

At Göttingen presently, when, in the dusk
 Of his life, if his cough, as I fear, should increase
 Prophesied of by that horrible husk—
 When thicker and thicker the darkness fills
 The world through his misty spectacles,
 And he gropes for something more substantial
 Than a fable, myth or personification,—
 May Christ do for him what no mere man shall,
 And stand confessed as the God of salvation!
 Meantime, in the still recurring fear
 Lest myself, at unawares, be found,
 While attacking the choice of my neighbours round,
 With none of my own made—I choose here!
 The giving out of the hymn reclaims me;
 I have done: and if any blames me,
 Thinking that merely to touch in brevity
 The topics I dwell on, were unlawful.—
 Or worse, that I trench, with undue levity,
 On the bounds of the holy and the awful,—
 I praise the heart, and pity the head of him,
 And refer myself to THEE, instead of him,
 Who head and heart alike discernest,
 Looking below light speech we utter,
 When frothy spume and frequent sputter
 Prove that the soul's depths boil in earnest!
 May truth shine out, stand ever before us!
 I put up pencil and join chorus
 To Hepzibah tune, without further apology,
 The last five verses of the third section
 Of the seventeenth hymn of Whitfield's Collection,
 To conclude with the doxology.

EASTER-DAY.

As Christmas-Eve has suggested the subject of the Christian Faith, Easter-Day gives occasion to a discussion concerning the Christian Life—the life of those who are “risen with Christ.” The poem is in substance a conversation or discussion between two persons, one of whom (a thorough Christian) finds it very hard, while the other (who takes a much lower and more common-place view of spiritual things) thinks it quite easy, to be a Christian. It is not, however, in the form of a conversation. As usual in Browning's work, one speaks, stating his own views and quoting the other's, which are therefore distinguished from his own (except when he quotes, as he sometimes does, from himself) by quotation marks. The argument is too abstruse to be followed out in all its ramifications; but enough of it can be given to render quite intelligible the extracts from it which we find it possible to give. The opening sentence will give the theme:—

I.

How very hard it is to be
 A Christian! Hard for you and me,
 —Not the mere task of making real
 That duty up to its ideal,
 Effecting thus, complete and whole,
 A purpose of the human soul—
 For that is always hard to do;
 But hard, I mean, for me and you
 To realize it, more or less,
 With even the moderate success
 Which commonly repays our strife
 To carry out the aims of life.

After some preliminary discussion about faith in its relation to life, the easy-going friend takes this position:—

VI.

* * * * *

"Renounce the world!
 "Were that a mighty hardship? Plan
 "A pleasant life, and straight some man
 "Beside you, with, if he thought fit,
 "Abundant means to compass it,
 "Shall turn deliberate aside
 "To try and live as, if you tried
 "You clearly might, yet most despise.
 "One friend of mine wears out his eyes,
 "Slighting the stupid joys of sense,
 "In patient hope that, ten years hence,
 "'Somewhat completer,' he may say,
 "'My list of *coleoptera*!'
 "While just the other who most laughs
 "At him, above all epitaphs
 "Aspires to have his tomb describe
 "Himself as sole among the tribe
 "Of snuffbox-fanciers, who possessed
 "A Grignon with the Regent's crest.
 "So that, subduing, as you want,
 "Whatever stands predominant
 "Among my earthly appetites
 "For tastes and smells and sounds and sights,
 "I shall be doing that alone,
 "To gain a palm-branch and a throne,
 "Which fifty people undertake
 "To do, and gladly, for the sake
 "Of giving a Semitic guess,
 "Or playing pawns at blindfold chess."

The stanza which follows gives the speaker's answer, ending with this striking passage:—

"Renounce the world!"—Ah, were it done
 By merely cutting one by one
 Your limbs off, with your wise head last,
 How easy were it!—how soon past,
 If once in the believing mood!

To which the other replies by reproaching him for ingratitude to God, who really asks us to give up nothing that is good, but only to observe such moderation in our pleasures that life is all the more enjoyable, while sorrow almost disappears, transfigured in the light of love. This answer has such a ring of the true metal in it, that the speaker begins his rejoinder with the question, "Do you say this, or I?" and then proceeds (in a passage of wonderful power) to expose the superficiality of the view he is endeavouring to support.

