Christmas Eve

by Robert Browning

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Title: Christmas Eve

Author: Robert Browning

Release date: October 1, 2004 [eBook #6670] Most recently updated: March 15, 2014

Language: English

Other information and formats: www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/6670

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CHRISTMAS EVE

ROBERT BROWNING

I

Out of the little chapel I burst Into the fresh night-air again. Five minutes full, I

waited first In the doorway, to escape the rain That drove in gusts down the common's centre At the edge of which the chapel stands, Before I plucked up heart to enter. Heaven knows how many sorts of hands Reached past me, groping for the latch Of the inner door that hung on catch More obstinate the more they fumbled, Till, giving way at last with a scold Of the crazy hinge, in squeezed or tumbled One sheep more to the rest in fold, And left me irresolute, standing sentry In the sheepfold's lath-and-plaster entry, Six feet long by three feet wide, Partitioned off from the vast inside— I blocked up half of it at least. No remedy; the rain kept driving. They eyed me much as some wild beast, That congregation, still arriving, Some of them by the main road, white A long way past me into the night, Skirting the common, then diverging; Not a few suddenly emerging From the common's self thro' the paling-gaps —They house in the gravel-pits perhaps, Where the road stops short with its safeguard border Of lamps, as tired of such disorder;— But the most turned in yet more abruptly From a certain squalid knot of alleys, Where the town's bad blood once slept corruptly, Which now the little chapel rallies And leads into day again,—its priestliness Lending itself to hide their beastliness So cleverly (thanks in part to the mason), And putting so cheery a whitewashed face on Those neophytes too much in lack of it, That, where you cross the common as I did, And meet the party thus presided, "Mount Zion" with Love-lane at the back of it, They front you as little disconcerted As, bound for the hills, her fate averted, And her wicked people made to mind him, Lot might have marched with Gomorrah behind him.

II

Well, from the road, the lanes or the common, In came the flock: the fat weary woman, Panting and bewildered, down-clapping Her umbrella with a mighty report, Grounded it by me, wry and flapping, A wreck of whalebones; then, with snort, Like a startled horse, at the interloper (Who humbly knew himself improper, But could not shrink up small enough) —Round to the door, and in,—the gruff Hinge's

invariable scold Making my very blood run cold. Prompt in the wake of her, up-pattered On broken clogs, the many-tattered Little old-faced peaking sister-turned-mother Of the sickly babe she tried to smother Somehow up, with its spotted face, From the cold, on her breast, the one warm place; She too must stop, wring the poor ends dry Of a draggled shawl, and add thereby Her tribute to the door-mat, sopping Already from my own clothes' dropping, Which yet she seemed to grudge I should stand on: Then, stooping down to take off her pattens, She bore them defiantly, in each hand one, Planted together before her breast And its babe, as good as a lance in rest. Close on her heels, the dingy satins Of a female something, past me flitted, With lips as much too white, as a streak Lay far too red on each hollow cheek; And it seemed the very door-hinge pitied All that was left of a woman once, Holding at least its tongue for the nonce. Then a tall yellow man, like the Penitent Thief, With his jaw bound up in a handkerchief, And eyelids screwed together tight, Led himself in by some inner light. And, except from him, from each that entered, I got the same interrogation— "What, you the alien, you have ventured "To take with us, the elect, your station? "A carer for none of it, a Gallio!"— Thus, plain as print, I read the glance At a common prey, in each countenance As of huntsman giving his hounds the tallyho. And, when the door's cry drowned their wonder, The draught, it always sent in shutting, Made the flame of the single tallow candle In the cracked square lantern I stood under, Shoot its blue lip at me, rebutting As it were, the luckless cause of scandal: I verily fancied the zealous light (In the chapel's secret, too!) for spite Would shudder itself clean off the wick, With the airs of a Saint John's Candlestick. [Footnote: See Rev. i. 20.] There was no standing it much longer. "Good folks," thought I, as resolve grew stronger, "This way you perform the Grand-Inquisitor "When the weather sends you a chance visitor? "You are the men, and wisdom shall die with you, "And none of the old Seven Churches vie with you! "But still, despite the pretty perfection "To which you carry your trick of exclusiveness, "And, taking God's word under wise protection, "Correct its

tendency to diffusiveness, "And bid one reach it over hot ploughshares,— "Still, as I say, though you've found salvation, "If I should choose to cry, as now, 'Shares!'— "See if the best of you bars me my ration! "I prefer, if you please, for my expounder "Of the laws of the feast, the feast's own Founder; "Mine's the same right with your poorest and sickliest "Supposing I don the marriage vestiment: "So shut your mouth and open your Testament, "And carve me my portion at your quickliest!" Accordingly, as a shoemaker's lad With wizened face in want of soap, And wet apron wound round his waist like a rope, (After stopping outside, for his cough was bad, To get the fit over, poor gentle creature, And so avoid disturbing the preacher) —Passed in, I sent my elbow spikewise At the shutting door, and entered likewise, Received the hinge's accustomed greeting, And crossed the threshold's magic pentacle, And found myself in full conventicle, —To wit, in Zion Chapel Meeting, On the Christmas-Eve of 'Forty-nine, Which, calling its flock to their special clover, Found all assembled and one sheep over, Whose lot, as the weather pleased, was mine.

