve hungered after more than bread,
My sister Marian?— can I hurt thee, dear?
Then why distrust me? Never tremble so.
Come with me rather where we’ll talk and live
And none shall vex us. I’ve a home for you
And me and no one else’....

She shook her head.

‘A home for you and me and no one else
Ill-suits one of us: I prefer to such,
A roof of grass on which a flower might spring,
Less costly to me than the cheapest here;
And yet I could not, at this hour, afford
A like home, even. That you offer yours,
I thank you. You are good as heaven itself—
As good as one I knew before.... Farewell.’

(When Marian says she needs to go home, Aurora accompanies her. They arrive at a house in a poor area. They go upstairs:)

’Twas a room
Scarce larger than a grave, and near as bare;
Two stools, a pallet-bed; I saw the room:
A mouse could find no sort of shelter in’t,
Much less a greater secret; curtainless,—
The window fixed you with its torturing eye,
Defying you to take a step apart
If peradventure you would hide a thing.
I saw the whole room, I and Marian there
Alone.

Alone? She threw her bonnet off,
Then, sighing as ’twere sighing the last time,
Approached the bed, and drew a shawl away:

You could not peel a fruit you fear to bruise
More calmly and more carefully than so,—
Nor would you find within, a rosier flushed
Pomegranate—

 There he lay upon his back,
The yearling creature, warm and moist with life
To the bottom of his dimples,— to the ends
Of the lovely tumbled curls about his face;
For since he had been covered over-much
To keep him from the light-glare, both his cheeks
Were hot and scarlet as the first live rose
The shepherd's heart-blood ebbed away into
The faster for his love. And love was here
As instant; in the pretty baby-mouth,
Shut close as if for dreaming that it sucked,
The little naked feet, drawn up the way
Of nestled birdlings; everything so soft
And tender,— to the little holdfast hands,
Which, closing on a finger into sleep,
Had kept the mould of't.

 While we stood there dumb,
For oh, that it should take such innocence
To prove just guilt, I thought, and stood there dumb,—
The light upon his eyelids pricked them wide,
And, staring out at us with all their blue,
As half perplexed between the angelhood
He had been away to visit in his sleep,
And our most mortal presence, gradually
He saw his mother's face, accepting it
In change for heaven itself, with such a smile
As might have well been learnt there,— never moved,
But smiled on, in a drowse of ecstasy,
So happy (half with her and half with heaven)
He could not have the trouble to be stirred,
But smiled and lay there...

*(Marian says the child is hers, the child of desperation. When Aurora remonstrates,
Marian continues:)*

 'Am I wicked, do you think?
God knows me, trusts me with the child! but you,
You think me really wicked?'

 'Complaisant,'
I answered softly, 'to a wrong you've done,
Because of certain profits,— which is wrong
Beyond the first wrong, Marian. When you left
The pure place and the noble heart, to take
The hand of a seducer'....

 'Whom? whose hand?
I took the hand of'....

Springing up erect
And lifting up the child at full arm's length,
As if to bear him like an oriflamme
Unconquerable to armies of reproach,—
'By him' she said, 'my child's head and its curls,
By those blue eyes no woman born could dare
A perjury on, I make my mother's oath,
That if I left that Heart, to lighten it,
The blood of mine was still, except for grief!
No cleaner maid than I was, took a step
To a sadder end,— no matron-mother now
Looks backward to her early maidenhood
Through chaster pulses. I speak steadily:
And if I lie so,... if, being fouled in will
And paltered with in soul by devil's lust,
I dared to bid this angel take my part,...
Would God sit quiet, let us think, in heaven,
Nor strike me dumb with thunder? Yet I speak:
He clears me therefore. What, 'seduced' 's your word?
Do wolves seduce a wandering fawn in France?
Do eagles, who have pinched a lamb with claws,
Seduce it into carrion? So with me.
I was not ever, as you say, seduced,
But simply, murdered.'

There she paused, and sighed,
With such a sigh as drops from agony
To exhaustion,— sighing while she let the babe
Slide down upon her bosom from her arms,
And all her face's light fell after him
Like a torch quenched in falling.

(Aurora asks for her forgiveness, and Marian grants it, saying:)

I'm dead, I say,
And if, to save the child from death as well,
The mother in me has survived the rest,
Why, that's God's miracle you must not tax,
I'm not less dead for that: I'm nothing more
But just a mother. Only for the child,
I'm warm, and cold, and hungry, and afraid,
And smell the flowers a little, and see the sun,
And speak still, and am silent,— just for him!
I pray you therefore to mistake me not,
And treat me haply as I were alive;
For though you ran a pin into my soul,
I think it would not hurt nor trouble me.
Here's proof, dear lady,— in the market-place
But now, you promised me to say a word
About... a friend, who once, long years ago,
Took God's place toward me, when He draws and loves

And does not thunder,... whom at last I left,
 As all of us leave God. You thought perhaps,
 I seemed to care for hearing of that friend?
 Now, judge me! we have sate here half-an-hour
 And talked together of the child and me,
 And I not asked as much as, "What's the thing
 You had to tell me of the friend ... the friend?"
 He's sad, I think you said,— he's sick perhaps?
 It's nought to Marian if he's sad or sick.
 Another would have crawled beside your foot
 And prayed your words out. Why, a beast, a dog,
 A starved cat, if he had fed it once with milk,
 Would show less hardness. But I'm dead, you see,
 And that explains it.'

Poor, poor thing, she spoke
 And shook her head, as white and calm as frost
 On days too cold for raining any more,
 But still with such a face, so much alive,
 I could not choose but take it on my arm
 And stroke the placid patience of its cheeks,—
 Then told my story out, of Romney Leigh,
 How, having lost her, sought her, missed her still,
 He, broken-hearted for himself and her,
 Had drawn the curtains of the world awhile
 As if he had done with morning. There I stopped,
 For when she gasped, and pressed me with her eyes,
 'And now... how is it with him? tell me now,'—
 I felt the shame of compensated grief,
 And chose my words with scruple — slowly stepped
 Upon the slippery stones set here and there
 Across the sliding water.

(But Marian says calmly that she knows that Romney loved Lady Waldemar, and not herself. She tells Aurora her story:)

At first she never mooted with herself
 If he was happy, since he made her so,
 Or if he loved her, being so much beloved.
 Who thinks of asking if the sun is light,
 Observing that it lightens? who's so bold,
 To question God of His felicity?
 Still less. And thus she took for granted first
 What first of all she should have put to proof,
 And sinned against him so, but only so.

* * *

And, by degrees, when he who had chosen her
 Brought in his courteous and benignant friends
 To spend their goodness on her, which she took

So very gladly, as a part of his,—
By slow degrees, it broke on her slow sense
That she, too, in that Eden of delight
Was out of place, and, like the silly kid,
Still did most mischief where she meant most love.

(This knowledge coincided with Lady Waldemar's visits:)

'And still the lady came,' said Marian Erle,
'Much oftener than *he* knew it, Mister Leigh.
She bade me never tell him that she had come,
She liked to love me better than he knew,
So very kind was Lady Waldemar:
And every time she brought with her more light,
And every light made sorrow clearer... Well,
Ah, well! we cannot give her blame for that;
'Twould be the same thing if an angel came,
Whose right should prove our wrong. And every time
The lady came, she looked more beautiful
And spoke more like a flute among green trees,
Until at last, as one, whose heart being sad
On hearing lovely music, suddenly
Dissolves in weeping, I brake out in tears
Before her, asked her counsel,— "had I erred
In being too happy? would she set me straight?"

* * *

She told me truths I asked for,— 'twas my fault,—
That Romney could not love me, if he would,
As men call loving; there are bloods that flow
Together, like some rivers, and not mix,
Through contraries of nature. He indeed
Was set to wed me, to espouse my class,
Act out a rash opinion,— and, once wed,
So just a man and gentle could not choose
But make my life as smooth as marriage-ring,
Bespeak me mildly, keep me a cheerful house,
With servants, broaches, all the flowers I liked,
And pretty dresses, silk the whole year round' ...
At which I stopped her,— "This for me. And now
For *him*."— She hesitated,— truth grew hard;
She owned, "'Twas plain a man like Romney Leigh
Required a wife more level to himself."

* * *

'She told me tenderly, (as when men come
To a bedside to tell people they must die)
She knew of knowledge,— ay, of knowledge knew,

That Romney Leigh had loved her formerly.
And she loved him, she might say, now the chance
Was past,— but that, of course, he never guessed,—
For something came between them, something thin
As a cobweb ... catching every fly of doubt,
To hold it buzzing at the window-pane
And help to dim the daylight. Ah, man's pride
Or woman's — which is greatest? most averse
To brushing cobwebs? Well, but she and he
Remained fast friends; it seemed not more than so,
Because he had bound his hands and could not stir.
An honourable man, if somewhat rash;
And she, not even for Romney, would she spill
A blot... as little even as a tear...
Upon his marriage-contract,— not to gain
A better joy for two than came by that:
For, though I stood between her heart and heaven,
She loved me wholly.'