VIII.

Do you say this, or I?—Oh, you!
 Then, what, my friend?—(thus I pursue
 Our parley)—you indeed opine
 That the Eternal and Divine
 Did, eighteen centuries ago,
 In very truth . . . Enough! you know
 The all-stupendous tale,—that Birth,
 That Life, that Death! And all, the earth
 Shuddered at,—all, the heavens grew black
 Rather than see; all, nature's rack
 And throe at dissolution's brink
 Attested,—all took place, you think,
 Only to give our joys a zest,
 And prove our sorrows for the best?
 We differ, then! Were I, still pale
 And heartstruck at the dreadful tale,
 Waiting to hear God's voice declare

What horror followed for my share,
 As implicated in the deed,
 Apart from other sins,—concede
 That if he blacked out in a blot
 My brief life's pleasantness, 't were not
 So very disproportionate !
 Or there might be another fate—
 I certainly could understand
 (If fancies were the thing in hand)
 How God might save, at that day's price,
 The impure in their impurities,
 Give formal licence and complete
 To choose the fair and pick the sweet.
 But there be certain words, broad, plain,
 Uttered again and yet again,
 Hard to mistake or overgloss—
 Announcing this world's gain for loss,
 And bidding us reject the same :
 The whole world lieth (they proclaim)
 In wickedness,—come out of it !
 Turn a deaf ear, if you think fit,
 But I who thrill through every nerve
 At thought of what deaf ears deserve,—
 How do you counsel in the case ?

The counsel was, to choose by all means the safe side, by giving up everything as literally as did the martyrs in the early days of persecution ; at which a shudder of doubt comes over him, and he answers (note the very remarkable illustration of the moles and the grasshoppers) :—

X.

* * * * *

If after all we should mistake,
 And so renounce life for the sake

Of death and nothing else ? You hear
 Our friends we jeered at, send the jeer
 Back to ourselves with good effect—
 “ There were my beetles to collect !
 “ My box—a trifle, I confess,
 “ But here I hold it, ne'ertheless ! ”
 Poor idiots, (let us pluck up heart
 And answer) we, the better part
 Have chosen, though 't were only hope,—
 Nor envy moles like you that grope
 Amid your veritable muck,
 More than the grasshoppers would truck,
 For yours, their passionate life away,
 That spends itself in leaps all day
 To reach the sun, you want the eyes
 To see, as they the wings to rise
 And match the noble hearts of them !
 Thus the contemner we contemn,—
 And, when doubt strikes us, thus we ward
 Its stroke off, caught upon our guard,
 —Not struck enough to overturn
 Our faith, but shake it—make us learn
 What I began with, and, I wis,
 End, having proved,—how hard it is
 To be a Christian !

* His friend now reproaches him with the thanklessness of the task he is undertaking, in trying to so little purpose to disturb the peace of a man who has no such high-flown views of duty ; whereupon he relates to him a wonderful experience he had on Easter-morn three years before :—

XIV.

I commence
 By trying to inform you, whence

It comes that every Easter-night
 As now, I sit up, watch, till light,
 Upon those chimney-stacks and roofs,
 Give, through my window-pane, grey proofs
 That Easter-day is breaking slow.
 On such a night three years ago,
 It chanced that I had cause to cross
 The common, where the chapel was,
 Our friend spoke of, the other day—
 You 've not forgotten, I dare say.
 I fell to musing of the time
 So close, the blessed matin-prime
 All hearts leap up at, in some guise—
 One could not well do otherwise.
 Insensibly my thoughts were bent
 Toward the main point ; I overwent
 Much the same ground of reasoning
 As you and I just now. One thing
 Remained, however—one that tasked
 My soul to answer ; and I asked,
 Fairly and frankly, what might be
 That History, that Faith, to me
 —Me there—not me in some domain
 Built up and peopled by my brain,
 Weighing its merits as one weighs
 Mere theories for blame or praise,
 —The kingcraft of the Lucumons,
 Or Fourier's scheme, its pros and cons,—
 But my faith there, or none at all.
 "How were my case, now, did I fall
 "Dead here, this minute—should I lie
 "Faithful or faithless ?"

