

THE COMPLETE WORKS
OF
ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING

Edited with Introductions and Notes by

CHARLOTTE PORTER AND HELEN A. CLARKE

Editors of Robert Browning's Works, Camberwell
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XXVIII.

Each Christian nation shall take upon her
 The law of the Christian man in vast :
 The crown of the getter shall fall to the donor, 138
 And last shall be first while first shall be last,
 And to love best shall still be, to reign unsurpassed.

A CURSE FOR A NATION.

PROLOGUE.

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, 10
 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."

A CURSE FOR A NATION.

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"Not so," I answered. "Evermore
 My heart is sore
 For my own land's sins : for little feet
 Of children bleeding along the street : 20

"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. 30
 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 39
 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. 50
 And thus, as was enjoined on me,
 I send it over the Western Sea.

THE CURSE.

I.

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 60
 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. 70

II.

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, 80
 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. 90
 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, 100
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 110
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.

NOTES.

THE POEMS OF 1844 (CONTINUED).

Rhyme of the Duchess May. Line 4. *Rebecks*: a Moorish musical instrument of the violin order, originally with but two strings on a round wooden sounding-board. Drayton alludes to its "mournful note," but its archaic sounding name rather than its tone may have caused the poet to choose it for this ballad.

5. *Abeles*: white poplars, regarded by the Greeks as funereal trees; the victor at the funereal games of Rhodes was crowned with white poplar leaves. Among the Highlanders the tradition goes that Christ was crucified on a white poplar tree. The Greeks dedicated groves of white poplars to Herakles in allusion to his conquest over death in bringing Alkestis from Hades.

25. *Linteged*: probably an imaginary name like the ballad itself.

125. *Blee*: color.

337. *Selle*: saddle, an obsolete form used by Spenser.

338. *Cypress-tree*: the tree of death. Coffins were made of it because of its hardness and soundness; tradition had made Christ's cross of this tree, also.

388. *Passing-bell*: the bell ringing for the passing from earth of a soul.

The Lost Bower. In a letter to H. S. Boyd, dated Feb. 21, 1843, she writes that she has just finished this poem and that the subject was an actual incident of her childhood, and to Mrs. Martin she wrote that the scene of it was laid at Hope End in the wood near the garden.

43. *Malvern hills*: a range of hills lying between Herefordshire and Worcestershire, England. "Our first holy

who are also mine, have endeavored to diminish the universal sympathy felt in Europe for your cause, by causing it to be believed that I am making war for personal ambition or to increase French territory. If there are men who fail to comprehend their epoch, I am not one of them. In the enlightened state of public opinion now prevailing, true greatness lies in the moral influence which we exercise rather than in sterile conquests," concluding, "To-morrow you will be the citizens of a great country."

Line 106. *Your Dead on Ticino*: at the river Ticino, over which the Austrian troops poured against Piedmont in the uprising of 1849, the Italians had been crushed by Radetsky; and in the campaigns of Napoleon and Victor Emmanuel the Austrians tried to resist the French advance, this battle of Magenta being very nearly a drawn battle and disastrous to thousands, Macmahon's arrival at five in the afternoon barely averting defeat.

Christmas Gifts. Motto. *ὡς βασιλεῖ, ὡς θεῷ, ὡς νεκρῷ*: as to a king, as to a god, as to a corpse.

21. *The bear who tore up the children*: the prophet Elisha, being jeered at by "little children out of the city," he "cursed them . . . and there came forth two she-bears out of the wood, and tare forty and two children of them." (See II. Kings ii., 23, 24.)

22. *The fox who burnt up the corn*: Samson having caught three hundred foxes, tied firebrands to their tails and "let them go into the standing corn of the Philistines." (See Judges xiv, 4, 5.)

23. *The wolf who suckled at Rome, etc.*: referring to the wolf who suckled Romulus and Remus, the brothers who founded Rome and quarrelled over laying out the city, Romulus slaying Remus.

39-41. *Red, for the patriot's blood, Green, for the martyr's crown, White, for the dew and the rime*: the three colors, red, green, and white, forming the Italian tricolor.

Italy and the World. 64. *Your Michel Angelo's giant Day*: see "Casa Guidi Windows," I., 73-96.

Line 67. *The coryphæus*: the leader or speaker of the classic chorus in the Greek tragedies was called the coryphæus.

123. *Churchman's charities, tender as Nero*: Nero, Emperor of Rome, being notorious for his excruciating cruelty, the comparison is grimly cynical.

124. *Indian suttee*: the Hindoo custom which exacted as a proof of a wife's devoted love for her husband that she throw herself upon his funeral pyre and be burned to death.

126. *Heptarchy patriotism*: referring to the beginnings of the English nation from the leagued six counties of the Anglo-Saxons under Alfred.

A Curse for a Nation is a denunciation of America's inconsistency, then, in sanctioning slavery while standing for freedom. It was mistaken as directed against England on its appearance and strongly censured as unpatriotic by *The Athenæum* and other English papers and persons. Mrs. Browning explained that in fact *she* did not curse either England or America, that the poem was directed only to America, and she showed how the "curse" was involved in the action of slave-holding. It was persistently taken to be a shoe that fitted, and she wrote Miss Blagden April 2, 1860, referring to this, that the truth was, "between you and me," that certain of the much discussed stanzas did suit England, as if they were so intended, although they were never so designed. In America the ardent poem fell in with the ethical fervor of the time against the evil rankling in the heart of the Republic, and helped her deliverance from it through the then pending Civil War.