Did I laugh or curse?

I think I sate there silent, hearing all,
Ay, hearing double,— Marian's tale, at once,
And Romney's marriage-vow, 'I'll keep to THEE,'
Which means that woman-serpent. Is it time
For church now?

(Lady Waldemar offered to help Marian emigrate to Australia, and said her own ladies-maid would accompany her: but Marian did not like or trust the maid.)

'I never blame the lady. Ladies who
Sit high, however willing to look down,
Will scarce see lower than their dainty feet;
And Lady Waldemar saw less than I,
With what a Devil's daughter I went forth
The swine's road, headlong over a precipice,
In such a curl of hell-foam caught and choked,
No shriek of soul in anguish could pierce through
To fetch some help. They say there's help in heaven
For all such cries. But if one cries from hell ...
What then?— the heavens are deaf upon that side.'

* * *

'You understand?— no, do not look at me,
But understand. The blank, blind, weary way,
Which led, where'er it led, away, at least;
The shifted ship, to Sydney or to France,
Still bound, wherever else, to another land;
The swooning sickness on the dismal sea,
The foreign shore, the shameful house, the night,
The feeble blood, the heavy-headed grief,...

No need to bring their damnable drugged cup,
And yet they brought it. Hell's so prodigal
Of devil's gifts, hunts liberally in packs,
Will kill no poor small creature of the wilds
But fifty red wide throats must smoke at it,
As HIS at me... when waking up at last...
I told you that I waked up in the grave.

* * *

‘I was mad,
How many weeks, I know not,— many weeks.
I think they let me go, when I was mad,
They feared my eyes and loosed me, as boys might
A mad dog which they had tortured. Up and down
I went, by road and village, over tracts
Of open foreign country, large and strange,
Crossed everywhere by long thin poplar-lines
Like fingers of some ghastly skeleton Hand
Through sunlight and through moonlight evermore
Pushed out from hell itself to pluck me back,
And resolute to get me, slow and sure;
While every roadside Christ upon his cross
Hung reddening through his gory wounds at me,
And shook his nails in anger, and came down
To follow a mile after, wading up
The low vines and green wheat, crying “Take the girl!
‘She’s none of mine from henceforth.” Then I knew
(But this is somewhat dimmer than the rest)
The charitable peasants gave me bread
And leave to sleep in straw: and twice they tied,
At parting, Mary’s image round my neck—
How heavy it seemed! as heavy as a stone;
A woman has been strangled with less weight:
I threw it in a ditch to keep it clean
And ease my breath a little, when none looked;
I did not need such safeguards:— brutal men
Stopped short, Miss Leigh, in insult, when they had seen
My face,— I must have had an awful look.
And so I lived: the weeks passed on,— I lived.
’Twas living my old tramp-life o’er again,
But, this time, in a dream, and hunted round
By some prodigious Dream-fear at my back,
Which ended yet: my brain cleared presently;
And there I sate, one evening, by the road,
I, Marian Erle, myself, alone, undone,
Facing a sunset low upon the flats
As if it were the finish of all time,
The great red stone upon my sepulchre,
Which angels were too weak to roll away.’

Note to Sixth Book

potage – thick soup

oriflamme – sacred banner

mooted with herself – debated with herself

↑

Seventh Book.

‘The woman’s motive? shall we daub ourselves
With finding roots for nettles? ’tis soft clay
And easily explored. She had the means,
The monies, by the lady’s liberal grace,
In trust for that Australian scheme and me,
Which so, that she might clutch with both her hands
And chink to her naughty uses undisturbed,
She served me (after all it was not strange;
’Twas only what my mother would have done)
A motherly, unmerciful, good turn.

‘Well, after. There are nettles everywhere,
But smooth green grasses are more common still;
The blue of heaven is larger than the cloud;
A miller’s wife at Clichy took me in
And spent her pity on me, – made me calm
And merely very reasonably sad.
She found me a servant’s place in Paris where
I tried to take the cast-off life again,
And stood as quiet as a beaten ass
Who, having fallen through overloads, stands up
To let them charge him with another pack.’

(However, the miller’s wife discovered that Marian was obviously soon to become a mother, and told her so – for Marian was unaware of it:)

‘The light broke in so. It meant *that* then, *that*?
I had not thought of that, in all my thoughts,
Through all the cold, dumb aching of my brow,
Through all the heaving of impatient life
Which threw me on death at intervals, – through all
The upbreak of the fountains of my heart
The rains had swelled too large: it could mean *that*?
Did God make mothers out of victims, then,
And set such pure amens to hideous deeds?
Why not? He overblows an ugly grave
With violets which blossom in the spring.
And *I* could be a mother in a month?
I hope it was not wicked to be glad.
I lifted up my voice and wept, and laughed,
To heaven, not her, until I tore my throat.

*(The miller's wife threw Marian out, and she found work with a kindly seamstress.
Aurora addresses Marian:)*

'Come with me, sweetest sister,' I returned,
'And sit within my house, and do me good
From henceforth, thou and thine! ye are my own
From henceforth. I am lonely in the world,
And thou art lonely, and the child is half
An orphan. Come,— and, henceforth, thou and I
Being still together will not miss a friend,
Nor he a father, since two mothers shall
Make that up to him. I am journeying south,
And, in my Tuscan home I'll find a niche,
And set thee there, my saint, the child and thee,
And burn the lights of love before thy face,
And ever at thy sweet look cross myself
From mixing with the world's prosperities;
That so, in gravity and holy calm,
We two may live on toward the truer life.'

She looked me in the face and answered not,
Nor signed she was unworthy, nor gave thanks,
But took the sleeping child and held it out
To meet my kiss, as if requiting me
And trusting me at once. And thus, at once,
I carried him and her to where I lived;
She's there now, in the little room, asleep,
I hear the soft child-breathing through the door;
And all three of us, at to-morrow's break,
Pass onward, homeward, to our Italy.
Oh, Romney Leigh, I have your debts to pay,
And I'll be just and pay them.

* * *

It is strange,
To-day while Marian told her story, like
To absorb most listeners, how I listened chief
To a voice not hers, nor yet that enemy's,
Nor God's in wrath,... but one that mixed with mine
Long years ago, among the garden-trees,
And said to *me*, to *me* too, 'Be my wife,
Aurora.' It is strange, with what a swell
Of yearning passion, as snow of ghosts
Might beat against the impervious doors of heaven,
I thought, 'Now, if I had been a woman, such
As God made women, to save men by love,—
By just my love I might have saved this man,
And made a nobler poem for the world
Than all I have failed in.' But I failed besides

In this; and now he's lost! through me alone!
And, by my only fault, his empty house
Sucks in, at this same hour, a wind from hell
To keep his hearth cold, make his casements creak
For ever to the tune of plague and sin—
O Romney, O my Romney, O my friend!
My cousin and friend! my helper, when I would,
My love, that might be! mine!

Why, how one weeps
When one's too weary! Were a witness by,
He'd say some folly... that I loved the man,
Who knows?... and make me laugh again for scorn.

(Aurora writes to Lord Howe telling him Marian's history, and saying:)

'I will tax in this
Your friendship, friend, if that convicted She
Be not his wife yet, to denounce the facts
To himself,— but, otherwise, to let them pass
On tip-toe like escaping murderers,
And tell my cousin, merely — Marian lives,
Is found, and finds her home with such a friend,
Myself, Aurora. Which good news, "She's found,"
Will help to make him merry in his love:
I send it, tell him, for my marriage gift.' ...

(Aurora also writes to Lady Waldemar, telling her:)

'Hide this letter: let it speak no more
Than I shall, how you tricked poor Marian Erle,
And set her own love digging its own grave
Within her green hope's pretty garden-ground,—
Ay, sent her forth with some one of your sort
To a wicked house in France, from which she fled
With curses in her eyes and ears and throat,
He whole soul choked with curses,— mad, in short,
And madly scouring up and down for weeks
The foreign hedgeless country, lone and lost...'

* * *

'If haply you're the wife of Romney Leigh,
(For which inheritance beyond your birth
You sold that poisonous porridge called your soul)
I charge you, be his faithful and true wife!
Keep warm his hearth and clean his board, and, when
He speaks, be quick with your obedience;
Still grind your paltry wants and low desires
To dust beneath his heel; though, even thus,
The ground must hurt him,— it was writ of old,

“Ye shall not yoke together ox and ass,”
The nobler and ignobler. Ay, but you
Shall do your part as well as such ill things
Can do aught good. You shall not vex him,— mark,
You shall not vex him, jar him when he’s sad,
Or cross him when he’s eager. Understand
To trick him with apparent sympathies,
Nor let him see thee in the face too near
And unlearn thy sweet seeming. Pay the price
Of lies, by being constrained to lie on still;
'Tis easy for thy sort: a million more
Will scarcely damn thee deeper.