III

I very soon had enough of it. The hot smell and the human noises, And my neighbour's coat, the greasy cuff of it, Were a pebble-stone that a child's hand poises, Compared with the pig-of-lead-like pressure Of the preaching man's immense stupidity, As he poured his doctrine forth, full measure, To meet his audience's avidity. You needed not the wit of the Sibyl To guess the cause of it all, in a twinkling: No sooner our friend had got an inkling Of treasure hid in the Holy Bible, (Whene'er 'twas the thought first struck him, How death, at unawares, might duck him Deeper than the grave, and quench The gin-shop's light in hell's grim drench) Than he handled it so, in fine irreverence, As to hug the book of books to pieces: And, a patchwork of chapters and texts in severance, Not improved by the private dog's-ears and creases, Having clothed his own soul with, he'd fain see equipt yours,— So tossed you again your Holy Scriptures. And you picked them up,

in a sense, no doubt: Nay, had but a single face of my neighbours Appeared to suspect that the preacher's labours Were help which the world could be saved without, 'Tis odds but I might have borne in quiet A qualm or two at my spiritual diet, Or (who can tell?) perchance even mustered Somewhat to urge in behalf of the sermon: But the flock sat on, divinely flustered, Sniffing, methought, its dew of Hermon With such content in every snuffle, As the devil inside us loves to ruffle. My old fat woman purred with pleasure, And thumb round thumb went twirling faster, While she, to his periods keeping measure, Maternally devoured the pastor. The man with the handkerchief untied it, Showed us a horrible wen inside it, Gave his eyelids yet another screwing, And rocked himself as the woman was doing. The shoemaker's lad, discreetly choking, Kept down his cough. 'Twas too provoking! My gorge rose at the nonsense and stuff of it; So, saying like Eve when she plucked the apple, "I wanted a taste, and now there's enough of it," I flung out of the little chapel.

IV

There was a lull in the rain, a lull In the wind too; the moon was risen, And would have shone out pure and full, But for the ramparted cloud-prison, Block on block built up in the West, For what purpose the wind knows best, Who changes his mind continually. And the empty other half of the sky Seemed in its silence as if it knew What, any moment, might look through A chance gap in that fortress massy:— Through its fissures you got hints Of the flying moon, by the shifting tints, Now, a dull lion-colour, now, brassy Burning to yellow, and whitest yellow, Like furnace-smoke just ere flames bellow, All a-simmer with intense strain To let her through,—then blank again, At the hope of her appearance failing. Just by the chapel, a break in the railing Shows a narrow path directly across; 'Tis ever dry walking there, on the moss— Besides, you go gently all the way uphill. I stooped under and soon felt better; My head grew lighter, my limbs more supple, As I walked on, glad to have slipt the fetter. My mind was full of the scene I had left,

That placid flock, that pastor vociferant, —How this outside was pure and different! The sermon, now—what a mingled weft Of good and ill! Were either less, Its fellow had coloured the whole distinctly; But alas for the excellent earnestness, And the truths, quite true if stated succinctly, But as surely false, in their quaint presentment, However to pastor and flock's contentment! Say rather, such truths looked false to your eyes, With his provings and parallels twisted and twined, Till how could you know them, grown double their size In the natural fog of the good man's mind, Like yonder spots of our roadside lamps, Haloed about with the common's damps? Truth remains true, the fault's in the prover; The zeal was good, and the aspiration; And yet, and yet, yet, fifty times over, Pharaoh received no demonstration, By his Baker's dream of Basket Three, Of the doctrine of the Trinity,— Although, as our preacher thus embellished it, Apparently his hearers relished it With so unfeigned a gust—who knows if They did not prefer our friend to Joseph? But so it is everywhere, one way with all of them! These people have really felt, no doubt, A something, the motion they style the Call of them; And this is their method of bringing about, By a mechanism of words and tones, (So many texts in so many groans) A sort of reviving and reproducing, More or less perfectly, (who can tell?) The mood itself, which strengthens by using; And how that happens, I understand well. A tune was born in my head last week, Out of the thump-thump and shriek-shriek Of the train, as I came by it, up from Manchester; And when, next week, I take it back again, My head will sing to the engine's clack again, While it only makes my neighbour's haunches stir, —Finding no dormant musical sprout In him, as in me, to be jolted out. 'Tis the taught already that profits by teaching; He gets no more from the railway's preaching Than, from this preacher who does the rail's office, I: Whom therefore the flock cast a jealous eye on. Still, why paint over their door "Mount Zion," To which all flesh shall come, saith the prophecy?

V

But wherefore be harsh on a single case? After how many modes, this Christmas

Eve, Does the self-same weary thing take place? The same endeavour to make you believe, And with much the same effect, no more: Each method abundantly convincing, As I say, to those convinced before, But scarce to be swallowed without wincing By the not-as-yet-convinced. For me, I have my own church equally: And in this church my faith sprang first! (I said, as I reached the rising ground, And the wind began again, with a burst Of rain in my face, and a glad rebound From the heart beneath, as if, God speeding me, I entered his church-door, nature leading me) —In youth I look to these very skies, And probing their immensities, I found God there, his visible power; Yet felt in my heart, amid all its sense Of the power, an equal evidence That his love, there too, was the nobler dower. For the loving worm within its clod, Were diviner than a loveless god Amid his worlds, I will dare to say. You know what I mean: God's all, man's nought: But also, God, whose pleasure brought Man into being, stands away As it were a handbreadth off, to give Room for the newly-made to live, And look at him from a place apart, And use his gifts of brain and heart, Given, indeed, but to keep for ever. Who speaks of man, then, must not sever Man's very elements from man, Saying, "But all is God's"—whose plan Was to create man and then leave him Able, his own word saith, to grieve him But able to glorify him too, As a mere machine could never do, That prayed or praised, all unaware Of its fitness for aught but praise and prayer, Made perfect as a thing of course. Man, therefore, stands on his own stock Of love and power as a pin-point rock: And, looking to God who ordained divorce Of the rock from his boundless continent, Sees, in his power made evident, Only excess by a million-fold O'er the power God gave man in the mould. For, note: man's hand, first formed to carry A few pounds' weight, when taught to marry Its strength with an engine's, lifts a mountain, —Advancing in power by one degree; And why count steps through eternity? But love is the ever-springing fountain: Man may enlarge or narrow his bed For the water's play, but the water-head— How can he multiply or reduce it? As easy create it, as cause it to cease; He may profit by it, or abuse it, But 'tis not a thing

