THE COMPLETE WORKS

OF

ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING

Edited with Introductions and Notes by

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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,
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."
``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.

1.
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,  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  110
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.

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 funeral trees; the victor at the funeral 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
cauing it to be believed that I am making war for per-
sonal 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,” con-
cluding, “To-morrow you will be the citizens of a great
country.”

Line 105. 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 very nearly a drawn battle and disastrous to thousands, MacMahon’s
arrival at five in the afternoon barely averting defeat.

Christmas Gifts. Motto. ὁς βασιλεύς, ὁς θεό, ὁς νεκρός:
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,”
his “curse 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
cought three hundred foxes, tied firebrands to their tails
and “let them go into the standing corn of the Philis-
tines.” (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.

59-71. Red, for the patriot’s blood, Green, for the
martyr’s crown, White, for the dawn and the rime: the three
colors, red, green, and white, forming the Italian tricolor.

Italy and the World. 64. Your Michel Angelo’s giant

Pp. 351-354. POEMS BEFORE CONGRESS. 433

Line 67. The corypheus: the leader or speaker of the
classic chorus in the Greek tragedies was called the cory-
pheus.

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 league six counties of the
Anglo-Saxons under Alfred.

A Curse for a Nation is a denunciation of America’s inco-
sistency, 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 dis-
cussed stanzas did suit England, as if they were so in-
tended, 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.