

## Easter-Day

[Robert Browning](#)

I.

**H**OW 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 or the human soul—  
For that is always hard to do;  
But hard, I mean, for me and you  
To realise it, more or less,  
With even the moderate success  
Which commonly repays our strife  
To carry out the aims of life.  
“This aim is greater,” you may say,  
“And so more arduous every way.”  
—But the importance of the fruits  
Still proves to man, in all pursuits,  
Proportional encouragement.  
“Then, what if it be God’s intent  
“That labour to this one result  
“Shall seem unduly difficult?”  
—Ah, that’s a question in the dark—  
And the sole thing that I remark  
Upon the difficulty, this;  
We do not see it where it *is*,  
At the beginning of the race:  
As we proceed, it shifts its place,  
And where we looked for palms to fall,  
We find the tug’s to come,—that’s all.

II.

At first you say, “The whole, or chief  
“Of difficulties, is Belief.  
“Could I believe once thoroughly,  
“The rest were simple. What? Am I  
“An idiot, do you think? A beast?  
“Prove to me only that the least  
“Command of God is God’s indeed,

“And what injunction shall I need  
“To pay obedience? Death so nigh  
“When time must end, eternity  
“Begin,—and cannot I compute?  
“Weigh loss and gain together? suit  
“My actions to the balance drawn,  
“And give my body to be sawn  
“Asunder, hacked in pieces, tied  
“To horses, stoned, burned, crucified,  
“Like any martyr of the list?  
“How gladly,—if I made acquit,  
“Through the brief minutes’ fierce annoy,  
“Of God’s eternity of joy.”

III.

—And certainly you name the point  
Whereon all turns: for could you joint  
This flexile finite life once tight  
Into the fixed and infinite,  
You, safe inside, would spurn what’s out,  
With carelessness enough, no doubt—  
Would spurn mere life: but where time brings  
To their next stage your reasonings,  
Your eyes, late wide, begin to wink  
Nor see the path so well, I think.

IV.

You say, “Faith may be, one agrees,  
“A touchstone for God’s purposes,  
“Even as ourselves conceive of them.  
“Could He acquit us or condemn  
“For holding what no hand can loose,  
“Rejecting when we can’t but choose?  
“As well award the victor’s wreath  
“To whosoever should take breath  
“Duly each minute while he lived—  
“Grant Heaven, because a man contrived  
“To see the sunlight every day  
“He walked forth on the public way.  
“You must mix some uncertainty  
“With faith, if you would have faith *be*.  
“Why, what but faith, do we abhor  
“And idolize each other for—  
“—Faith in our evil, or our good,  
“Which is or is not understood  
“Aright by those we love or those  
“We hate, thence called our friends or foes?

“Your mistress saw your spirit’s grace,  
“When, turning from the ugly face,  
“I found belief in it too hard;  
“And both of us have our reward.  
“—Yet here a doubt peeps: well for us  
“Weak beings, to go using thus  
“A touchstone for our little ends,  
“And try with faith the foes and friends;  
“—But God, bethink you! I would fain  
“Conceive of the Creator’s reign  
“As based upon exacter laws  
“Than creatures build by with applause.  
“In all God’s acts—(as Plato cries  
“He doth)—He *should* geometrize.  
“Whence, I desiderate . . .

v.

I see!

You would grow smoothly as a tree.  
Soar heavenward, straightly up like fire—  
God bless you—there’s your world entire  
Needing no faith, if you think fit;  
Go there, walk up and down in it!  
The whole creation travails, groans—  
Contrive your music from its moans,  
Without or let or hindrance, friend!  
That’s an old story, and its end  
As old—you come back (be sincere)  
With every question you put here  
(Here where there once was, and is still,  
We think, a living oracle,  
Whose answers you stood carping at)  
This time flung back unanswered flat,—  
Besides, perhaps, as many more  
As those that drove you out before,  
Now added, where was little need!  
Questions impossible, indeed,  
To us who sate still, all and each  
Persuaded that our earth had speech  
Of God’s, writ down, no matter if  
In cursive type or hieroglyph,—  
Which one fact frees us from the yoke  
Of guessing why He never spoke.  
You come back in no better plight  
Than when you left us,—am I right?

vi.