to bear increase As power does: be love less or more In the heart of man, he keeps it shut Or opes it wide, as he pleases, but Love's sum remains what it was before. So, gazing up, in my youth, at love As seen through power, ever above All modes which make it manifest, My soul brought all to a single test— That he, the Eternal First and Last, Who, in his power, had so surpassed All man conceives of what is might,— Whose wisdom, too, showed infinite, —Would prove as infinitely good; Would never, (my soul understood,) With power to work all love desires, Bestow e'en less than man requires; That he who endlessly was teaching, Above my spirit's utmost reaching, What love can do in the leaf or stone, (So that to master this alone, This done in the stone or leaf for me, I must go on learning endlessly) Would never need that I, in turn, Should point him out defect unheeded, And show that God had yet to learn What the meanest human creature needed, —Not life, to wit, for a few short years, Tracking his way through doubts and fears, While the stupid earth on which I stay Suffers no change, but passive adds Its myriad years to myriads, Though I, he gave it to, decay, Seeing death come and choose about me, And my dearest ones depart without me. No: love which, on earth, amid all the shows of it, Has ever been seen the sole good of life in it, The love, ever growing there, spite of the strife in it. Shall arise, made perfect, from death's repose of it, And I shall behold thee, face to face, O God, and in thy light retrace How in all I loved here, still wast thou! Whom pressing to, then, as I fain would now, I shall find as able to satiate The love, thy gift, as my spirit's wonder Thou art able to quicken and sublimate, With this sky of thine, that I now walk under, And glory in thee for, as I gaze Thus, thus! Oh, let men keep their ways Of seeking thee in a narrow shrine— Be this my way! And this is mine!

VI

For lo, what think you? suddenly The rain and the wind ceased, and the sky Received at once the full fruition Of the moon's consummate apparition. The black cloud-barricade was riven, Ruined beneath her feet, and driven Deep in the West;

while, bare and breathless, North and South and East lay ready For a glorious thing that, dauntless, deathless, Sprang across them and stood steady. 'Twas a moon-rainbow, vast and perfect, From heaven to heaven extending, perfect As the mother-moon's self, full in face. It rose, distinctly at the base With its seven proper colours chorded, Which still, in the rising, were compressed, Until at last they coalesced, And supreme the spectral creature lorded In a triumph of whitest white,— Above which intervened the night. But above night too, like only the next, The second of a wondrous sequence, Reaching in rare and rarer frequence, Till the heaven of heavens were circumflexed, Another rainbow rose, a mightier, Fainter, flushier and flightier,— Rapture dying along its verge. Oh, whose foot shall I see emerge, Whose, from the straining topmost dark, On to the keystone of that arc?

VII

This sight was shown me, there and then,— Me, out of a world of men, Singled forth, as the chance might hap To another if, in a thunderclap Where I heard noise and you saw flame, Some one man knew God called his name. For me, I think I said, "Appear! "Good were it to be ever here. "If thou wilt, let me build to thee "Service-tabernacles three, "Where, forever in thy presence, "In ecstatic acquiescence, "Far alike from thriftless learning "And ignorance's undiscerning, "I may worship and remain!" Thus at the show above me, gazing With upturned eyes, I felt my brain Glutted with the glory, blazing Throughout its whole mass, over and under Until at length it burst asunder And out of it bodily there streamed, The too-much glory, as it seemed, Passing from out me to the ground, Then palely serpentining round Into the dark with mazy error.

VIII

All at once I looked up with terror. He was there. He himself with his human air. On the narrow pathway, just before. I saw the back of him, no more— He had left the chapel, then, as I. I forgot all about the sky. No face: only the sight Of a sweepy

garment, vast and white, With a hem that I could recognize. I felt terror, no surprise; My mind filled with the cataract, At one bound of the mighty fact. "I remember, he did say "Doubtless that, to this world's end, "Where two or three should meet and pray, "He would be in their midst, their friend; "Certainly he was there with them!" And my pulses leaped for joy Of the golden thought without alloy, Then I saw his very vesture's hem. Then rushed the blood back, cold and clear, With a fresh enhancing shiver of fear; And I hastened, cried out while I pressed To the salvation of the vest, "But not so, Lord! It cannot be "That thou, indeed, art leaving me— "Me, that have despised thy friends! "Did my heart make no amends? "Thou art the love of God—above "His power, didst hear me place his love, "And that was leaving the world for thee. "Therefore thou must not turn from me "As I had chosen the other part! "Folly and pride o'ercame my heart. "Our best is bad, nor bears thy test; "Still, it should be our very best. "I thought it best that thou, the spirit, "Be worshipped in spirit and in truth, "And in beauty, as even we require it— "Not in the forms burlesque, uncouth, "I left but now, as scarcely fitted "For thee: I knew not what I pitied. "But, all I felt there, right or wrong, "What is it to thee, who curest sinning? "Am I not weak as thou art strong? "I have looked to thee from the beginning, "Straight up to thee through all the world "Which, like an idle scroll, lay furled "To nothingness on either side: "And since the time thou wast descried, "Spite of the weak heart, so have I "Lived ever, and so fain would die, "Living and dying, thee before! "But if thou leavest me——"