To this solemn question a friendly answer seems to come from Common Sense, assuring him that all would be right ; for, though his ship might not sail very grandly into the eternal haven, it was enough if, in whatever state of wreck, it arrived at all ; which leads him to utter the deepest wish and expectation of his heart :—

Would the ship reach home !

I wish indeed "God's kingdom come—"
 The day when I shall see appear
 His bidding, as my duty, clear
 From doubt ! And it shall dawn, that day,
 Some future season ; Easter may
 Prove, not impossibly, the time—
 Yes, that were striking—fates would chime
 So aptly ! Easter-morn, to bring
 The Judgment !—deeper in the spring
 Than now, however, when there 's snow
 Capping the hills ; for earth must show
 All signs of meaning to pursue
 Her tasks as she was wont to do
 —The skylark, taken by surprise
 As we ourselves, shall recognise
 Sudden the end. For suddenly
 It comes ; the dreadfulness must be
 In that ; all warrants the belief—
 "At night it cometh like a thief."
 I fancy why the trumpet blows ;
 —Plainly, to wake one. From repose
 We shall start up, at last awake
 From life, that insane dream we take
 For waking now.

* * * * *

The next stanza gives the famous description of the fiery aurora, when even "the south firmament with north-fire did its wings reflexed !" (Compare description of lunar rainbow in "Christmas-Eve.") He feels sure that his wish is realized, and the Judgment Day has come !

XV.

* * * * *

I found

Suddenly all the midnight round
 One fire. The dome of heaven had stood
 As made up of a multitude
 Of handbreadth cloudlets, one vast rack
 Of ripples infinite and black,
 From sky to sky. Sudden there went,
 Like horror and astonishment,
 A fierce vindictive scribble of red
 Quick flame across, as if one said
 (The angry scribe of Judgment) "There—
 "Burn it!" And straight I was aware
 That the whole ribwork round, minute
 Cloud touching cloud beyond compute,
 Was tinted, each with its own spot
 Of burning at the core, till clot
 Jammed against clot, and spilt its fire
 Over all heaven, which 'gan suspire
 As fanned to measure equable,—
 Just so great conflagrations kill
 Night overhead, and rise and sink,
 Reflected. Now the fire would shrink
 And wither off the blasted face
 Of heaven, and I distinct might trace
 The sharp black ridgy outlines left
 Unburned like network—then, each cleft .
 The fire had been sucked back into,
 Regorged, and out it surging flew
 Furiously, and night writhed inflamed,

Till, tolerating to be tamed
 No longer, certain rays world-wide
 Shot downwardly. On every side
 Caught past escape, the earth was lit ;
 As if a dragon's nostril split,
 And all his famished ire o'erflowed ;
 Then as he winced at his lord's goad,
 Back he inhaled : whereat I found
 The clouds into vast pillars bound,
 Based on the corners of the earth,
 Propping the skies at top : a dearth
 Of fire i' the violet intervals,
 Leaving exposed the utmost walls
 Of time, about to tumble in
 And end the world.

XVI.

I felt begin

The Judgment-Day : to retrocede
 Was too late now. "In very deed,"
 (I uttered to myself) "that Day!"
 The intuition burned away
 All darkness from my spirit too :
 There, stood I, found and fixed, I knew,
 Choosing the world. The choice was made ;
 And naked and disguiseless stayed,
 And unevadable, the fact.
 My brain held ne'ertheless compact
 Its senses, nor my heart declined
 Its office ; rather, both combined
 To help me in this juncture. I

Lost not a second,—agony
 Gave boldness : since my life had end
 And my choice with it—best defend,
 Applaud both ! I resolved to say,
 “So was I framed by thee, such way
 “I put to use thy senses here !
 “It was so beautiful, so near,
 “Thy world,—what could I then but choose
 “My part there ? Nor did I refuse
 “To look above the transient boon
 “Of time ; but it was hard so soon
 “As in a short life, to give up
 “Such beauty : I could put the cup
 “Undrained of half its fulness, by ;
 “But, to renounce it utterly,
 “—That was too hard ! Nor did the cry
 “Which bade renounce it, touch my brain
 “Authentically deep and plain
 “Enough to make my lips let go.
 “But thou, who knowest all, dost know
 “Whether I was not, life’s brief while,
 “Endeavouring to reconcile
 “Those lips (too tardily, alas !)
 “To letting the dear remnant pass,
 “One day,—some drops of earthly good
 “Untasted ! Is it for this mood,
 “That thou, whose earth delights so well,
 “Hast made its complement a hell ?”

