

A SELECTION FROM THE POEMS
OF ROBERT BROWNING.

A SELECTION FROM THE POEMS
OF ROBERT BROWNING.

HOME THOUGHTS, FROM ABROAD.

OH, to be in England now that April's there,
And whoever wakes in England sees, some morning, unaware,
That the lowest boughs and the brushwood sheaf
Round the elm-tree bole are in tiny leaf,
While the chaffinch sings on the orchard bough
In England—now !
And after April, when May follows,
And the white-throat builds, and all the swallows !
Hark, where my blossomed pear-tree in the hedge
Leans to the field and scatters on the clover
Blossoms and dewdrops—at the bent spray's edge—
That's the wise thrush ; he sings each song twice over
Lest you should think he never could recapture
The first fine careless rapture !
And, though the fields look rough with hoary dew,
All will be gay when noontide wakes anew
The buttercups, the little children's dower
—Far brighter than this gaudy melon-flower !

HOME THOUGHTS, FROM THE SEA.

NOBLY, nobly Cape Saint Vincent to the North-West died
 away ;
 Sunset ran, one glorious blood-red, reeking into Cadiz Bay ;
 Bluish 'mid the burning water, full in face Trafalgar lay ;
 In the dimmest North-East distance dawned Gibraltar grand
 and grey ;
 "Here and here did England help me : how can I help
 England?"—say,
 Whoso turns as I, this evening, turn to God to praise and
 pray,
 While Jove's planet rises yonder, silent over Africa.

The former of these companion poems may have been written from Italy or the south of Spain, as would appear from the last line of it. Mr. E. C. Stedman, one of the severest of Browning's appreciative critics, commenting (in his "Victorian Poets") on the lines beginning "That's the wise thrush," says:—"Having in mind Shakespeare and Shelley, I nevertheless think these three lines the finest ever written touching the song of a bird."

In the latter poem, the course is from the southern point of Portugal through the Straits. "Here and here"—the reference is to the battles of Cape St. Vincent (1796) and Trafalgar (1805), and perhaps to the defence of Gibraltar (1782).

"HOW THEY BROUGHT THE GOOD
 NEWS FROM GHENT TO AIX."

[16—.]

I.

I SPRANG to the stirrup, and Joris, and he ;
 I galloped, Dirck galloped, we galloped all three ;
 "Good speed !" cried the watch, as the gate-bolts undrew ;
 "Speed !" echoed the wall to us galloping through ;
 Behind shut the postern, the lights sank to rest,
 And into the midnight we galloped abreast.

II.

Not a word to each other ; we kept the great pace
 Neck by neck, stride by stride, never changing our place ;
 I turned in my saddle and made its girths tight,
 Then shortened each stirrup, and set the pique right,
 Rebuckled the cheek-strap, chained slacker the bit,
 Nor galloped less steadily Roland a whit.

III.

T was moonset at starting ; but while we drew near
 Lokeren, the cocks crew and twilight dawned clear ;
 At Boom, a great yellow star came out to see ;
 At Düffeld, 't was morning as plain as could be ;
 And from Mecheln church-steeple we heard the half-chime,
 So, Joris broke silence with, "Yet there is time !"

IV.

At Aershot, up leaped of a sudden the sun,
 And against him the cattle stood black every one,
 To stare thro' the mist at us galloping past,
 And I saw my stout galloper Roland at last,
 With resolute shoulders, each butting away
 The haze, as some bluff river headland its spray :

V.

And his low head and crest, just one sharp ear bent back
 For my voice, and the other pricked out on his track ;
 And one eye's black intelligence,—ever that glance
 O'er its white edge at me, his own master, askance !
 And the thick heavy spume-flakes which aye and anon
 His fierce lips shook upwards in galloping on.

VI.

By Hasselt, Dirck groaned ; and cried Joris, "Stay spur !
 "Your Roos galloped bravely, the fault's not in her,
 "We'll remember at Aix"—for one heard the quick wheeze
 Of her chest, saw the stretched neck and staggering knees,
 And sunk tail, and horrible heave of the flank,
 As down on her haunches she shuddered and sank.