IX

Less or more, I suppose that I spoke thus. When,—have mercy, Lord, on us! The whole face turned upon me full. And I spread myself beneath it, As when the bleacher spreads, to seethe it In the cleansing sun, his wool,— Steeps in the flood of noontide whiteness Some denied, discoloured web— So lay I, saturate with brightness. And when the flood appeared to ebb, Lo, I was walking, light and swift, With my senses settling fast and steadying, But my body caught up in the whirl and

drift Of the vesture's amplitude, still eddying On, just before me, still to be followed, As it carried me after with its motion: What shall I say?—as a path were hollowed And a man went weltering through the ocean, Sucked along in the flying wake Of the luminous water-snake. Darkness and cold were cloven, as through I passed, upborne yet walking too. And I turned to myself at intervals,— "So he said, so it befalls. "God who registers the cup "Of mere cold water, for his sake "To a disciple rendered up, "Disdains not his own thirst to slake "At the poorest love was ever offered: "And because my heart I proffered, "With true love trembling at the brim, "He suffers me to follow him "For ever, my own way,—dispensed "From seeking to be influenced "By all the less immediate ways "That earth, in worships manifold, "Adopts to reach, by prayer and praise, "The garment's hem, which, lo, I hold!"

X

And so we crossed the world and stopped. For where am I, in city or plain, Since I am 'ware of the world again? And what is this that rises propped With pillars of prodigious girth? Is it really on the earth, This miraculous Dome of God? Has the angel's measuring-rod Which numbered cubits, gem from gem, 'Twixt the gates of the New Jerusalem, Meted it out,—and what he meted, Have the sons of men completed? —Binding, ever as he bade, Columns in the colonnade With arms wide open to embrace The entry of the human race To the breast of... what is it, yon building, Ablaze in front, all paint and gilding, With marble for brick, and stones of price For garniture of the edifice? Now I see; it is no dream; It stands there and it does not seem; For ever, in pictures, thus it looks, And thus I have read of it in books Often in England, leagues away, And wondered how these fountains play, Growing up eternally Each to a musical water-tree, Whose blossoms drop, a glittering boon, Before my eyes, in the light of the moon, To the granite layers underneath. Liar and dreamer in your teeth! I, the sinner that speak to you, Was in Rome this night, and stood, and knew Both this and more. For see, for see, The dark is rent, mine eye is free To pierce the crust of the outer wall, And I view inside, and

all there, all, As the swarming hollow of a hive, The whole Basilica alive! Men in the chancel, body and nave, Men on the pillars' architrave, Men on the statues, men on the tombs With popes and kings in their porphyry wombs, All famishing in expectation Of the main-altar's consummation. For see, for see, the rapturous moment Approaches, and earth's best endowment Blends with heaven's; the taper-fires Pant up, the winding brazen spires Heave loftier yet the baldachin; [Footnote: Canopy over the High Altar.] The incense-gaspings, long kept in, Suspire in clouds; the organ blatant Holds his breath and grovels latent, As if God's hushing finger grazed him, (Like Behemoth when he praised him) At the silver bell's shrill tinkling, Quick cold drops of terror sprinkling On the sudden pavement strewed With faces of the multitude. Earth breaks up, time drops away, In flows heaven, with its new day Of endless life, when He who trod, Very man and very God, This earth in weakness, shame and pain, Dying the death whose signs remain Up yonder on the accursed tree,— Shall come again, no more to be Of captivity the thrall, But the one God, All in all, King of kings, Lord of lords, As His servant John received the words, "I died, and live for evermore!"

XI

Yet I was left outside the door. "Why sit I here on the threshold-stone "Left till He return, alone "Save for the garment's extreme fold "Abandoned still to bless my hold?" My reason, to my doubt, replied, As if a book were opened wide, And at a certain page I traced Every record undefaced, Added by successive years,— The harvestings of truth's stray ears Singly gleaned, and in one sheaf Bound together for belief. Yes, I said—that he will go And sit with these in turn, I know. Their faith's heart beats, though her head swims Too giddily to guide her limbs, Disabled by their palsy-stroke From propping mine. Though Rome's gross yoke Drops off, no more to be endured, Her teaching is not so obscured By errors and perversities, That no truth shines athwart the lies: And he, whose eye detects a spark Even where, to man's, the whole seems dark, May well see flame where each beholder Acknowledges the

embers smoulder. But I, a mere man, fear to quit The clue God gave me as most fit To guide my footsteps through life's maze, Because himself discerns all ways Open to reach him: I, a man Able to mark where faith began To swerve aside, till from its summit Judgment drops her damning plummet, Pronouncing such a fatal space Departed from the founder's base: He will not bid me enter too, But rather sit, as now I do, Awaiting his return outside. —'Twas thus my reason straight replied And joyously I turned, and pressed The garment's skirt upon my breast, Until, afresh its light suffusing me, My heart cried—What has been abusing me That I should wait here lonely and coldly, Instead of rising, entering boldly, Baring truth's face, and letting drift Her veils of lies as they choose to shift? Do these men praise him? I will raise My voice up to their point of praise! I see the error; but above The scope of error, see the love.— Oh, love of those first Christian days! —Fanned so soon into a blaze, From the spark preserved by the trampled sect, That the antique sovereign Intellect Which then sat ruling in the world, Like a change in dreams, was hurled From the throne he reigned upon: You looked up and he was gone. Gone, his glory of the pen! —Love, with Greece and Rome in ken, Bade her scribes abhor the trick Of poetry and rhetoric, And exult with hearts set free, In blessed imbecility Scrawled, perchance, on some torn sheet Leaving Sallust incomplete Gone, his pride of sculptor, painter! —Love, while able to acquaint her While the thousand statues yet Fresh from chisel, pictures wet From brush, she saw on every side, Chose rather with an infant's pride To frame those portents which impart Such unction to true Christian Art. Gone, music too! The air was stirred By happy wings: Terpander's* bird *[Footnote: Terpander, a famous Lesbian musician and lyric poet, 670 B.C.] (That, when the cold came, fled away) Would tarry not the wintry day,— As more-enduring sculpture must, Till filthy saints rebuked the gust With which they chanced to get a sight Of some dear naked Aphrodite They glanced a thought above the toes of, By breaking zealously her nose off. Love, surely, from that music's lingering, Might have filched her organ-fingering, Nor chosen rather to set prayings