‘Doing which,
You are very safe from Marian and myself:
We’ll breathe as softly as the infant here,
And stir no dangerous embers. Fail a point,
And show our Romney wounded, ill-content,
Tormented in his home, we open mouth,
And such a noise will follow, the last trump’s
Will scarcely seem more dreadful, even to you...’

*(Proceeding on her journey with Marian and the child to Italy, Aurora feels herself
haunted by the sound of wedding-bells:)*

That night we spent between the purple heaven
And purple water: I think Marian slept;
But I, as a dog a-watch for his master’s foot,
Who cannot sleep or eat before he hears,
I sate upon the deck and watched all night,
And listened through the stars for Italy.
Those marriage-bells I spoke of, sounded far,
As some child’s go-cart in the street beneath
To a dying man who will not pass the day,
And knows it, holding by a hand he loves.
I, too, sate quiet, satisfied with death,
Sate silent: I could hear my own soul speak,
And had my friend,— for Nature comes sometimes
And says, ‘I am ambassador for God.’
I felt the wind soft from the land of souls;
The old miraculous mountains heaved in sight,
One straining past another along the shore,
The way of grand dull Odyssean ghosts
Athirst to drink the cool blue wine of seas
And stare on voyagers. Peak pushing peak
They stood: I watched beyond that Tyrian belt
Of intense sea betwixt them and the ship,
Down all their sides the misty olive-woods
Dissolving in the weak congenial moon
And still disclosing some brown convent-tower
That seems as if it grew from some brown rock,—

Or many a little lighted village, dropt
Like a fallen star upon so high a point,
You wonder what can keep it in its place
From sliding headlong with the waterfalls
Which powder all the myrtle and orange groves
With spray of silver. Thus my Italy
Was stealing on us. Genoa broke with day,
The Doria's long pale palace striking out,
From green hills in advance of the white town,
A marble finger dominant to ships,
Seen glimmering through the uncertain grey of dawn.

And then I did not think, 'my Italy,'
I thought, 'my father!' O my father's house,
Without this presence!— Places are too much
Or else too little, for immortal man...

(They find a house on a hill at Florence:)

From the outer wall
Of the garden, drops the mystic floating grey
Of olive-trees, (with interruptions green
From maize and vine) until 'tis caught and torn
On that abrupt black line of cypresses
Which signs the way to Florence. Beautiful
The city lies along the ample vale,
Cathedral, tower and palace, piazza and street,
The river trailing like a silver cord
Through all, and curling loosely, both before
And after, over the whole stretch of land
Sown whitely up and down its opposite slopes
With farms and villas.

(Aurora receives a letter from Vincent Carrington: he has heard no news of her, but tells her that her book is highly thought of, not least by his new wife. He has married Kate Ward – to the surprise of his friend Romney Leigh. Carrington relates how he told Romney of his marriage:)

'Are you put
To wonder by my marriage, like poor Leigh?
"Kate Ward!" he said. "Kate Ward!" he said anew.
"I thought..." he said, and stopped,— "I did not think...."
And then he dropped to silence.

'Ah, he's changed.
I had not seen him, you're aware, for long,
But went of course. I have not touched on this
Through all this letter,— conscious of your heart,
And writing lightlier for the heavy fact,
As clocks are voluble with lead.

‘How poor,
To say I’m sorry! Dear Leigh, dearest Leigh.
In those old days of Shropshire,— pardon me,—
When he and you fought many a field of gold
On what you should do, or you should not do,
Make bread or verses, (it just came to that)
I thought you’d one day draw a silken peace
Through a golden ring. I thought so: foolishly,
The event proved,— for you went more opposite
To each other, month by month, and year by year,
Until this happened. God knows best, we say,
But hoarsely. When the fever took him first,
Just after I had writ to you in France,
They tell me Lady Waldemar mixed drinks
And counted grains, like any salaried nurse,
Excepting that she wept too. Then Lord Howe,
You’re right about Lord Howe, Lord Howe’s a trump;
And yet, with such in his hand, a man like Leigh
May lose as *he* does.’

(Aurora is upset by the letter, and with herself. She assumed Romney is now married to Lady Waldemar.)

Books succeed,
And lives fail....
...Tush, Aurora Leigh!
You wear your sackcloth looped in Cæsar’s way
And brag your failings as mankind’s. Be still.
There *is* what’s higher, in this very world,
Than you can live, or catch at. Stand aside,
And look at others – instance little Kate!
She’ll make a perfect wife for Carrington.
She always has been looking round the earth
For something good and green to alight upon
And nestle into, with those soft-winged eyes,
Subsiding now beneath his manly hand
’Twixt trembling lids of inexpressive joy:
I will not scorn her, after all, too much,
That so much she should love me: a wise man
Can pluck a leaf, and find a lecture in ’t;
And I, too,... God has made me,— I’ve a heart
That’s capable of worship, love, and loss;
We say the same of Shakespeare’s. I’ll be meek
And learn to reverence, even this poor myself.

The book, too – pass it. ‘A good book,’ says he,
‘And you a woman.’ I had laughed at that,
But long since. I’m a woman,— it is true;
Alas, and woe to us, when we feel it most!
Then, least care have we for the crowns and goals

And compliments on writing our good books.

The book has some truth in it, I believe,
And truth outlives pain, as the soul does life.
I know we talk our Phaedons to the end,
Through all the dismal faces that we make,
O'er-wrinkled with dishonouring agony
From decomposing drugs. I have written truth,
And I a woman,— feebly, partially,
Inaptly in presentation, Romney'll add,
Because a woman. For the truth itself,
That's neither man's nor woman's, but just God's.

* * *

‘There's nothing great
Nor small,’ has said a poet of our day,
Whose voice will ring beyond the curfew of eve
And not be thrown out by the matin's bell;
And truly, I reiterate, nothing's small!
No lily-muffled hum of a summer-bee,
But finds some coupling with the spinning stars;
No pebble at your foot, but proves a sphere;
No chaffinch, but implies the cherubim;
And, (glancing on my own thin, veined wrist,)
In such a little tremour of the blood
The whole strong clamour of a vehement soul
Doth utter itself distinct. Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God:
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes,
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries,
And daub their natural faces unaware
More and more from the first similitude.

Truth, so far, in my book! a truth which draws
From all things upwards. I, Aurora, still
Have felt it hound me through the wastes of life
As Jove did Io: and, until that Hand
Shall overtake me wholly, and, on my head,
Lay down its large unfluctuating peace,
The feverish gad-fly pricks me up and down,
It must be. Art's the witness of what Is
Behind this show.

* * *

Thus is Art
Self-magnified in magnifying a truth
Which, fully recognised, would change the world
And shift its morals. If a man could feel,

Not one day, in the artist's ecstasy,
But every day, feast, fast, or working-day,
The spiritual significance burn through
The hieroglyphic of material shows,
Henceforward he would paint the globe with wings,
And reverence fish and fowl, the bull, the tree,
And even his very body as a man,—
Which now he counts so vile, that all the towns
Make offal of their daughters for its use,
On summer-nights, when God is sad in heaven
To think what goes on in his recreant world
He made quite other; while that moon He made
To shine there, at the first love's covenant,
Shines still, convictive as a marriage-ring
Before adulterous eyes.

How sure it is,
That, if we say a true word, instantly
We feel 'tis God's, not ours, and pass it on
Like bread at sacrament we taste and pass
Nor handle for a moment, as indeed
We dared to set up any claim to such!
And I — my poem,— let my readers talk.
I'm closer to it — I can speak as well:
I'll say, with Romney, that the book is weak,
The range uneven, the points of sight obscure,
The music interrupted.

Let us go.
The end of woman (or of man, I think)
Is not a book. Alas, the best of books
Is but a word in Art, which soon grows cramped,
Stiff, dubious-statured with the weight of years,
And drops an accent or digamma down
Some cranny of unfathomable time,
Beyond the critic's reaching. Art itself,
We've called the higher life, must feel the soul
Live past it.

*(Made unhappy at the idea of Romney's marriage to Lady Waldemar, Aurora
consoles herself with the thought of her peaceful life with Marian and the child:)*

Surely I should be glad.
The little creature almost loves me now,
And calls my name, 'Alola,' stripping off
The *rs* like thorns, to make it smooth enough
To take between his dainty, milk-fed lips,
God love him! I should certainly be glad,
Except, God help me, that I'm sorrowful
Because of Romney.

Romney, Romney! Well,
This grows absurd!— too like a tune that runs

I' the head, and forces all things in the world,
Wind, rain, the creaking gnat or stuttering fly,
To sing itself and vex you,— yet perhaps
A paltry tune you never fairly liked.

* * *

But Romney,— he has chosen, after all.
I think he had as excellent a sun
To see by, as most others, and perhaps
Has scarce seen really worse than some of us,
When all's said. Let him pass.

