

## Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came”

Robert Browning (1812–89)

MY first thought was, he lied in every word,  
 That hoary cripple, with malicious eye  
 Askance to watch the working of his lie  
 On mine, and mouth scarce able to afford  
 Suppression of the glee, that purs'd and scor'd                     5  
 Its edge, at one more victim gain'd thereby.

What else should he be set for, with his staff?  
 What, save to waylay with his lies, ensnare  
 All travellers who might find him posted there,  
 And ask the road? I guess'd what skull-like laugh                     10  
 Would break, what crutch 'gin write my epitaph  
 For pastime in the dusty thoroughfare,

If at his counsel I should turn aside  
 Into that ominous tract which, all agree,  
 Hides the Dark Tower. Yet acquiescingly                     15  
 I did turn as he pointed: neither pride  
 Nor hope rekindling at the end descried,  
 So much as gladness that some end might be.

For, what with my whole world-wide wandering,  
 What with my search drawn out thro' years, my hope                     20  
 Dwindled into a ghost not fit to cope  
 With that obstreperous joy success would bring,—  
 I hardly tried now to rebuke the spring  
 My heart made, finding failure in its scope.

As when a sick man very near to death                     25  
 Seems dead indeed, and feels begin and end  
 The tears and takes the farewell of each friend,  
 And hears one bid the other go, draw breath  
 Freelier outside, (“since all is o'er,” he saith,  
 “And the blow fallen no grieving can amend;”)                     30

While some discuss if near the other graves  
 Be room enough for this, and when a day  
 Suits best for carrying the corpse away,  
 With care about the banners, scarves and staves,  
 And still the man hears all, and only craves                     35  
 He may not shame such tender love and stay.

Thus, I had so long suffer'd, in this quest,  
 Heard failure prophesied so oft, been writ  
 So many times among “The Band”—to wit,  
 The knights who to the Dark Tower's search address'd                     40  
 Their steps—that just to fail as they, seem'd best.  
 And all the doubt was now—should I be fit?

So, quiet as despair, I turn'd from him,

That hateful cripple, out of his highway  
 Into the path the pointed. All the day 45  
 Had been a dreary one at best, and dim  
 Was settling to its close, yet shot one grim  
 Red leer to see the plain catch its estray.

For mark! no sooner was I fairly found  
 Pledged to the plain, after a pace or two, 50  
 Than, pausing to throw backward a last view  
 O'er the safe road, 't was gone; gray plain all round:  
 Nothing but plain to the horizon's bound.  
 I might go on; nought else remain'd to do.

So, on I went. I think I never saw 55  
 Such starv'd ignoble nature; nothing throve:  
 For flowers—as well expect a cedar grove!  
 But cockle, spurge, according to their law  
 Might propagate their kind, with none to awe,  
 You 'd think; a burr had been a treasure trove. 60

No! penury, inertness and grimace,  
 In the strange sort, were the land's portion. "See  
 Or shut your eyes," said Nature peevishly,  
 "It nothing skills: I cannot help my case:  
 'T is the Last Judgment's fire must cure this place, 65  
 Calcine its clods and set my prisoners free."

If there push'd any ragged thistle=stalk  
 Above its mates, the head was chopp'd; the bents  
 Were jealous else. What made those holes and rents  
 In the dock's harsh swarth leaves, bruise'd as to balk 70  
 All hope of greenness? 'T is a brute must walk  
 Pashing their life out, with a brute's intents.

As for the grass, it grew as scant as hair  
 In leprosy; thin dry blades prick'd the mud  
 Which underneath look'd kneaded up with blood. 75  
 One stiff blind horse, his every bone a-stare,  
 Stood stupefied, however he came there:  
 Thrust out past service from the devil's stud!

Alive? he might be dead for aught I know,  
 With that red, gaunt and collop'd neck a-strain, 80  
 And shut eyes underneath the rusty mane;  
 Seldom went such grotesqueness with such woe;  
 I never saw a brute I hated so;  
 He must be wicked to deserve such pain.

I shut my eyes and turn'd them on my heart. 85  
 As a man calls for wine before he fights,  
 I ask'd one draught of earlier, happier sights,  
 Ere fitly I could hope to play my part.  
 Think first, fight afterwards—the soldier's art:  
 One taste of the old time sets all to rights. 90

Not it! I fancied Cuthbert's reddening face

Beneath its garniture of curly gold,  
 Dear fellow, till I almost felt him fold  
 An arm in mine to fix me to the place,  
 That way he us'd. Alas, one night's disgrace! 95  
 Out went my heart's new fire and left it cold.

Giles then, the soul of honor—there he stands  
 Frank as ten years ago when knighted first.  
 What honest man should dare (he said) he durst.  
 Good—but the scene shifts—faugh! what hangman hands 100  
 Pin to his breast a parchment? His own bands  
 Read it. Poor traitor, spit upon and curst!