To hog-grunts, praises to horse-neighings. Love was the startling thing, the new: Love was the all-sufficient too; And seeing that, you see the rest: As a babe can find its mother's breast As well in darkness as in light, Love shut our eyes, and all seemed right. True, the world's eyes are open now: —Less need for me to disallow Some few that keep Love's zone unbuckled, Peevish as ever to be suckled, Lulled by the same old baby-prattle With intermixture of the rattle, When she would have them creep, stand steady Upon their feet, or walk already, Not to speak of trying to climb. I will be wise another time, And not desire a wall between us, When next I see a church-roof cover So many species of one genus, All with foreheads bearing lover Written above the earnest eyes of them; All with breasts that beat for beauty, Whether sublimed, to the surprise of them, In noble daring, steadfast duty, The heroic in passion, or in action,— Or, lowered for sense's satisfaction, To the mere outside of human creatures, Mere perfect form and faultless features. What? with all Rome here, whence to levy Such contributions to their appetite, With women and men in a gorgeous bevy, They take, as it were, a padlock, clap it tight On their southern eyes, restrained from feeding On the glories of their ancient reading, On the beauties of their modern singing, On the wonders of the builder's bringing, On the majesties of Art around them,— And, all these loves, late struggling incessant, When faith has at last united and bound them, They offer up to God for a present? Why, I will, on the whole, be rather proud of it,— And, only taking the act in reference To the other recipients who might have allowed it, I will rejoice that God had the preference.

XII

So I summed up my new resolves: Too much love there can never be. And where the intellect devolves Its function on love exclusively, I, a man who possesses both, Will accept the provision, nothing loth, —Will feast my love, then depart elsewhere, That my intellect may find its share. And ponder, O soul, the while thou departest, And see them applaud the great heart of the artist, Who, examining the capabilities

Of the block of marble he has to fashion Into a type of thought or passion,— Not always, using obvious facilities, Shapes it, as any artist can, Into a perfect symmetrical man, Complete from head to foot of the life-size, Such as old Adam stood in his wife's eyes,— But, now and then, bravely aspires to consummate A Colossus by no means so easy to come at, And uses the whole of his block for the bust, Leaving the mind of the public to finish it, Since cut it ruefully short he must: On the face alone he expends his devotion, He rather would mar than resolve to diminish it, —Saying, "Applaud me for this grand notion "Of what a face may be! As for completing it "In breast and body and limbs, do that, you!" All hail! I fancy how, happily meeting it, A trunk and legs would perfect the statue, Could man carve so as to answer volition. And how much nobler than petty cavils, Were a hope to find, in my spirit-travels, Some artist of another ambition, Who, having a block to carve, no bigger, Has spent his power on the opposite quest, And believed to begin at the feet was best— For so may I see, ere I die, the whole figure!

XIII

No sooner said than out in the night! My heart lighter and more light: And still, as before, I was walking swift, With my senses settling fast and steadying, But my body caught up in the whirl and drift Of the vesture's amplitude, still eddying On just before me, still to be followed, As it carried me after with its motion, —What shall I say?—as a path, were hollowed, And a man went weltering through the ocean, Sucked along in the flying wake Of the luminous water-snake.

XIV

Alone! I am left alone once more— (Save for the garment's extreme fold Abandoned still to bless my hold) Alone, beside the entrance-door Of a sort of temple,-perhaps a college, —Like nothing I ever saw before At home in England, to my knowledge. The tall old quaint irregular town! It may be... though which, I can't affirm... any Of the famous middle-age towns of Germany: And this flight of stairs where I sit down,

Is it Halle, Weimar, Cassel, Frankfort Or Gottingen, I have to thank for't? It may be Gottingen,—most likely. Through the open door I catch obliquely Glimpses of a lecture-hall; And not a bad assembly neither, Ranged decent and symmetrical On benches, waiting what's to see there: Which, holding still by the vesture's hem, I also resolve to see with them, Cautious this time how I suffer to slip The chance of joining in fellowship With any that call themselves his friends; As these folk do, I have a notion. But hist—a buzzing and emotion! All settle themselves, the while ascends By the creaking rail to the lecture-desk, Step by step, deliberate Because of his cranium's over-freight, Three parts sublime to one grotesque, If I have proved an accurate guesser, The hawk-nosed high-cheek-boned Professor. I felt at once as if there ran A shoot of love from my heart to the man— That sallow virgin-minded studious Martyr to mild enthusiasm, As he uttered a kind of cough-preludious That woke my sympathetic spasm, (Beside some spitting that made me sorry) And stood, surveying his auditory With a wan pure look, well-nigh celestial,— Those blue eyes had survived so much! While, under the foot they could not smutch, Lay all the fleshly and the bestial. Over he bowed, and arranged his notes, Till the auditory's clearing of throats Was done with, died into a silence; And, when each glance was upward sent, Each bearded mouth composed intent, And a pin might be heard drop half a mile hence,— He pushed back higher his spectacles, Let the eyes stream out like lamps from cells, And giving his head of hair—a hake Of undressed tow, for colour and quantity— One rapid and impatient shake, (As our own Young England adjusts a jaunty tie When about to impart, on mature digestion, Some thrilling view of the surplice-question) —The Professor's grave voice, sweet though hoarse, Broke into his Christmas-Eve discourse.