VII.

So, we were left galloping, Joris and I,
 Past Looz and past Tongres, no cloud in the sky ;
 The broad sun above laughed a pitiless laugh,
 'Neath our feet broke the brittle bright stubble like chaff ;
 Till over by Dalhem a dome-spire sprang white,
 And "Gallop," gasped Joris, "for Aix is in sight !"

VIII.

'How they'll greet us !"—and all in a moment his roan
 Rolled neck and croup over, lay dead as a stone ;
 And there was my Roland to bear the whole weight
 Of the news which alone could save Aix from her fate,
 With his nostrils like pits full of blood to the brim,
 And with circles of red for his eye-sockets' rim.

IX.

Then I cast loose my buffcoat, each holster let fall,
 Shook off both my jack-boots, let go belt and all,
 Stood up in the stirrup, leaned, patted his ear,
 Called my Roland his pet-name, my horse without peer ;
 Clapped my hands, laughed and sang, any noise, bad or good,
 Till at length into Aix Roland galloped and stood.

X.

And all I remember is, friends flocking round
 As I sat with his head 'twixt my knees on the ground ;
 And no voice but was praising this Roland of mine,
 As I poured down his throat our last measure of wine,
 Which (the burgesses voted by common consent)
 Was no more than his due who brought good news from
 Ghent.

The indefiniteness of the date at the head of this poem will be best explained by the following extract from a letter of Mr. Browning's, published in 1881 in the *Boston Literary World* :—

"There is no sort of historical foundation about 'Good News From Ghent.' I wrote it under the bulwark of a vessel off the African coast, after I had been at sea long enough to appreciate even the fancy of a gallop on the back of a certain good horse 'York,' then in my stable at home."

This poem, therefore, widely known and appreciated as one of the most stirring in the language, may be regarded as a living picture to illustrate the pages—no page in particular—of Motley.

As parallels in American literature, reference may be made to "Paul Revere's Ride," by Longfellow, and "Sheridan's Ride," by T. B. Reade.

ECHETLOS.

HERE is a story, shall stir you! Stand up, Greeks dead and
gone,
Who breasted, beat Barbarians, stemmed Persia rolling on,
Did the deed and saved the world, since the day was
Marathon!

No man but did his manliest, kept rank and fought away
In his tribe and file: up, back, out, down—was the spear-
arm play:
Like a wind-whipt branchy wood, all spear-arms a-swing that
day!

But one man kept no rank, and his sole arm plied no spear,
As a flashing came and went, and a form i' the van, the rear,
Brightened the battle up, for he blazed now there, now here.

Nor helmed nor shielded, he! but, a goat-skin all his wear,
Like a tiller of the soil, with a clown's limbs broad and bare,
Went he ploughing on and on: he pushed with a plough-
man's share.

Did the weak mid-line give way, as tunnies on whom the
shark
Precipitates his bulk? Did the right-wing halt when, stark
Dn his heap of slain, lay stretched Kallimachos Polemarch?

Did the steady phalanx falter? To the rescue, at the need,
The clown was ploughing Persia, clearing Greek earth of
weed,
As he routed through the Sakian and rooted up the Mede.

But the deed done, battle won,—nowhere to be descried
On the meadow, by the stream, at the marsh,—look far and
wide

From the foot of the mountain, no, to the last bloodplashed
sea-side,—

Not anywhere on view blazed the large limbs thonged and
brown,

Shearing and clearing still with the share before which—
down

To the dust went Persia's pomp, as he ploughed for Greece,
that clown!

How spake the Oracle? "Care for no name at all!
Say but just this: We praise one helpful whom we call
The Holder of the Ploughshare. The great deed ne'er
grows small."

Not the great name! Sing—woe for the great name Miltiadés,
And its end at Paros isle! Woe for Themistokles—
Satrap in Sardis court! Name not the clown like these!