Better this present than a past like that;  
 Back therefore to my darkening path again!  
 No sound, no sight as far as eye could strain. 105  
 Will the night send a howlet of a bat?  
 I asked: when something on the dismal flat  
 Came to arrest my thoughts and change their train.

A sudden little river cross'd my path  
 As unexpected as a serpent comes. 110  
 No sluggish tide congenial to the glooms;  
 This, as it froth'd by, might have been a bath  
 For the fiend's glowing hoof—to see the wrath  
 Of its black eddy bespate with flakes and spumes.

So petty yet so spiteful All along, 115  
 Low scrubby alders kneel'd down over it;  
 Drench'd willows flung them headlong in a fit  
 Of mute despair, a suicidal throng:  
 The river which had done them all the wrong,  
 Whate'er that was, roll'd by, deterr'd no whit. 120

Which, while I forded,—good saints, how I fear'd  
 To set my foot upon a dead man's cheek,  
 Each step, or feel the spear I thrust to seek  
 For hollows, tangled in his hair or beard!  
 —It may have been a water-rat I spear'd, 125  
 But, ugh! it sounded like a baby's shriek.

Glad was I when I reach'd the other bank.  
 Now for a better country. Vain presage!  
 Who were the strugglers, what war did they wage  
 Whose savage trample thus could pad the dank 130  
 Soil to a splash? Toads in a poison'd tank,  
 Or wild cats in a red-hot iron cage—

The fight must so have seem'd in that fell cirque.  
 What penn'd them there, with all the plain to choose?  
 No foot-print leading to that horrid mews, 135  
 None out of it. Mad brewage set to work  
 Their brains, no doubt, like galley-slaves the Turk  
 Pits for his pastime, Christians against Jews.

And more than that—a furlong on—why, there!

What bad use was that engine for, that wheel, 140  
 Or brake, not wheel—that harrow fit to reel  
 Men's bodies out like silk? with all the air  
 Of Tophet's tool, on earth left unaware,  
 Or brought to sharpen its rusty teeth of steel.

Then came a bit of stobb'd ground, once a wood, 145  
 Next a marsh, it would seem, and now mere earth  
 Desperate and done with; (so a fool finds mirth,  
 Makes a thing and then mars it, till his mood  
 Changes and off he goes!) within a rood—  
 Bog, clay, and rubble, sand and stark black dearth. 150

Now blotches rankling, color'd gay and grim,  
 Now patches where some leanness of the soil's  
 Broke into moss or substances like thus;  
 Then came some palsied oak, a cleft in him  
 Like a distorted mouth that splits its rim 155  
 Gaping at death, and dies while it recoils.

And just as far as ever from the end,  
 Nought in the distance but the evening, nought  
 To point my footstep further! At the thought,  
 A great black bird, Apollyon's bosom-friend, 160  
 Sail'd past, nor beat his wide wing dragon-penn'd  
 That brush'd my cap—perchance the guide I sought.

For, looking up, aware I somehow grew,  
 Spite of the dusk, the plain had given place  
 All round to mountains—with such name to grace 165  
 Mere ugly heights and heaps now stolen in view.  
 How thus they had surpris'd me,—solve it, you!  
 How to get from them was no clearer case.

Yet half I seem'd to recognize some trick  
 Of mischief happen'd to me, God knows when— 170  
 In a bad perhaps. Here ended, then,  
 Progress this way. When, in the very nick  
 Of giving up, one time more, came a click  
 As when a trap shuts—you're inside the den.

Burningly it came on me all at once, 175  
 This was the place! those two hills on the right,  
 Couch'd like two bulls lock'd horn in horn in fight,  
 While, to the left, a tall scalp'd mountain ... Dunce,  
 Dotard, a-dozing at the very nonce,  
 After a life spent training for the sight! 180

What in the midst lay but the Tower itself?  
 The round squat turret, blind as the fool's heart,  
 Built of brown stone, without a counter-part  
 In the whole world. The tempest's mocking elf  
 Points to the shipman thus the unseen shelf 185  
 He strikes on, only when the timbers start.

Not see? because of night perhaps?—Why, day

Came back again for that! before it left,  
The dying sunset kindled through a cleft:  
The hills, like giants at a hunting, lay, 190  
Chin upon hand, to see the game at bay,—  
“Now stab and end the creature—to the heft!”

Not hear? when noise was everywhere! it toll’d  
Increasing like a bell. Names in my ears  
Of all the lost adventurers my peers,— 195  
How such a one was strong, and such was bold,  
And such was fortunate, yet each of old  
Lost, lost! one moment knell’d the woe of years.

There they stood, ranged along the hill-sides, met  
To view the last of me, a living frame 200  
For one more picture! in a sheet of flame  
I saw them and I knew them all. And yet  
Dauntless the slug-horn to my lips I set,  
And blew “*Childe Roland to the Dark Tower came.*”