So the old process, I conclude,  
Goes on, the reasoning's pursued  
Further. You own. "'Tis well averred,  
"A scientific faith's absurd,  
"—Frustrates the very end 'twas meant  
"To serve: so I would rest content  
"With a mere probability,  
"But, probable; the chance must lie  
"Clear on one side,—lie all in rough,  
"So long as there is just enough  
"To pin my faith to, though it hap  
"Only at points: from gap to gap  
"One hangs up a huge curtain so,  
"Grandly, nor seeks to have it go  
"Foldless and flat along the wall:  
"—What care I that some interval  
"Of life less plainly might depend  
"On God? I'd hang there to the end;  
"And thus I should not find it hard  
"To be a Christian and debarred  
"From trailing on the earth, till furled  
"Away by death!—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 see  
"His list of *lepidopteræ*:  
"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.”

VII.

Good! and the next thing is,—look round  
For evidence enough. 'Tis found,  
No doubt: as is your sort of mind,  
So is your sort of search—you'll find  
What you desire, and that's to be  
A Christian: what says History?  
How comforting a point it were  
To find some mummy-scrap declare  
There lived a Moses! Better still,  
Prove Jonah's whale translatable  
Into some quicksand of the seas,  
Isle, cavern, rock, or what you please,  
That Faith might clap her wings and crow  
From such an eminence! Or, no—  
The Human Heart's best; you prefer  
Making that prove the minister  
To truth; you probe its wants and needs  
And hopes and fears, then try what creeds  
Meet these most aptly,—resolute  
That Faith plucks such substantial fruit  
Wherever these two correspond,  
She little needs to look beyond,  
To puzzle out what Orpheus was,  
Or Dionysius Zagrias.  
You'll find sufficient, as I say,  
To satisfy you either way.  
You wanted to believe; your pains  
Are crowned—you do: and what remains?  
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!  
Such is man's usual gratitude,  
Such thanks to God do we return,  
For not exacting that we spurn  
A single gift of life, forego

One real gain,—only taste them so  
With gravity and temperance,  
That those mild virtues may enhance  
Such pleasures, rather than abstract—  
Last spice of which, will be the fact  
Of love discerned in every gift;  
While, when the scene of life shall shift,  
And the gay heart be taught to ache,  
As sorrows and privations take  
The place of joy,—the thing that seems  
Mere misery, under human schemes,  
Becomes, regarded by the light  
Of Love, as very near, or quite  
As good a gift as joy before.  
So plain is it that all the more  
God's dispensation's merciful,  
More pettishly we try and cull  
Briars, thistles, from our private plot,  
To mar God's ground where thorns are not!

VIII.

Do you say this, or I?—Oh, you!  
Then, what, my friend,—(so 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,—it 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, 'twere 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,  
Leave 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, to 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?

IX.

“I'd take, by all means, in your place,  
“The safe side, since it so appears:  
“Deny myself, a few brief years,  
“The natural pleasure, leave the fruit  
“Or cut the plant up by the root.  
“Remember what a martyr said  
“On the rude tablet overhead—  
““I was born sickly, poor and mean,  
““A slave: no misery could screen  
““The holders of the pearl of price  
““From Cæsar's envy; therefore twice  
““I fought with beasts, and three times saw  
““My children suffer by his law—  
““At last my own release was earned:  
““I was some time in being burned,  
““But at the close a Hand came through  
““The fire above my head, and drew  
““My soul to Christ, whom now I see.  
““Sergius, a brother, writes for me  
““This testimony on the wall—  
““For me, I have forgot it all.’  
“You say right; this were not so hard!  
“And since one nowise is debarred  
“From this, why not escape some sins  
“By such a method?”

X.

—Then begins

To the old point, revulsion new—  
 (For 'tis just this, I bring you to)  
 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 'twere 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!  
 So, the contemner we contemn,—  
 And, when doubt strikes us, so, 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!

XI.

"Proved, or not,  
 "Howe'er you wis, small thanks, I wot,  
 "You get of mine, for taking pains  
 "To make it hard to me. Who gains  
 "By that, I wonder? Here I live  
 "In trusting ease; and do you drive  
 "At causing me to lose what most  
 "Yourself would mourn for when 'twas lost?"