XVII.

A final belch of fire like blood,

Overbroke all heaven in one flood
 Of doom. Then fire was sky, and sky
 Fire, and both, one brief ecstasy,
 Then ashes. But I heard no noise
 (Whatever was) because a voice
 Beside me spoke thus, “Life is done,
 “Time ends, Eternity’s begun,
 “And thou art judged for evermore.”

As in “Christmas-Eve,” the question rises of a Presence in the awful scene.

XIX.

* * * * *

What if, ’twixt skies

And prostrate earth, he should surprise
 The imaged vapour, head to foot,
 Surveying, motionless and mute,
 Its work, ere, in a whirlwind rapt
 It vanish up again ?—So hapt
 My chance. HE stood there. Like the smoke
 Pillared o’er Sodom, when day broke,—
 I saw him. One magnificent pall
 Mantled in massive fold and fall
 His head, and coiled in snaky swathes
 About his feet : night’s black, that bathes
 All else, broke, grizzled with despair,
 Against the soul of blackness there.
 A gesture told the mood within—
 That wrapped right hand which based the chin
 That intense meditation fixed
 On his procedure,—pity mixed
 With the fulfilment of decree.

Motionless, thus, he spoke to me,
 Who fell before his feet, a mass,
 No man now.

Then follows the Sentence, excluding him from the heaven of spirit, and leaving him to the world of sense, hopeless for ever of anything higher—a sentence which seemed to him at first to be rather a reward than a punishment, as he thought of "earth's resources—vast exhaustless beauty, endless change of wonder!" Even a fern-leaf a museum in itself!

The answer of the Voice to this shallow thought leads us into the very loftiest regions of the imagination, suggesting views of the future of the redeemed which make the soul thrill with eager expectancy—

XXIV.

Then the Voice, "Welcome so to rate
 "The arras-folds that variegate
 "The earth, God's antechamber, well!
 "The wise, who waited there, could tell
 "By these, what royalties in store
 "Lay one step past the entrance-door.
 "For whom, was reckoned, not too much,
 "This life's munificence? For such
 "As thou,—a race, whereof scarce one
 "Was able, in a million,
 "To feel that any marvel lay
 "In objects round his feet all day;
 "Scarce one in many millions more,
 "Willing, if able, to explore
 "The secreter, minuter charm!
 "—Brave souls, a fern-leaf could disarm
 "Of power to cope with God's intent,—
 "Or scared if the south firmament
 "With north-fire did its wings refledge!

"All partial beauty was a pledge
 "Of beauty in its plenitude:
 "But since the pledge sufficed thy mood,
 "Retain it! plenitude be theirs
 "Who looked above!"

At this answer "sharp despairs shot through" him, at the thought of what he had missed; but on reflection he finds comfort in the prospect of the possibilities of Art. Again the inexorable voice is heard, pronouncing loss unspeakable. Even if he could be a Michelangelo (Buonarroti), it would be only the initial earthly stage of his development that was possible for him. (The whole passage is magnificent; but perhaps the exquisitely wrought-out illustration of the lizard in its narrow rock-chamber will be most enjoyed.)

XXVI.

* * * * *

"If such his soul's capacities,
 "Even while he trod the earth,—think, now,
 "What pomp in Buonarroti's brow,
 "With its new palace-brain where dwells
 "Superb the soul, unvexed by cells
 "That crumbled with the transient clay!
 "What visions will his right hand's sway
 "Still turn to form, as still they burst
 "Upon him? How will he quench thirst,
 "Titanically infantine,
 "Laid at the breast of the Divine?
 "Does it confound thee,—this first page
 "Emblazoning man's heritage?—
 "Can this alone absorb thy sight,
 "As pages were not infinite,—
 "Like the omnipotence which tasks
 "Itself, to furnish all that asks