XV

And he began it by observing How reason dictated that men Should rectify the natural swerving, By a reversion, now and then, To the well-heads of knowledge, few And far away, whence rolling grew The life-stream wide whereat we drink,

Commingled, as we needs must think, With waters alien to the source; To do which, aimed this eve's discourse; Since, where could be a fitter time For tracing backward to its prime This Christianity, this lake, This reservoir, whereat we slake, From one or other bank, our thirst? So, he proposed inquiring first Into the various sources whence This Myth of Christ is derivable; Demanding from the evidence, (Since plainly no such life was livable) How these phenomena should class? Whether 'twere best opine Christ was, Or never was at all, or whether He was and was not, both together— It matters little for the name, So the idea be left the same. Only, for practical purpose' sake, 'Twas obviously as well to take The popular story,—understanding How the ineptitude of the time, And the penman's prejudice, expanding Fact into fable fit for the clime, Had, by slow and sure degrees, translated it Into this myth, this Individuum,— Which, when reason had strained and abated it Of foreign matter, left, for residuum, A Man!—a right true man, however, Whose work was worthy a man's endeavour: Work, that gave warrant almost sufficient To his disciples, for rather believing He was just omnipotent and omniscient, As it gives to us, for as frankly receiving His word, their tradition,—which, though it meant Something entirely different From all that those who only heard it, In their simplicity thought and averred it, Had yet a meaning quite as respectable: For, among other doctrines delectable, Was he not surely the first to insist on The natural sovereignty of our race?— Here the lecturer came to a pausing-place. And while his cough, like a drouthy piston, Tried to dislodge the husk that grew to him, I seized the occasion of bidding adieu to him, The vesture still within my hand.

XVI

I could interpret its command. This time he would not bid me enter The exhausted air-bell of the Critic. Truth's atmosphere may grow mephitic When Papist struggles with Dissenter, Impregnating its pristine clarity, —One, by his daily fare's vulgarity, Its gust of broken meat and garlic; —One, by his soul's too-much presuming To turn the frankincense's fuming And vapours of the candle starlike Into the cloud her

wings she buoys on. Each, that thus sets the pure air seething, May poison it for healthy breathing— But the Critic leaves no air to poison; Pumps out with ruthless ingenuity Atom by atom, and leaves you—vacuity. Thus much of Christ does he reject? And what retain? His intellect? What is it I must reverence duly? Poor intellect for worship, truly, Which tells me simply what was told (If mere morality, bereft Of the God in Christ, be all that's left) Elsewhere by voices manifold; With this advantage, that the stater Made nowise the important stumble Of adding, he, the sage and humble, Was also one with the Creator. You urge Christ's followers' simplicity: But how does shifting blame, evade it? Have wisdom's words no more felicity? The stumbling-block, his speech—who laid it? How comes it that for one found able To sift the truth of it from fable, Millions believe it to the letter? Christ's goodness, then—does that fare better? Strange goodness, which upon the score Of being goodness, the mere due Of man to fellow-man, much more To God,—should take another view Of its possessor's privilege, And bid him rule his race! You pledge Your fealty to such rule? What, all— From heavenly John and Attic Paul, And that brave weather-battered Peter, Whose stout faith only stood completer For buffets, sinning to be pardoned, As, more his hands hauled nets, they hardened,— All, down to you, the man of men, Professing here at Gottingen, Compose Christ's flock! They, you and I, Are sheep of a good man! And why? The goodness,—how did he acquire it? Was it self-gained, did God inspire it? Choose which; then tell me, on what ground Should its possessor dare propound His claim to rise o'er us an inch? Were goodness all some man's invention, Who arbitrarily made mention What we should follow, and whence flinch,— What qualities might take the style Of right and wrong,—and had such guessing Met with as general acquiescing As graced the alphabet erewhile, When A got leave an Ox to be, No Camel (quoth the Jews) like G*,— *[Footnote: Gimel, the Hebrew G, means camel.] For thus inventing thing and title Worship were that man's fit requital. But if the common conscience must Be ultimately judge, adjust Its apt name to each quality Already known,—I would

decree Worship for such mere demonstration And simple work of nomenclature, Only the day I praised, not nature, But Harvey, for the circulation. I would praise such a Christ, with pride And joy, that he, as none beside, Had taught us how to keep the mind God gave him, as God gave his kind, Freer than they from fleshly taint: I would call such a Christ our Saint, As I declare our Poet, him Whose insight makes all others dim: A thousand poets pried at life, And only one amid the strife Rose to be Shakespeare: each shall take His crown, I'd say, for the world's sake— Though some objected—"Had we seen "The heart and head of each, what screen "Was broken there to give them light, "While in ourselves it shuts the sight, "We should no more admire, perchance, "That these found truth out at a glance, "Than marvel how the bat discerns "Some pitch-dark cavern's fifty turns, "Led by a finer tact, a gift "He boasts, which other birds must shift "Without, and grope as best they can." No, freely I would praise the man,— Nor one whit more, if he contended That gift of his, from God descended. Ah friend, what gift of man's does not? No nearer something, by a jot, Rise an infinity of nothings Than one: take Euclid for your teacher: Distinguish kinds: do crownings, clothings, Make that creator which was creature? Multiply gifts upon man's head, And what, when all's done, shall be said But—the more gifted he, I ween! That one's made Christ, this other, Pilate, And this might be all that has been,— So what is there to frown or smile at? What is left for us, save, in growth Of soul, to rise up, far past both, From the gift looking to the giver, And from the cistern to the river, And from the finite to infinity, And from man's dust to God's divinity?