The name, Echetlos, is derived from *ἐχέτλη*, a plough handle. It is not strictly a proper name, but an appellative, meaning "the Holder of the Ploughshare." The story is found in Pausanias, author of the "Itinerary of Greece" (1, 15, 32). Nothing further is necessary in order to understand this little poem and appreciate its rugged strength than familiarity with the battle of Marathon, and some knowledge of Miltiades and Themistocles, the one known as the hero of Marathon, and the other as the hero of Salamis. The lesson of the poem ("The great deed ne'er grows small, not the great name!") is taught in a way not likely to be forgotten. One is reminded of another, who wished to be nameless, heard only as "the voice of one crying in the wilderness!"

The ellipsis in thought between the eighth and ninth stanzas is so easily supplied that it is noticed here only as a simple illustration of what is sometimes the occasion of difficulty (see Introduction, p. iii). It would only have lengthened the poem and weakened it to have inserted a stanza telling in so many words that when the hero could not be found, a message was sent to the Oracle to enquire who it could be.

As a companion to "Echetlos" may be read the stirring poem of "Hervé Riel."

HELEN'S TOWER.

Ἑλένη ἐπὶ πύργῳ.

WHO hears of Helen's Tower, may dream perchance,
 How the Greek Beauty from the Scæan Gate
 Gazed on old friends unanimous in hate,
 Death-doom'd because of her fair countenance.

Hearts would leap otherwise, at thy advance,
 Lady, to whom this Tower is consecrate :
 Like hers, thy face once made all eyes elate,
 Yet, unlike hers, was bless'd by every glance.

The Tower of Hate is outworn, far and strange :
 A transitory shame of long ago,
 It dies into the sand from which it sprang :
 But thine, Love's rock-built Tower, shall fear no change :
 God's self laid stable Earth's foundations so,
 When all the morning-stars together sang.

The tower is one built by Lord Dufferin, in memory of his mother Helen, Countess of Gifford, on one of his estates in Ireland. "The Greek Beauty" is, of course, Helen of Troy, and the reference in the alternative heading is apparently to that fine passage in the third book of the "Iliad," where Helen meets the Trojan chiefs at the Scæan Gate (see line 154, which speaks of "Helen at the Tower").

On the last two lines, founded of course on the well-known passage in Job (xxxviii. 4-7), compare Dante :

"E il sol montava in su con quelle stelle
 Ch'eran con lui, quando l'Amor Divino
 Mosse da prima quelle cose belle."

"Aloft the sun ascended with those stars
 That with him rose, when Love Divine first moved
 Those its fair works."

—*Inferno* I. 38-40.

SHOP.

I.

So, friend, your shop was all your house !
 Its front, astonishing the street,
 Invited view from man and mouse
 To what diversity of treat
 Behind its glass—the single sheet !

II.

What gimcracks, genuine Japanese :
 Gape-jaw and goggle-eye, the frog ;
 Dragons, owls, monkeys, beetles, geese ;
 Some crush-nosed human-hearted dog :
 Queer names, too, such a catalogue !

III.

I thought "And he who owns the wealth
 "Which blocks the window's vastitude,
 "—Ah, could I peep at him by stealth
 "Behind his ware, pass shop, intrude
 "On house itself, what scenes were viewed !

IV.

"If wide and showy thus the shop,
 "What must the habitation prove ?
 "The true house with no name a-top—
 "The mansion, distant one remove,
 "Once get him off his traffic groove !

V.

" Pictures he likes, or books perhaps ;
 " And as for buying most and best,
 " Commend me to these city chaps !
 " Or else he 's social, takes his rest
 " On Sundays, with a Lord for guest.

VI.

" Some suburb-palace, parked about
 " And gated grandly, built last year :
 " The four-mile walk to keep off gout ;
 " Or big seat sold by bankrupt peer :
 " But then he takes the rail, that 's clear.

VII.

" Or, stop ! I wager, taste selects
 " Some out o' the way, some all-unknown
 " Retreat : the neighbourhood suspects
 " Little that he who rambles lone
 " Makes Rothschild tremble on his throne !"

VIII.

Nowise ! Nor Mayfair residence
 Fit to receive and entertain,—
 Nor Hampstead villa's kind defence
 From noise and crowd, from dust and drain,—
 Nor country-box was soul's domain !