* * *

Alas, long-suffering and most patient God,
Thou need'st be surelier God to bear with us
Than even to have made us! thou, aspire, aspire
From henceforth for me! thou who hast thyself
Endured this fleshhood, knowing how as a soaked
And sucking vesture it would drag us down
And choke us in the melancholy Deep,
Sustain me, that with thee I walk these waves,
Resisting!— breathe me upward, thou in me
Aspiring who art the way, the truth, the life,—
That no truth henceforth seem indifferent,
No way to truth laborious, and no life,
Not even this life I live, intolerable!

The days went by. I took up the old days,
With all their Tuscan pleasures worn and spoiled,
Like some lost book we dropt in the long grass
On such a happy summer-afternoon
When last we read it with a loving friend,
And find in autumn when the friend is gone,
The grass cut short, the weather changed, too late,
And stare at, as at something wonderful
For sorrow,— thinking how two hands before
Had held up what is left to only one,
And how we smiled when such a vehement nail
Impressed the tiny dint here which presents
This verse in fire for ever. Tenderly
And mournfully I lived. I knew the birds
And insects,— which look fathered by the flowers
And emulous of their hues: I recognised
The moths, with that great overpoise of wings
Which makes a mystery of them how at all
They can stop flying: butterflies, that bear
Upon their blue wings such red embers round,
They seem to scorch the blue air into holes

Each flight they take: and fire-flies, that suspire
In short soft lapses of transported flame
Across the tingling Dark, while overhead
The constant and inviolable stars
Outburn those lights-of-love: melodious owls,
(If music had but one note and was sad,
'Twould sound just so); and all the silent swirl
Of bats that seem to follow in the air
Some grand circumference of a shadowy dome
To which we are blind: and then the nightingales,
Which pluck our heart across a garden-wall...

(Aurora finds herself missing her father; she rides to the house where they used to live, but recoils on finding it changed.)

My old Assunta, too, was dead, was dead—
O land of all men's past! for me alone,
It would not mix its tenses. I was past,
It seemed, like others,— only not in heaven.
And many a Tuscan eve I wandered down
The cypress alley like a restless ghost
That tries its feeble ineffectual breath
Upon its own charred funeral-brands put out
Too soon, where black and stiff stood up the trees
Against the broad vermilion of the skies.
Such skies!— all clouds abolished in a sweep
Of God's skirt, with a dazzle to ghosts and men...

(Aurora finds relaxation in walking round the city where nobody knows her. She sees women praying in the old churches:)

Then I knelt,
And dropped my head upon the pavement too,
And prayed, since I was foolish in desire
Like other creatures, craving offal-food,
That He would stop his ears to what I said,
And only listen to the run and beat
Of this poor, passionate, helpless blood—
And then
I lay, and spoke not: but He heard in heaven.

So many Tuscan evenings passed the same.
I could not lose a sunset on the bridge,
And would not miss a vigil in the church,
And liked to mingle with the out-door crowd
So strange and gay and ignorant of my face,
For men you know not, are as good as trees.
And only once, at the Santissima,
I almost chanced upon a man I knew,
Sir Blaise Delorme. He saw me certainly,

And somewhat hurried, as he crossed himself,
 The smoothness of the action,— then half bowed,
 But only half, and merely to my shade,
 I slipped so quick behind the porphyry plinth
 And left him dubious if 'twas really I
 Or peradventure Satan's usual trick
 To keep a mounting saint uncanonised.
 But he was safe for that time, and I too;
 The argent angels in the altar-flare
 Absorbed his soul next moment. The good man!
 In England we were scarce acquaintances,
 That here in Florence he should keep my thought
 Beyond the image on his eye, which came
 And went: and yet his thought disturbed my life
 For, after that, I oftener sate at home
 On evenings, watching how they fined themselves
 With gradual conscience to a perfect night,
 Until the moon, diminished to a curve,
 Lay out there, like a sickle for His hand
 Who cometh down at last to reap the earth.
 At such times, ended seemed my trade of verse;
 I feared to jingle bells upon my robe
 Before the four-faced silent cherubim:
 With God so near me, could I sing of God?
 I did not write, nor read, nor even think,
 But sate absorbed amid the quickening glooms,
 Most like some passive broken lump of salt
 Dropt in by chance to a bowl of ænomel,
 To spoil the drink a little and lose itself,
 Dissolving slowly, slowly, until lost.

Notes to Seventh Book

You sold that poisonous porridge called your soul – a reference to the Biblical story in which Esau sold his birthright to his brother Jacob in exchange for a “mess of pottage.”

Odyssean – as in Homer's *Odyssey*, and the voyages of its hero in the eastern Mediterranean.

Tyrian – of Tyre, in ancient Phoenicia (now in Lebanon)

Doria's long pale palace – Palazzo Doria is a 16th century building in the centre of Genoa, in north-west Italy.

he and you fought many a field of gold – a reference to the Field of the Cloth of Gold, the scene of a famous tournament between the English and French in 1520.

Pheadon or Phaedo – an ancient Greek philosopher who was present at the death of Socrates; a dialogue about that event named the *Phaedo* after him discusses the immortality of the soul.

a poet of our day – probably refers to Robert Browning.

as Jove did Io – In Greek mythology, Io was a girl seduced by Jupiter (Jove), who then turned her into a young cow to hide her from his wife Hera; but Hera punished Io by sending a gadfly to sting her continuously as she wandered the earth.

digamma – an archaic letter of the Greek alphabet
Santissima – The Basilica della Santissima Annunziata, a church in Florence.
enomel – a mixture of wine and honey.

↑

Eighth Book

One eve it happened, when I sate alone,
Alone, upon the terrace of my tower,
A book upon my knees to counterfeit
The reading that I never read at all,
While Marian, in the garden down below,
Knelt by the fountain I could just hear thrill
The drowsy silence of the exhausted day,
And peeled a new fig from that purple heap
In the grass beside her, turning out the red
To feed her eager child (who sucked at it
With vehement lips across a gap of air
As he stood opposite, face and curls a-flame
With that last sun-ray, crying, 'give me, give,'
And stamping with imperious baby-feet,
We're all born princes) – something startled me,—
The laugh of sad and innocent souls, that breaks
Abruptly, as if frightened at itself.
'Twas Marian laughed. I saw her glance above
In sudden shame that I should hear her laugh,
And straightway dropped my eyes upon my book...

* * *

Gradually

The purple and transparent shadows slow
Had filled up the whole valley to the brim,
And flooded all the city, which you saw
As some drowned city in some enchanted sea,
Cut off from nature,— drawing you who gaze,
With passionate desire, to leap and plunge
And find a sea-king with a voice of waves,
And treacherous soft eyes, and slippery locks
You cannot kiss but you shall bring away
Their salt upon your lips. The duomo-bell
Strikes ten, as if it struck ten fathoms down,
So deep; and twenty churches answer it
The same, with twenty various instances.
Some gaslights tremble along squares and streets;
The Pitti's palace-front is drawn in fire;
And, past the quays, Maria Novella Place,
In which the mystic obelisks stand up
Triangular, pyramidal, each based

Upon its four-square brazen tortoises,
To guard that fair church, Buonarroti's Bride,
That stares out from her large blind dial-eyes,
(Her quadrant and armillary dials, black
With rhythms of many suns and moons) in vain
Enquiry for so rich a soul as his.
Methinks I have plunged, I see it all so clear....
And, oh my heart,... the sea-king!

In my ears
The sound of waters. There he stood, my king!

I felt him, rather than beheld him. Up
I rose, as if he were my king indeed,
And then sate down, in trouble at myself,
And struggling for my woman's empery.
'Tis pitiful; but women are so made:
We'll die for you, perhaps,— 'tis probable;
But we'll not spare you an inch of our full height:
We'll have our whole just stature,— five feet four,
Though laid out in our coffins: pitiful.
— 'You, Romney!— Lady Waldemar is here?'

He answered in a voice which was not his.
'I have her letter; you shall read it soon:
But first, I must be heard a little, I,
Who have waited long and travelled far for that,
Although you thought to have shut a tedious book
And farewell. Ah, you dog-eared such a page,
And here you find me.'

Did he touch my hand,
Or but my sleeve? I trembled, hand and foot,—
He must have touched me.— 'Will you sit?' I asked,
And motioned to a chair; but down he sate,
A little slowly, as a man in doubt,
Upon the couch beside me...

(Aurora says she has heard from Vincent Carrington, whose marriage she is glad of. Romney, seeming stunned, asks if she has had a letter from Lord Howe, which Sir Blaise was supposed to deliver to her. She has not. Her words sound bitter to him, for he says:)

'Twould move me sore to hear your softened voice,—
Aurora's voice,— if softened unaware
In pity of what I am.'

Ah friend, I thought,
As husband of the Lady Waldemar
You're granted very sorely pitiable!
And yet Aurora Leigh must guard her voice
From softening in the pity of your case,

As if from lie or licence. Certainly
We'll soak up all the slush and soil of life
With softened voices, ere we come to *you*.