XVII

Take all in a word: the truth in God's breast Lies trace for trace upon curs impressed: Though he is so bright and we so dim, We are made in his image to witness him: And were no eye in us to tell, Instructed by no inner sense, The light of heaven from the dark of hell, That light would want its evidence,— Though justice, good and truth were still Divine, if, by some demon's will, Hatred and wrong had been

proclaimed Law through the worlds, and right misnamed. No mere exposition of morality Made or in part or in totality, Should win you to give it worship, therefore: And, if no better proof you will care for, —Whom do you count the worst man upon earth? Be sure, he knows, in his conscience, more Of what right is, than arrives at birth In the best man's acts that we bow before: This last knows better—true, but my fact is, 'Tis one thing to know, and another to practise. And thence I conclude that the real God-function Is to furnish a motive and injunction For practising what we know already. And such an injunction and such a motive As the God in Christ, do you waive, and "heady, "High-minded," hang your tablet-votive Outside the fane on a finger-post? Morality to the uttermost, Supreme in Christ as we all confess, Why need we prove would avail no jot To make him God, if God he were not? What is the point where himself lays stress? Does the precept run "Believe in good, "In justice, truth, now understood "For the first time?"—or, "Believe in me, "Who lived and died, yet essentially "Am Lord of Life?" Whoever can take The same to his heart and for mere love's sake Conceive of the love,—that man obtains A new truth; no conviction gains Of an old one only, made intense By a fresh appeal to his faded sense.

XVIII

Can it be that he stays inside? Is the vesture left me to commune with? Could my soul find aught to sing in tune with Even at this lecture, if she tried? Oh, let me at lowest sympathize With the lurking drop of blood that lies In the desiccated brain's white roots Without throb for Christ's attributes, As the lecturer makes his special boast! If love's dead there, it has left a ghost. Admire we, how from heart to brain (Though to say so strike the doctors dumb) One instinct rises and falls again, Restoring the equilibrium. And how when the Critic had done his best, And the pearl of price, at reason's test, Lay dust and ashes levigable On the Professor's lecture-table,— When we looked for the inference and monition That our faith, reduced to such condition, Be swept forthwith to its natural dust-hole,— He bids us,

when we least expect it, Take back our faith,—if it be not just whole, Yet a pearl indeed, as his tests affect it, Which fact pays damage done rewardingly, So, prize we our dust and ashes accordingly! "Go home and venerate the myth "I thus have experimented with— "This man, continue to adore him "Rather than all who went before him, "And all who ever followed after!"— Surely for this I may praise you, my brother! Will you take the praise in tears or laughter? That's one point gained: can I compass another? Unlearned love was safe from spurning— Can't we respect your loveless learning? Let us at least give learning honour! What laurels had we showered upon her, Girding her loins up to perturb Our theory of the Middle Verb; Or Turk-like brandishing a scimitar O'er anapasts in comic-trimeter; Or curing the halt and maimed 'Iketides,' [Footnote: "The Suppliants," a fragment of a play by Aeschylus.] While we lounged on at our indebted ease: Instead of which, a tricksy demon Sets her at Titus or Philemon! When ignorance wags his ears of leather And hates God's word, 'tis altogether; Nor leaves he his congenial thistles To go and browse on Paul's Epistles. —And you, the audience, who might ravage The world wide, enviably savage, Nor heed the cry of the retriever, More than Herr Heine (before his fever),— I do not tell a lie so arrant As say my passion's wings are furled up, And, without plainest heavenly warrant, I were ready and glad to give the world up— But still, when you rub brow meticulous, And ponder the profit of turning holy If not for God's, for your own sake solely, —God forbid I should find you ridiculous! Deduce from this lecture all that eases you, Nay, call yourselves, if the calling pleases you, "Christians,"—abhor the deist's pravity,— Go on, you shall no more move my gravity Than, when I see boys ride a-cockhorse, I find it in my heart to embarrass them By hinting that their stick's a mock horse, And they really carry what they say carries them.

XIX

So sat I talking with my mind. I did not long to leave the door And find a new church, as before, But rather was quiet and inclined To prolong and enjoy the gentle

resting From further tracking and trying and testing. "This tolerance is a genial mood!" (Said I, and a little pause ensued). "One trims the bark 'twixt shoal and shelf, "And sees, each side, the good effects of it, "A value for religion's self, "A carelessness about the sects of it. "Let me enjoy my own conviction, "Not watch my neighbour's faith with fretfulness, "Still spying there some dereliction "Of truth, perversity, forgetfulness!" Better a mild indifferentism, "Teaching that both our faiths (though duller "His shine through a dull spirit's prism) "Originally had one colour! "Better pursue a pilgrimage "Through ancient and through modern times "To many peoples, various climes, "Where I may see saint, savage, sage "Fuse their respective creeds in one "Before the general Father's throne!"

XX

—'Twas the horrible storm began afresh! The black night caught me in his mesh, Whirled me up, and flung me prone. I was left on the college-step alone. I looked, and far there, ever fleeting Far, far away, the receding gesture, And looming of the lessening vesture!— Swept forward from my stupid hand, While I watched my foolish heart expand In the lazy glow of benevolence, O'er the various modes of man's belief. I sprang up with fear's vehemence. Needs must there be one way, our chief Best way of worship: let me strive To find it, and when found, contrive My fellows also take their share! This constitutes my earthly care: God's is above it and distinct. For I, a man, with men am linked But not a brute with brutes; no gain That I experience, must remain Unshared: but should my best endeavour To share it, fail—subsisteth ever God's care above, and I exult That God, by God's own ways occult, May—doth, I will believe—bring back All wanderers to a single track. Meantime, I can but testify God's care for me—no more, can I— It is but for myself I know; The world rolls witnessing around me Only to leave me as it found me; Men cry there, but my ear is slow: There races flourish or decay —What boots it, while yon lucid way Loaded with stars divides the vault? But soon my soul repairs its fault When, sharpening sense's hebetude, She turns on my own life! So viewed, No mere