"The soul it means to satiate?
 "What was the world, the starry state
 "Of the broad skies,—what, all displays
 "Of power and beauty intermixed,
 "Which now thy soul is chained betwixt,—
 "What else than needful furniture
 "For life's first stage? God's work, be sure,
 "No more spreads wasted, than falls scant!
 "He filled, did not exceed, man's want
 "Of beauty in this life. But through
 "Life pierce,—and what has earth to do,
 "Its utmost beauty's appanage,
 "With the requirement of next stage?
 "Did God pronounce earth 'very good'?
 "Needs must it be, while understood
 "For man's preparatory state;
 "Nothing to heighten nor abate:
 "Transfer the same completeness here,
 "To serve a new state's use,—and drear
 "Deficiency gapes every side!
 "The good, tried once, were bad, retried.
 "See the enwrapping rocky niche,
 "Sufficient for the sleep, in which
 "The lizard breathes for ages safe:
 "Split the mould—and as this would chafe
 "The creature's new world-widened sense,
 "One minute after day dispense
 "The thousand sounds and sights that broke
 "In on him at the chisel's stroke,—
 "So, in God's eye, the earth's first stuff
 "Was, neither more nor less, enough

"To house man's soul, man's need fulfil.
 "Man reckoned it immeasurable?
 "So thinks the lizard of his vault!
 "Could God be taken in default,
 "Short of contrivances, by you,—
 "Or reached, ere ready to pursue
 "His progress through eternity?
 "That chambered rock, the lizard's world,
 "Your easy mallet's blow has hurled
 "To nothingness for ever; so,
 "Has God abolished at a blow
 "This world, wherein his saints were pent,—
 "Who, though found grateful and content,
 "With the provision there, as thou,
 "Yet knew he would not disallow
 "Their spirit's hunger, felt as well,—
 "Unsated,—not unsatable,
 "As paradise gives proof. Deride
 "Their choice now, thou who sit'st outside!"

The poem proceeds in the same lofty strain, till—humbled to the dust at the thought of the unutterable folly of his choice, especially in view of the love of God expressed on Calvary, a love which he had slighted in the happy days gone by—he presents the touching plea of the 31st stanza, the result of which appears in what follows, spoken of by Professor Kirkman of Cambridge, as "the splendid consummation of Easter-Day so closely resembling the well-known crisis in Faust."

XXXI.

And I cowered deprecatingly—
 "Thou Love of God! Or let me die,
 "Or grant what shall seem heaven almost!

"Let me not know that all is lost,
 "Though lost it be—leave me not tied
 "To this despair, this corpse-like bride!
 "Let that old life seem mine—no more—
 "With limitation as before,
 "With darkness, hunger, toil, distress:
 "Be all the earth a wilderness!
 "Only let me go on, go on,
 "Still hoping ever and anon
 "To reach one eve the Better Land!"

XXXII.

Then did the form expand, expand—
 I knew him through the dread disguise
 As the whole God within his eyes
 Embraced me.

XXXIII.

When I lived again,
 The day was breaking,—the grey plain
 I rose from, silvered thick with dew.
 Was this a vision? False or true?
 Since then, three varied years are spent,
 And commonly my mind is bent
 To think it was a dream—be sure
 A mere dream and distemperature—
 The last day's watching: then the night,—
 The shock of that strange Northern Light

Set my head swimming, bred in me
 A dream. And so I live, you see,
 Go through the world, try, prove, reject,
 Prefer, still struggling to effect
 My warfare; happy that I can
 Be crossed and thwarted as a man,
 Not left in God's contempt apart,
 With ghastly smooth life, dead at heart,
 Tame in earth's paddock as her prize.
 Thank God, she still each method tries
 To catch me, who may yet escape,
 She knows, the fiend in angel's shape!
 Thank God, no paradise stands barred
 To entry, and I find it hard
 To be a Christian, as I said!
 Still every now and then my head
 Raised glad, sinks mournful—all grows drear
 Spite of the sunshine, while I fear
 And think, "How dreadful to be grudged
 "No ease henceforth, as one that's judged,
 "Condemned to earth for ever, shut
 "From heaven!"

But Easter-Day breaks! But

Christ rises! Mercy every way
 Is infinite,—and who can say?