At which I interrupted my own thought
And spoke out calmly. 'Let us ponder, friend,
Whate'er our state we must have made it first;
And though the thing displease us, ay, perhaps
Displease us warrantably, never doubt
That other states, thought possible once, and then
Rejected by the instinct of our lives,
If then adopted had displeased us more
Than this, in which the choice, the will, the love,
Has stamped the honour of a patent act
From henceforth. What we choose may not be good;
But, that we choose it, proves it good for *us*
Potentially, fantastically, now
Or last year, rather than a thing we saw,
And saw no need for choosing. Moths will burn
Their wings, – which proves that light is good for moths,
Or else they had flown not where they agonise.'

'Ay, light is good,' he echoed, and there paused:
And then abruptly, ... 'Marian. Marian's well?'

I bowed my head, but found no word. 'Twas hard
To speak of *her* to Lady Waldemar's
New husband. How much did he know, at last?
How much? how little? – He would take no sign,
But straight repeated, – 'Marian. Is she well?'

'She's well,' I answered.

She was there in sight
An hour back, but the night had drawn her home,
Where still I heard her in an upper room,
Her low voice singing to the child in bed,
Who restless with the summer-heat and play
And slumber snatched at noon, was long sometimes
In falling off, and took a score of songs
And mother-hushes ere she saw him sound.

'She's well,' I answered.

'Here?' he asked.

'Yes, here.'

He stopped and sighed. 'That shall be presently,
But now this must be. I have words to say,
And would be alone to say them, I with you,
And no third troubling.'

‘Speak then,’ I returned,
‘She will not vex you.’

At which, suddenly
He turned his face upon me with its smile
As if to crush me. ‘I have read your book,
Aurora.’

‘You have read it,’ I replied,
‘And I have writ it,— we have done with it.
And now the rest?’

‘The rest is like the first,’
He answered,— ‘for the book is in my heart,
Lives in me, wakes in me, and dreams in me:
My daily bread tastes of it,— and my wine
Which has no smack of it, I pour it out,
It seems unnatural drinking.’

Bitterly

I took the word up; ‘Never waste your wine.
The book lived in me ere it lived in you;
I know it closer than another does,
And that it’s foolish, feeble, and afraid,
And all unworthy so much compliment.
Beseech you, keep your wine,— and, when you drink,
Still wish some happier fortune to your friend,
Than even to have written a far better book.’

He answered gently, ‘That is consequent:
The poet looks beyond the book he has made,
Or else he had not made it. If a man
Could make a man, he’d henceforth be a god
In feeling what a little thing is man:
It is not my case. And this special book,
I did not make it, to make light of it:
It stands above my knowledge, draws me up;
’Tis high to me. It may be that the book
Is not so high, but I so low, instead;
Still high to me. I mean no compliment:
I will not say there are not, young or old,
Male writers, ay, or female, let it pass,
Who’ll write us richer and completer books.
A man may love a woman perfectly,
And yet by no means ignorantly maintain
A thousand women have not larger eyes:
Enough that she alone has looked at him
With eyes that, large or small, have won his soul.
And so, this book, Aurora,— so, your book.’

‘Alas,’ I answered, ‘is it so, indeed?’
And then was silent.

‘Is it so, indeed,’
He echoed, ‘that *alas* is all your word?’
I said,— ‘I’m thinking of a far-off June,
When you and I, upon my birthday once,
Discoursed of life and art, with both untried.
I’m thinking, Romney, how ’twas morning then,
And now ’tis night.’

‘And now,’ he said, ‘’tis night.’

‘I’m thinking,’ I resumed, ‘’tis somewhat sad
That if I had known, that morning in the dew,
My cousin Romney would have said such words
On such a night, at close of many years,
In speaking of a future book of mine,
It would have pleased me better as a hope,
Than as an actual grace it can at all:
That’s sad, I’m thinking.’

‘Ay,’ he said, ‘’tis night.’

‘And there,’ I added lightly, ‘are the stars!
And here, we’ll talk of stars, and not of books.’

‘You have the stars,’ he murmured,— ‘it is well:
Be like them! shine, Aurora, on my dark,
Though high and cold and only like a star,
And for this short night only,— you, who keep
The same Aurora of the bright June day
That withered up the flowers before my face,
And turned me from the garden evermore
Because I was not worthy. Oh, deserved,
Deserved! That I, who verily had not learnt
God’s lesson half, attaining as a dunce
To obliterate good words with fractious thumbs
And cheat myself of the context,— *I* should push
Aside, with male ferocious impudence,
The world’s Aurora who had conned her part
On the other side the leaf! ignore her so,
Because she was a woman and a queen,
And had no beard to bristle through her song,
My teacher, who has taught me with a book,
My Miriam, whose sweet mouth, when nearly drowned
I still heard singing on the shore! Deserved,
That here I should look up unto the stars
And miss the glory...’

‘Can I understand?’

I broke in. ‘You speak wildly, Romney Leigh,
Or I hear wildly. In that morning-time
We recollect, the roses were too red,

The trees too green, reproach too natural
If one should see not what the other saw:
And now, it's night, remember; we have shades
In place of colours; we are now grown cold,
And old, my cousin Romney. Pardon me,—
I'm very happy that you like my book,
And very sorry that I quoted back
A ten years' birthday.'

* * *

... 'Young you were,
That birthday, poet, but you talked the right:
While I, ... I built up follies like a wall
To intercept the sunshine and your face.
Your face! that's worse.'

'Speak wisely, cousin Leigh.'

'Yes, wisely, dear Aurora, though too late:
But then, not wisely. I was heavy then,
And stupid, and distracted with the cries
Of tortured prisoners in the polished brass
Of that Phalarian bull, society,
Which seems to bellow bravely like ten bulls
But, if you listen, moans and cries instead
Despairingly, like victims tossed and gored
And trampled by their hoofs. I heard the cries
Too close: I could not hear the angels lift
A fold of rustling air, nor what they said
To help my pity. I beheld the world
As one great famishing carnivorous mouth,—
A huge, deserted, callow, black, bird Thing,
With piteous open beak that hurt my heart,
Till down upon the filthy ground I dropped,
And tore the violets up to get the worms.
Worms, worms, was all my cry: an open mouth,
A gross want, bread to fill it to the lips,
No more.'

* * *

'I was wrong,
I've sorely failed; I've slipped the ends of life,
I yield; you have conquered.'

'Stay,' I answered him;

'I've something for your hearing, also. I
Have failed too.'

'You!' he said, 'you're very great;
The sadness of your greatness fits you well:
As if the plume upon a hero's casque
Should nod a shadow upon his victor face.'

I took him up austerely,— ‘You have read
My book, but not my heart; for recollect,
'Tis writ in Sanscrit which you bungle at.
I’ve surely failed, I know; if failure means
To look back sadly on work gladly done...’

(Romney tells her she is unchanged: she replies,)

‘A dog would never know me, I’m so changed;
Much less a friend ... except that you’re misled
By the colour of the hair, the trick of the voice,
Like that Aurora Leigh’s.’

‘Sweet trick of voice!

I would be a dog for this, to know it at last,
And die upon the falls of it. O love,
O best Aurora! are you then so sad
You scarcely had been sadder as my wife?’

‘Your wife, sir! I must certainly be changed,
If I, Aurora, can have said a thing
So light, it catches at the knightly spurs
Of a noble gentleman like Romney Leigh,
And trips him from his honourable sense
Of what befits...’

‘You wholly misconceive,’

He answered.

I returned,— ‘I’m glad of it.

But keep from misconception, too, yourself:
I am not humbled to so low a point,
Nor so far saddened. If I am sad at all,
Ten layers of birthdays on a woman’s head
Are apt to fossilise her girlish mirth,
Though ne’er so merry: I’m perforce more wise,
And that, in truth, means sadder. For the rest,
Look here, sir: I was right upon the whole,
That birthday morning. ’Tis impossible
To get at men excepting through their souls,
However open their carnivorous jaws;
And poets get directlier at the soul,
Than any of your economists...’

* * *

‘We both were wrong that June-day,— both as wrong
As an east wind had been. I who talked of art,
And you who grieved for all men’s griefs... what then?
We surely made too small a part for God
In these things.

(Romney answers:)

‘Poet, doubt yourself,
But never doubt that you’re a poet to me
From henceforth. Ah, you’ve written poems, sweet,
Which moved me in secret, as the sap is moved
In still March-branches, signless as a stone:
But this last book o’ercame me like soft rain
Which falls at midnight, when the tightened bark
Breaks out into unhesitating buds
And sudden protestations of the spring.
In all your other books, I saw but *you*:
A man may see the moon so, in a pond,
And not be nearer therefore to the moon,
Nor use the sight... except to drown himself:
And so I forced my heart back from the sight,
For what had *I*, I thought, to do with *her*,
Aurora... Romney? But, in this last book,
You showed me something separate from yourself,
Beyond you, and I bore to take it in
And let it draw me. You have shown me truths,
O June-day friend, that help me now at night,
When June is over!...