IX.

Nowise ! At back of all that spread
 Of merchandize, woe 's me, I find
 A hole i' the wall where, heels by head,
 The owner couched, his ware behind,
 —In cupboard suited to his mind.

X.

For, why ? He saw no use of life
 But, while he drove a roaring trade,
 To chuckle " Customers are rife !"
 To chafe " So much hard cash outlaid
 " Yet zero in my profits made !

XI.

" This novelty costs pains, but—takes ?
 " Cumbers my counter ! Stock no more !
 " This article, no such great shakes,
 " Fizzes like wild fire ? Underscore
 " The cheap thing—thousands to the fore !"

XII.

'T was lodging best to live most nigh
 (Cramp, coffinlike as crib might be)
 Receipt of Custom ; ear and eye
 Wanted no outworld : " Hear and see
 " The bustle in the shop !" quoth he.

XIII.

My fancy of a merchant-prince
 Was different. Through his wares we groped
 Our darkling way to—not to mince
 The matter—no black den where moped
 The master if we interloped!

XIV.

Shop was shop only : household-stuff?
 What did he want with comforts there?
 "Walls, ceiling, floor, stay blank and rough,
 "So goods on sale show rich and rare!
 "*Sell and scud home,*" be shop's affair!

XV.

What might he deal in? Gems, suppose!
 Since somehow business must be done
 At cost of trouble,—see, he throws
 You choice of jewels, everyone
 Good, better, best, star, moon and sun!

XVI.

Which lies within your power of purse?
 This ruby that would tip aright
 Solomon's sceptre? Oh, your nurse
 Wants simply coral, the delight
 Of teething baby,—stuff to bite!

XVII.

Howe'er your choice fell, straight you took
 Your purchase, prompt your money rang
 On counter,—scarce the man forsook
 His study of the "Times," just swang
 Till-ward his hand that stopped the clang,—

XVIII.

Then off made buyer with a prize,
 Then seller to his "Times" returned,
 And so did day wear, wear, till eyes
 Brightened apace, for rest was earned:
 He locked door long ere candle burned.

XIX.

And whither went he? Ask himself,
 Not me! To change of scene, I think.
 Once sold the ware and pursed the pelf,
 Chaffer was scarce his meat and drink,
 Nor all his music—money-chink.

XX.

Because a man has shop to mind
 In time and place, since flesh must live,
 Needs spirit lack all life behind,
 All stray thoughts, fancies fugitive,
 All loves except what trade can give?

XXI.

I want to know a butcher paints,
 A baker rhymes for his pursuit,
 Candlestick-maker much acquaints
 His soul with song, or, haply mute,
 Blows out his brains upon the flute!

XXII.

But shop each day and all day long!
 Friend, your good angel slept, your star
 Suffered eclipse, fate did you wrong!
 From where these sorts of treasures are,
 There should our hearts be—Christ, how far!

There ought to be far more in a man than can be put into a front window. This man had all sorts of "curios" in his shop window, but there was nothing rich or rare in his soul; and so there was room for all of *him* in a den which would not have held the hundredth part of his wares. The contemptible manner of the man's life is strikingly brought out by the various suppositions (stanzas 5, 6, 7) so different from the poor reality (8—9). All he cared for was business, which made him "chuckle" on the one hand or "chafe" on the other, according as times were good or bad (10). Even in his business it was not the real excellence of his wares he cared for, only their saleability (11). A merchant prince is a very different person (13—19). The last three stanzas give the lesson in a style partly humorous, but passing in the end to an impressive solemnity. . . .

In connection with this should be read the companion piece, "House," to which reference is made in the Introduction.

THE BOY AND THE ANGEL.

MORNING, evening, noon and night,
 "Praise God!" sang Theocrite.

Then to his poor trade he turned,
 Whereby the daily meal was earned.

Hard he laboured, long and well;
 O'er his work the boy's curls fell.

But ever, at each period,
 He stopped and sang, "Praise God!"

Then back again his curls he threw,
 And cheerful turned to work anew.