mote's-breadth but teems immense With witnessings of providence: And woe to me if when I look Upon that record, the sole book Unsealed to me, I take no heed Of any warning that I read! Have I been sure, this Christmas-Eve, God's own hand did the rainbow weave, Whereby the truth from heaven slid Into my soul?—I cannot bid The world admit he stooped to heal My soul, as if in a thunder-peal Where one heard noise, and one saw flame, I only knew he named my name: But what is the world to me, for sorrow Or joy in its censure, when to-morrow It drops the remark, with just-turned head Then, on again, 'That man is dead'? Yes, but for me—my name called,—drawn As a conscript's lot from the lap's black yawn, He has dipt into on a battle-dawn: Bid out of life by a nod, a glance,— Stumbling, mute-mazed, at nature's chance, With a rapid finger circled round, Fixed to the first poor inch of ground To fight from, where his foot was found; Whose ear but a minute since lay free To the wide camp's buzz and gossipry— Summoned, a solitary man To end his life where his life began, From the safe glad rear, to the dreadful van! Soul of mine, hadst thou caught and held By the hem of the vesture!—

XXI

And I caught At the flying robe, and unrepelled Was lapped again in its folds full-fraught With warmth and wonder and delight, God's mercy being infinite. For scarce had the words escaped my tongue, When, at a passionate bound, I sprung, Out of the wandering world of rain, Into the little chapel again.

XXII

How else was I found there, bolt upright On my bench, as if I had never left it? —Never flung out on the common at night, Nor met the storm and wedge-like cleft it, Seen the raree-show of Peter's successor, Or the laboratory of the Professor! For the Vision, that was true, I wist, True as that heaven and earth exist. There sat my friend, the yellow and tall, With his neck and its wen in the selfsame place; Yet my nearest neighbour's cheek showed gall. She had slid away a contemptuous space:

And the old fat woman, late so placable, Eyed me with symptoms hardly mistakable, Of her milk of kindness turning rancid. In short, a spectator might have fancied That I had nodded, betrayed by slumber. Yet kept my scat, a warning ghastly, Through the heads of the sermon, nine in number, And woke up now at the tenth and lastly. But again, could such disgrace have happened? Each friend at my elbow had surely nudged it; And, as for the sermon, where did my nap end? Unless I heard it, could I have judged it? Could I report as I do at the close, First, the preacher speaks through his nose: Second, his gesture is too emphatic: Thirdly, to waive what's pedagogic, The subject-matter itself lacks logic: Fourthly, the English is ungrammatic. Great news! the preacher is found no Pascal, Whom, if I pleased, I might to the task call Of making square to a finite eye The circle of infinity, And find so all-but-just-succeeding! Great news! the sermon proves no reading Where bee-like in the flowers I bury me, Like Taylor's the immortal Jeremy! And now that I know the very worst of him, What was it I thought to obtain at first of him? Ha! Is God mocked, as he asks, Shall I take on me to change his tasks, And dare, despatched to a river-head For a simple draught of the element, Neglect the thing for which he sent, And return with another thing instead?— Saying, "Because the water found "Welling up from the underground, "Is mingled with the taints of earth, "While thou, I know, dost laugh at dearth, "And couldst, at wink or word, convulse "The world with the leap of a river-pulse,— "Therefore I turned from the oozings muddy, "And bring thee a chalice I found, instead; "See the brave veins in the breccia ruddy! "One would suppose that the marble bled. "What matters the water? A hope I have nursed: "The waterless cup will quench my thirst." —Better have knelt at the poorest stream That trickles in pain from the straitest rift! For the less or the more is all God's gift, Who blocks up or breaks wide the granite-seam. And here, is there water or not, to drink? I then, in ignorance and weakness, Taking God's help, have attained to think My heart does best to receive in meekness That mode of worship, as most to his mind, Where earthly aids being cast behind, His All in All appears serene With the

thinnest human veil between, Letting the mystic lamps, the seven, The many motions of his spirit, Pass, as they list, to earth from heaven. For the preacher's merit or demerit, It were to be wished the flaws were fewer In the earthen vessel, holding treasure Which lies as safe in a golden ewer; But the main thing is, does it hold good measure? Heaven soon sets right all other matters!— Ask, else, these ruins of humanity, This flesh worn out to rags and tatters, This soul at struggle with insanity, Who thence take comfort—can I doubt?— Which an empire gained were a loss without. May it be mine! And let us hope That no worse blessing befall the Pope, Turned sick at last of to-day's buffoonery, Of posturings and petticoatings, Beside his Bourbon bully's gloatings In the bloody orgies of drunk poltroonery! Nor may the Professor forego its peace At Gottingen presently, when, in the dusk Of his life, if his cough, as I fear, should increase, Prophesied of by that horrible husk— When thicker and thicker the darkness fills The world through his misty spectacles, And he gropes for something more substantial Than a fable, myth or personification,— May Christ do for him what no mere man shall, And stand confessed as the God of salvation! Meantime, in the still recurring fear Lest myself, at unawares, be found, While attacking the choice of my neighbours round, With none of my own made—I choose here! The giving out of the hymn reclaims me; I have done: and if any blames me, Thinking that merely to touch in brevity The topics I dwell on, were unlawful,— Or worse, that I trench, with undue levity, On the bounds of the holy and the awful,— I praise the heart, and pity the head of him, And refer myself to THEE, instead of him, Who head and heart alike discernest Looking below light speech we utter, When frothy spume and frequent sputter Prove that the soul's depths boil in earnest! May truth shine out, stand ever before us! I put up pencil and join chorus To Hepzibah Tune, without further apology, The last five verses of the third section Of the seventeenth hymn of Whitfield's Collection, To conclude with the doxology.

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