* * *

‘Aurora, if I smiled
To see you, in your lovely morning-pride,
Try on the poet’s wreath which suits the noon,
(Sweet cousin, walls must get the weather-stain
Before they grow the ivy!) certainly
I stood myself there worthier of contempt,
Self-rated, in disastrous arrogance,
As competent to sorrow for mankind
And even their odds. A man may well despair,
Who counts himself so needful to success.
I failed. I throw the remedy back on God,
And sit down here beside you, in good hope.

(Romney continues:)

‘Oh cousin, let us be content, in work,
To do the thing we can, and not presume
To fret because it’s little. ’Twill employ
Seven men, they say, to make a perfect pin:
Who makes the head, content to miss the point,
Who makes the point, agreed to leave the join:
And if a man should cry, ‘I want a pin,
And I must make it straightway, head and point,’
His wisdom is not worth the pin he wants.

Seven men to a pin,— and not a man too much!
Seven generations, haply, to this world,
To right it visibly a finger's breadth,
And mend its rents a little.'

(Aurora tells him not to be too dismissive of his own efforts:)

'Cousin, you are sad.
Did all your social labour at Leigh Hall
And elsewhere, come to nought then?'

..

'It was nought,'
He answered mildly. 'There is room indeed
For statues still, in this large world of God's,
But not for vacuums,— so I am not sad;
Not sadder than is good for what I am.
My vain phalanstery dissolved itself;
My men and women of disordered lives,
I brought in orderly to dine and sleep,
Broke up those waxen masks I made them wear,
With fierce contortions of the natural face,—
And cursed me for my tyrannous constraint
In forcing crooked creatures to live straight;
And set the country hounds upon my back
To bite and tear me for my wicked deed
Of trying to do good without the church
Or even the squires, Aurora.'

(He tells her that Leigh Hall was burnt down by disaffected men, along with all its contents:)

'...in the roof fell, and the fire that paused,
Stunned momentarily beneath the stroke of slates
And tumbling rafters, rose at once and roared,
And wrapping the whole house, (which disappeared
In a mounting whirlwind of dilated flame,)
Blew upward, straight, its drift of fiery chaff
In the face of Heaven, which blenched, and ran up higher.'

'Poor Romney!'

'Sometimes when I dream,' he said,
'I hear the silence after; 'twas so still.
For all those wild beasts, yelling, cursing round,
Were suddenly silent, while you counted five,
So silent, that you heard a young bird fall
From the top-nest in the neighbouring rookery
Through edging over-rashly toward the light.
The old rooks had already fled too far,
To hear the screech they fled with, though you saw
Some flying still, like scatterings of dead leaves

In autumn-gusts, seen dark against the sky,—
All flying,— ousted, like the House of Leigh.’

* * *

‘Alas,’ I said; ‘I speak I know not what:
I’m back in childhood, thinking as a child,
A foolish fancy – will it make you smile?
I shall not from the window of my room
Catch sight of those old chimneys any more.’

‘No more,’ he answered. ‘If you pushed one day
Through all the green hills to our fathers’ house,
You’d come upon a great charred circle, where
The patient earth was singed an acre round;
With one stone-stair, symbolic of my life,
Ascending, winding, leading up to nought!
’Tis worth a poet’s seeing. Will you go?’

I made no answer. Had I any right
To weep with this man, that I dared to speak?
A woman stood between his soul and mine,
And waved us off from touching evermore
With those unclean white hands of hers. Enough.
We had burnt our viols and were silent.

So,

The silence lengthened till it pressed. I spoke,
To breathe: ‘I think you were ill afterward.’

‘More ill,’ he answered, ‘had been scarcely ill.
I hoped this feeble fumbling at life’s knot
Might end concisely,— but I failed to die,
As formerly I failed to live,— and thus
Grew willing, having tried all other ways,
To try just God’s. Humility’s so good,
When pride’s impossible. Mark us, how we make
Our virtues, cousin, from our worn-out sins,
Which smack of them from henceforth. Is it right,
For instance, to wed here, while you love there?
And yet because a man sins once, the sin
Cleaves to him, in necessity to sin;
That if he sin not *so*, to damn himself,
He sins *so*, to damn others with himself:
And thus, to wed here, loving there, becomes
A duty. Virtue buds a dubious leaf
Round mortal brows; your ivy’s better, dear.
—Yet she, ’tis certain, is my very wife;
The very lamb left mangled by the wolves
Through my own bad shepherding: and could I choose
But take her on my shoulder past this stretch

Of rough, uneasy wilderness, poor lamb,
 Poor child, poor child?— Aurora, my beloved,
 I will not vex you any more to-night;
 But, having spoken what I came to say,
 The rest shall please you. What she can, in me,—
 Protection, tender liking, freedom, ease,
 She shall have surely, liberally, for her
 And hers, Aurora. Small amends they'll make
 For hideous evils which she had not known
 Except by me, and for this imminent loss,
 This forfeit presence of a gracious friend,
 Which also she must forfeit for my sake...
 Since,... drop your hand in mine a moment, sweet,
 We're parting!— Ah, my snowdrop, what a touch,
 As if the wind had swept it off! you grudge
 Your gelid sweetness on my palm but so,
 A moment? angry, that I could not bear
 You... speaking, breathing, living, side by side
 With some one called my wife... and live, myself?
 Nay, be not cruel — you must understand!
 Your lightest footfall on a floor of mine
 Would shake the house, my lintel being uncrossed
 'Gainst angels: henceforth it is night with me,
 And so, henceforth, I put the shutters up;
 Auroras must not come to spoil my dark.'

(Aurora speaks coldly to Romney, telling him he should not say such things now that he is married to Lady Waldemar. He is amazed, saying:)

‘Are we mad?’

He echoed — ‘wife! mine! Lady Waldemar!
 I think you said my wife.’ He sprang to his feet,
 And threw his noble head back toward the moon
 As one who swims against a stormy sea,
 And laughed with such a helpless, hopeless scorn,
 I stood and trembled.

‘May God judge me so,’

He said at last,— ‘I came convicted here,
 And humbled sorely if not enough. I came,
 Because this woman from her crystal soul
 Had shown me something which a man calls light;
 Because too, formerly, I sinned by her
 As then and ever since I have, by God,
 Through arrogance of nature,— though I loved...
 Whom best, I need not say, since that is writ
 Too plainly in the book of my misdeeds:
 And thus I came here to abase myself,
 And fasten, kneeling, on her regent brows
 A garland which I startled thence one day
 Of her beautiful June-youth. But here again

I'm baffled,— fail in my abasement as
 My aggrandisement: there's no room left for me,
 At any woman's foot, who misconceives
 My nature, purpose, possible actions. What!
 Are you the Aurora who made large my dreams
 To frame your greatness? you conceive so small?
 You stand so less than woman through being more,
 And lose your natural instinct (like a beast)
 Through intellectual culture? since indeed
 I do not think that any common she
 Would dare adopt such fancy-forgeries
 For the legible life-signature of such
 As I, with all my blots,— with all my blots!
 At last then, peerless cousin, we are peers,
 At last we're even. Ah, you've left your height;
 And here upon my level we take hands,
 And here I reach you to forgive you, sweet,
 And that's a fall, Aurora. Long ago
 You seldom understood me,— but, before,
 I could not blame you. Then, you only seemed
 So high above, you could not see below;
 But now I breathe,— but now I pardon!— nay,
 We're parting. Dearest, men have burnt my house,
 Maligned my motives,— but not one, I swear,
 Has wronged my soul as this Aurora has,
 Who called the Lady Waldemar my wife.'

'Not married to her! yet you said...'

'Again?

Nay, read the lines' (he held a letter out)

'She sent you through me.'

By the moonlight there,

I tore the meaning out with passionate haste

Much rather than I read it. Thus it ran.

Notes to Eighth Book

find a sea-king – may suggest a reference to the statue of Neptune which stands in the centre of Florence.

the duomo-bell – the bell of Florence's cathedral

Buonarroti's Bride – the Church of Santa Maria Novella, which Michelangelo admired

conned her part – studied or learnt her part

Phalarian bull – Phalaris was a cruel tyrant in Sicily in the 7th century BCE. He had his enemies roasted alive inside a bronze bull, but when he was overthrown he was killed in the same manner.

casque – helmet

Ninth Book

Even thus. I pause to write it out at length.
The letter of the Lady Waldemar.

‘I prayed your cousin Leigh to take you this,
He says he’ll do it. After years of love,
Or what is called so, when a woman frets
And fools upon one string of a man’s name,
And fingers it for ever till it breaks,—
He may perhaps do for her such a thing,
And she accept it without detriment
Although she should not love him any more.
And I, who do not love him, nor love you,
Nor you, Aurora,— choose you shall repent
Your most ungracious letter and confess,
Constrained by his convictions, (he’s convinced)
You’ve wronged me foully. Are you made so ill,
You woman — to impute such ill to *me*?
We both had mothers,— lay in their bosom once.
Why, after all, I thank you, Aurora Leigh,
For proving to myself that there are things
I would not do,— not for my life, nor him...’