Said Blaise, the listening monk, "Well done;
 "I doubt not thou art heard, my son:

"As well as if thy voice to-day
 "Were praising God, the Pope's great way.

"This Easter Day, the Pope at Rome
 "Praises God from Peter's dome."

Said Theocrite, "Would God that I
 "Might praise Him, that great way, and die!"

Night passed, day shone,
 And Theocrite was gone.

With God a day endures alway,
A thousand years are but a day.

God said in heaven, "Nor day nor night
"Now brings the voice of my delight."

Then Gabriel, like a rainbow's birth,
Spread his wings and sank to earth ;

Entered, in flesh, the empty cell,
Lived there, and played the craftsman well ;

And morning, evening, noon and night,
Praised God in place of Theocrite.

And from a boy, to youth he grew :
The man put off the stripling's hue :

The man matured and fell away
Into the season of decay :

And ever o'er the trade he bent,
And ever lived on earth content.

(He did God's will ; to him, all one
If on the earth or in the sun.)

God said, "A praise is in mine ear ;
"There is no doubt in it, no fear :

"So sing old worlds, and so
"New worlds that from my footstool go.

"Clearer loves sound other ways :
"I miss my little human praise."

Then forth sprang Gabriel's wings, off fell
The flesh disguise, remained the cell.

'T was Easter Day : He flew to Rome,
And paused above Saint Peter's dome.

In the tiring-room close by
The great outer gallery,

With his holy vestments dight,
Stood the new Pope, Theocrite :

And all his past career
Came back upon him clear,

Since when, a boy, he plied his trade,
Till on his life the sickness weighed ;

And in his cell, when death drew near,
An angel in a dream brought cheer :

And, rising from the sickness drear,
He grew a priest, and now stood here.

To the East with praise he turned,
And on his sight the angel burned.

"I bore thee from thy craftsman's cell,
"And set thee here ; I did not ween.

"Vainly I left my angel-sphere,
"Vain was thy dream of many a year.

"Thy voice's praise seemed weak ; it dropped—
"Creation's chorus stopped !

"Go back and praise again
"The early way, while I remain.

"With that weak voice of our disdain,
"Take up creation's pausing strain.

"Back to the cell and poor employ :
"Resume the craftsman and the boy !"

Theocrite grew old at home ;
A new Pope dwelt in Peter's dome.

One vanished as the other died :
They sought God side by side.

The lesson of this beautiful fancy is the complement of the "Shop" lesson. Even drudgery may be divine ; since the will of God is the work to be done, no matter whether under St. Peter's dome or in the cell of the craftsman (the Boy)—"all one, if on the earth or in the sun" (the Angel).

The poem is so full of exquisite things, that only a few can be noted. The value of the "little human praise" to God Himself (distich 12), all the dearer because of the doubts and fears in it (20—22) ; and the contrast between its seeming weakness and insignificance and its real importance as a necessary part of the great chorus of creation (34) ; the eager desire of Gabriel to anticipate the will of God, and his content to live on earth and bend over a common trade, if only thus he can serve Him best (13—19) ; and again the content of the "new pope Theocrite" to go back to his "cell and poor employ" and fill out the measure of his day of service, growing old at home, while Gabriel as contentedly takes his place as pope (probably a harder trial than the more menial service) and waits for the time when both "sought God side by side"—these are some of the fine and far reaching thoughts which find simple and beautiful expression here.

Longfellow's "King Robert of Sicily," though not really parallel, has points of similarity to "The Boy and the Angel."

THE PATRIOT.

AN OLD STORY.

I.

It was roses, roses, all the way,
With myrtle mixed in my path like mad :
The house-roofs seemed to heave and sway,
The church-spires flamed, such flags they had,
A year ago on this very day.

II.

The air broke into a mist with bells,
The old walls rocked with the crowd and cries.
Had I said, "Good folk, mere noise repels—
"But give me your sun from yonder skies !"
They had answered "And afterward, what else ?"

III.

Alack, it was I who leaped at the sun
To give it my loving friends to keep !
Nought man could do, have I left undone :
And you see my harvest, what I reap
This very day, now a year is run.