

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.*”