(Lady Waldemar’s letter tells how she nursed Romney in his sickness, thinking he had come to love her: but he asked her to read Aurora’s book to him.)

‘I read on calmly,— calmly shut it up,
Observing, “There’s some merit in the book;
And yet the merit in’t is thrown away,
As chances still with women, if we write
Or write not: we want string to tie our flowers,
So drop them as we walk, which serves to show
The way we went. Good morning, Mister Leigh;
You’ll find another reader the next time.
A woman who does better than to love,
I hate; she will do nothing very well:
Male poets are preferable, tiring less
And teaching more.” I triumphed o’er you both,
And left him.

‘When I saw him afterward,
I had read your shameful letter, and my heart.
He came with health recovered, strong though pale,
Lord Howe and he, a courteous pair of friends,
To say what men dare say to women, when
Their debtors. But I stopped them with a word;
And proved I had never trodden such a road,
To carry so much dirt upon my shoe.
Then, putting into it something of disdain,

I asked forsooth his pardon, and my own,
For having done no better than to love,
And that, not wisely,— though 'twas long ago,
And has been mended radically since.
I told him, as I tell you now, Miss Leigh,
And proved I took some trouble for his sake
(Because I knew he did not love the girl)
To spoil my hands with working in the stream
Of that poor bubbling nature,— till she went,
Consigned to one I trusted, my own maid,
Who once had lived full five months in my house,
(Dressed hair superbly) with a lavish purse
To carry to Australia where she had left
A husband, said she. If the creature lied,
The mission failed, we all do fail and lie
More or less — and I'm sorry — which is all
Expected from us when we fail the most,
And go to church to own it. What I meant,
Was just the best for him, and me, and her...
Best even for Marian!— I am sorry for't...'

(Lady Waldemar writes that Romney had vowed to go to Florence to find Marian, considering himself still engaged to marry her.)

‘I wish you joy, Miss Leigh,
You've made a happy marriage for your friend,
And all the honour, well-assorted love,
Derives from you who love him, whom he loves!
You need not wish *me* joy to think of it;
I have so much. Observe, Aurora Leigh;
Your droop of eyelid is the same as his,
And, but for you, I might have won his love,
And, to you, I have shown my naked heart;
For which three things I hate, hate, hate you. Hush,
Suppose a fourth!— I cannot choose but think
That, with him, I were virtuouser than you
Without him: so I hate you from this gulf
And hollow of my soul, which opens out
To what, except for you, had been my heaven,
And is instead, a place to curse by! Love.’

An active kind of curse. I stood there cursed,
Confounded. I had seized and caught the sense
Of the letter with its twenty stinging snakes,
In a moment's sweep of eyesight, and I stood
Dazed.— ‘Ah! not married.’

‘You mistake,’ he said;
‘I'm married. Is not Marian Erle my wife?
As God sees things, I have a wife and child;
And I, as I'm a man who honours God,

Am here to claim them as my child and wife.’

I felt it hard to breathe, much less to speak.
Nor word of mine was needed. Some one else
Was there for answering. ‘Romney,’ she began,
‘My great good angel, Romney.’

Then at first,
I knew that Marian Erle was beautiful.
She stood there, still and pallid as a saint,
Dilated, like a saint in ecstasy,
As if the floating moonshine interposed
Betwixt her foot and the earth, and raised her up
To float upon it. ‘I had left my child,
Who sleeps,’ she said, ‘and, having drawn this way,
I heard you speaking,... friend!— Confirm me now.
You take this Marian, such as wicked men
Have made her, for your honourable wife?’

The thrilling, solemn, proud, pathetic voice.
He stretched his arms out toward the thrilling voice,
As if to draw it on to his embrace.
—‘I take her as God made her, and as men
Must fail to unmake her, for my honoured wife.’

She never raised her eyes, nor took a step,
But stood there in her place, and spoke again.
—‘You take this Marian’s child, which is her shame
In sight of men and women, for your child,
Of whom you will not ever feel ashamed?’

The thrilling, tender, proud, pathetic voice.
He stepped on toward it, still with outstretched arms,
As if to quench upon his breast that voice.
—‘May God so father me, as I do him,
And so forsake me, as I let him feel
He’s orphaned haply. Here I take the child
To share my cup, to slumber on my knee,
To play his loudest gambol at my foot,
To hold my finger in the public ways,
Till none shall need inquire, “Whose child is this,”
The gesture saying so tenderly, “My own.”’

(Marian asks Aurora whether, as a disgraced woman, she should accept. Aurora says:)

‘I’ll witness to the world
That Romney Leigh is honoured in his choice,
Who chooses Marian for his honoured wife.’

Her broad wild woodland eyes shot out a light;
Her smile was wonderful for rapture. 'Thanks,
My great Aurora.' Forward then she sprang,
And dropping her impassioned spaniel head
With all its brown abandonment of curls
On Romney's feet, we heard the kisses drawn
Through sobs upon the foot, upon the ground—
'O Romney! O my angel! O unchanged...'

(Nevertheless, Marian adds:)

... 'You and I
Must never, never, never join hands so...

* * *

'Oh, it does me good,
It wipes me clean and sweet from devil's dirt,
That Romney Leigh should think me worthy still
Of being his true and honourable wife!
Henceforth I need not say, on leaving earth,
I had no glory in it. For the rest,
The reason's ready (master, angel, friend,
Be patient with me) wherefore you and I
Can never, never, never join hands so.
I know you'll not be angry like a man
(For *you* are none) when I shall tell the truth,
Which is, I do not love you, Romney Leigh,
I do not love you...'

(Marian says that she had worshipped Romney once, rather than loved him:)

'But, if indeed I loved, 'twas long ago,—
So long! before the sun and moon were made,
Before the hells were open,— ah, before
I heard my child cry in the desert night,
And knew he had no father. It may be,
I'm not as strong as other women are,
Who, torn and crushed, are not undone from love:
It may be, I am colder than the dead,
Who, being dead, love always. But for me
Once killed, this ghost of Marian loves no more,
No more... except the child!... no more at all.
I told your cousin, sir, that I was dead;
And now, she thinks I'll get up from my grave,
And wear my chin-cloth for a wedding-veil,
And glide along the churchyard like a bride
While all the dead keep whispering through the withes,
"You would be better in your place with us,
You pitiful corruption!"

* * *

'I've room for no more children in my arms;
My kisses are all melted on one mouth;
I would not push my darling to a stool
To dandle babies. Here's a hand, shall keep
For ever clean without a marriage-ring,
To tend my boy, until he cease to need
One steadying finger of it...

* * *

... 'For you, meantime,
Most noble Romney, wed a noble wife,
And open on each other your great souls,—
I need not farther bless you. If I dared
But strain and touch her in her upper sphere,
And say, 'Come down to Romney — pay my debt!'
I should be joyful with the stream of joy
Sent through me. But the moon is in my face ...
I dare not,— though I guess the name he loves;
I'm learned with my studies of old days,
Remembering how he crushed his under-lip
When some one came and spoke, or did not come:
Aurora, I could touch her with my hand,
And fly, because I dare not.'

She was gone.

(After Marian leaves, Romney says that he was wrong to assume that she wanted a husband. He tells Aurora that he was led astray —)

...By a supposition that she wanted these,
Could act the husband's coat and hat set up
To creak i' the wind and drive the world-crows off
From pecking in her garden. Straw can fill
A hole to keep out vermin. Now, at last,
I own heaven's angels round her life suffice
To fight the rats of our society,
Without this Romney: I can see it at last;
And here is ended my pretension which
The most pretended. Over-proud of course,
Even so!— but not so stupid... blind... that I,
Whom thus the great Taskmaster of the world
Has set to meditate mistaken work,
My dreary face against a dim blank wall
Throughout man's natural lifetime,— could pretend
Or wish... O love, I have loved you! O my soul,
I have lost you! — but I swear by all yourself,
And all you might have been to me these years,

If that June-morning had not failed my hope,—
I'm not so bestial, to regret that day
This night,— this night, which still to you is fair;
Nay, not so blind, Aurora. I attest
Those stars above us, which I cannot see...'

'You cannot'....

 'That if Heaven itself should stoop,
Remix the lots, and give me another chance,
I'd say, 'No other!'— I'd record my blank.
Aurora never should be wife of mine.'

'Not see the stars?'

 'Tis worse still, not to see
To find your hand, although we're parting, dear.
A moment let me hold it, ere we part;
And understand my last words — these, at last!
I would not have you thinking, when I'm gone,
That Romney dared to hanker for your love,
In thought or vision, if attainable,
(Which certainly for me it never was)
And wish to use it for a dog to-day
To help the blind man stumbling. God forbid!
And now I know He held you in his palm,
And kept you open-eyed to all my faults,
To save you at last from such a dreary end.
Believe me, dear, that if I had known, like Him
What loss was coming on me, I had done
As well in this as He has.— Farewell, you
Who are still my light,— farewell!

(Aurora realises that Romney cannot see her. He tells her that an injury received during the fire left him blind.)

 'Blind, Romney?'

 'Ah, my friend,
You'll learn to say it in a cheerful voice.
I, too, at first desponded. To be blind,
Turned out of nature, mulcted as a man,
Refused the daily largesse of the sun
To humble creatures! When the fever's heat
Dropped from me, as the flame did from my house,
And left me ruined like it, stripped of all
The hues and shapes of aspectable life,
A mere bare blind stone in the blaze of day,
A man, upon the outside of the earth,
As dark as ten feet under, in the grave,—
Why that seemed hard.'

 'No hope?'

 'A tear! you weep,

Divine Aurora? tears upon my hand!
I've seen you weeping for a mouse, a bird,—
But, weep for me, Aurora? Yes, there's hope.
Not hope of sight,— I could be learned, dear,
And tell you in what Greek and Latin name
The visual nerve is withered to the root,
Though the outer eyes appear indifferent,
Unspotted in their crystals. But there's hope.
The spirit, from behind this dethroned sense,
Sees, waits in patience till the walls break up
From which the bas-relief and fresco have dropt:
There's hope. The man here, once so arrogant
And restless, so ambitious, for his part,
Of dealing with statistically packed
Disorders (from a pattern on his nail),
And packing such things quite another way,—
Is now contented. From his personal loss
He has come to hope for others when they lose,
And wear a gladder faith in what we gain...
Through bitter experience, compensation sweet,
Like that tear, sweetest. I am quiet now,
As tender surely for the suffering world,
But quiet,— sitting at the wall to learn,
Content, henceforth, to do the thing I can:
For, though as powerless, said I, as a stone,
A stone can still give shelter to a worm,
And it is worth while being a stone for that:
There's hope, Aurora.'

 'Is there hope for me?
For me?— and is there room beneath the stone
For such a worm?— And if I came and said...
What all this weeping scarce will let me say,
And yet what women cannot say at all,
But weeping bitterly ... (the pride keeps up,
Until the heart breaks under it) ... I love,—
I love you, Romney'....

 'Silence!' he exclaimed.
'A woman's pity sometimes makes her mad.
A man's distraction must not cheat his soul
To take advantage of it. Yet, 'tis hard—
Farewell, Aurora.'

 'But I love you, sir;
And when a woman says she loves a man,
The man must hear her, though he love her not,
Which... hush!... he has leave to answer in his turn;
She will not surely blame him.

(Aurora continues:)

 'You were wrong

In much? you said so. I was wrong in most.
 Oh, most! You only thought to rescue men
 By half-means, half-way, seeing half their wants,
 While thinking nothing of your personal gain.
 But I who saw the human nature broad,
 At both sides, comprehending, too, the soul's,
 And all the high necessities of Art,
 Betrayed the thing I saw, and wronged my own life
 For which I pleaded. Passioned to exalt
 The artist's instinct in me at the cost
 Of putting down the woman's, I forgot
 No perfect artist is developed here
 From any imperfect woman. Flower from root,
 And spiritual from natural, grade by grade
 In all our life. A handful of the earth
 To make God's image! the despised poor earth,
 The healthy odorous earth,— I missed with it
 The divine Breath that blows the nostrils out
 To ineffable inflatus,— ay, the breath
 Which love is. Art is much, but love is more.
 O Art, my Art, thou'rt much, but Love is more!
 Art symbolises heaven, but Love is God
 And makes heaven...

* * *

'I love you, loved you... loved you first and last,
 And love you on for ever. Now I know
 I loved you always, Romney. She who died
 Knew that, and said so; Lady Waldemar
 Knows that;... and Marian. I had known the same
 Except that I was prouder than I knew,
 And not so honest. Ay, and, as I live,
 I should have died so, crushing in my hand
 This rose of love, the wasp inside and all,
 Ignoring ever to my soul and you
 Both rose and pain,— except for this great loss,
 This great despair,— to stand before your face
 And know you do not see me where I stand...

* * *

... 'I mistook my own heart, and that slip
 Was fatal. Romney,— will you leave me here?
 So wrong, so proud, so weak, so unconsoled,
 So mere a woman!— and I love you so,
 I love you, Romney.'

Could I see his face,
 I wept so? Did I drop against his breast,
 Or did his arms constrain me? were my cheeks

Hot, overflowed, with my tears, or his?
And which of our two large explosive hearts
So shook me? That, I know not. There were words
That broke in utterance... melted, in the fire,—
Embrace, that was convulsion,... then a kiss
As long and silent as the ecstatic night,
And deep, deep, shuddering breaths, which meant beyond
Whatever could be told by word or kiss.

* * *

From the day
I had brought to England my poor searching face,
(An orphan even of my father's grave)
He had loved me, watched me, watched his soul in mine,
Which in me grew and heightened into love.
For he, a boy still, had been told the tale
Of how a fairy bride from Italy
With smells of oleanders in her hair,
Was coming through the vines to touch his hand;
Whereat the blood of boyhood on the palm
Made sudden heats. And when at last I came,
And lived before him, lived, and rarely smiled,
He smiled and loved me for the thing I was,
As every child will love the year's first flower,
(Not certainly the fairest of the year,
But, in which, the complete year seems to blow)
The poor sad snowdrop,— growing between drifts,
Mysterious medium 'twixt the plant and frost,
So faint with winter while so quick with spring,
So doubtful if to thaw itself away
With that snow near it. Not that Romney Leigh
Had loved me coldly. If I thought so once,
It was as if I had held my hand in fire
And shook for cold. But now I understood
For ever, that the very fire and heat
Of troubling passion in him, burned him clear,
And shaped, to dubious order, word and act:
That, just because he loved me over all,
All wealth, all lands, all social privilege,
To which chance made him unexpected heir,
And, just because on all these lesser gifts,
Constrained by conscience and the sense of wrong
He had stamped with steady hand God's arrow-mark
Of dedication to the human need,
He thought it should be so too, with his love;
He, passionately loving, would bring down
His love, his life, his best, (because the best)
His bride of dreams, who walked so still and high
Through flowery poems as through meadow-grass,

The dust of golden lilies on her feet,
That *she* should walk beside him on the rocks
In all that clang and hewing out of men,
And help the work of help which was his life,
And prove he kept back nothing,— not his soul.
And when I failed him,— for I failed him, I,
And when it seemed he had missed my love, he thought,
'Aurora makes room for a working-noon,'
And so, self-girded with torn strips of hope,
Took up his life as if it were for death,
(Just capable of one heroic aim,)
And threw it in the thickest of the world,—
At which men laughed as if he had drowned a dog.
No wonder,— since Aurora failed him first!
The morning and the evening made his day.

But oh, the night! oh, bitter-sweet! oh, sweet!
O dark, O moon and stars, O ecstasy
Of darkness! O great mystery of love,
In which absorbed, loss, anguish, treason's self
Enlarges rapture,— as a pebble dropt
In some full wine-cup, over-brims the wine!
While we two sate together, leaned that night
So close, my very garments crept and thrilled
With strange electric life, and both my cheeks
Grew red, then pale, with touches from my hair
In which his breath was,— while the golden moon
Was hung before our faces as the badge
Of some sublime inherited despair,
Since ever to be seen by only one,—
A voice said, low and rapid as a sigh,
Yet breaking, I felt conscious, from a smile,
'Thank God, who made me blind, to make me see!
Shine on, Aurora, dearest light of souls,
Which rul'st for evermore both day and night!
I am happy.'

(The two vow to love, live and work together. Romney says:)

'The world's old;
But the old world waits the hour to be renewed.
Toward which, new hearts in individual growth
Must quicken, and increase to multitude
In new dynasties of the race of men;
Developed whence, shall grow spontaneously
New churches, new economies, new laws
Admitting freedom, new societies
Excluding falsehood: HE shall make all new.'

My Romney!— Lifting up my hand in his,
As wheeled by Seeing spirits toward the east,
He turned instinctively, where, faint and fair,
Along the tingling desert of the sky,
Beyond the circle of the conscious hills,
Were laid in jasper-stone as clear as glass
The first foundations of that new, near Day
Which should be builded out of heaven to God.
He stood a moment with erected brows
In silence, as a creature might, who gazed,—
Stood calm, and fed his blind, majestic eyes
Upon the thought of perfect noon: and when
I saw his soul saw,— ‘Jasper first,’ I said,
‘And second, sapphire; third, chalcedony;
The rest in order,— last, an amethyst.’

THE END.

Notes to the Ninth Book

withes – willows

mulcted – taxed, deprived

aspectable – visible

ineffable inflatus – indescribable breath

oleanders – flowering shrubs from the Mediterranean area

Aurora Leigh was published in 1856, nine years after Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre*, whose hero, Rochester, is also blinded in a fire that destroys his home.

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