XII.

But, do you see, my friend, that thus  
 You leave St. Paul for Æschylus?—  
 —Who made his Titan's arch-device  
 The giving men *blind hopes* to spice  
 The meal of life with, else devoured  
 In bitter haste, while lo! Death loured

Before them at the platter's edge!  
If faith should be, as we allege,  
Quite other than a condiment  
To heighten flavors with, or meant  
(Like that brave curry of his Grace)  
To take at need the victuals' place?  
If having dined you would digest  
Besides, and turning to your rest  
Should find instead . . .

XIII.

Now, you shall see

And judge if a mere foppery  
Pricks on my speaking! I resolve  
To utter . . . yes, it shall devolve  
On you to hear as solemn, strange  
And dread a thing as in the range  
Of facts,—or fancies, if God will—  
E'er happened to our kind! I still  
Stand in the cloud, and while it wraps  
My face, ought not to speak, perhaps;  
Seeing that as I carry through  
My purpose, if my words in you  
Find veritable listeners,  
My story, reason's self avers  
Must needs be false—the happy chance!  
While, if each human countenance  
I meet in London streets all day,  
Be what I fear,—my warnings fray  
No one, and no one they convert,  
And no one helps me to assert  
How hard it is to really be  
A Christian, and in vacancy  
I pour this story!

XIV.

I commence

By trying to inform you, whence  
It comes that every Easter-night  
As now, I sit up, watch, till light  
Shall break, 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 as *my* faith, or none at all.  
'How were my case, now, should I fall  
'Dead here, this minute—do I lie  
'Faithful or faithless?'—Note that I  
Inclined thus ever!—little prone  
For instance, when I slept alone  
In childhood, to go calm to sleep  
And leave a closet where might keep  
His watch perdue some murderer  
Waiting till twelve o'clock to stir,  
As good, authentic legends tell  
He might—'But how improbable!  
'How little likely to deserve  
'The pains and trial to the nerve  
'Of thrusting head into the dark,'—  
Urged my old nurse, and bade me mark  
Besides, that, should the dreadful scout  
Really lie hid there, to leap out  
At first turn of the rusty key,  
It were small gain that she could see  
In being killed upon the floor  
And losing one night's sleep the more.  
I tell you, I would always burst  
The door ope, know my fate at first.—  
This time, indeed, the closet penned

No such assassin: but a friend  
Rather, peeped out to guard me, fit  
For counsel, Common Sense, to-wit,  
Who said a good deal that might pass,—  
Heartening, impartial too, it was,  
Judge else: ‘For, soberly now,—who  
‘Should be a Christian if not you?’  
(Hear how he smoothed me down). ‘One takes  
‘A whole life, sees what course it makes  
‘Mainly, and not by fits and starts—  
‘In spite of stoppage which imparts  
‘Fresh value to the general speed:  
‘A life, with none, would fly indeed:  
‘Your progressing is slower-right!  
‘We deal with progressing, not flight.  
‘Through baffling senses passionate,  
‘Fancies as restless,—with a freight  
‘Of knowledge cumbersome enough  
‘To sink your ship when waves grow rough,  
‘Not serve as ballast in the hold,  
‘I find, ’mid dangers manifold,  
‘The good bark answers to the helm  
‘Where Faith sits, easier to o’erwhelm  
‘Than some stout peasant’s heavenly guide,  
‘Whose hard head could not, if it tried,  
‘Conceive a doubt, or understand  
‘How senses hornier than his hand  
‘Should ’tice the Christian off, his guard—  
‘More happy! But shall we award  
‘Less honour to the hull, which, dogged  
‘By storms, a mere wreck, waterlogged,  
‘Masts by the board, and bulwarks gone,  
‘And stanchions going, yet bears on,—  
‘Than to mere life-boats, built to save,  
‘And triumph o’er the breaking wave?  
‘Make perfect your good ship as these,  
‘And what were her performances!’  
I added—‘Would the ship reached 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 lark, as 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, because it seems.  
 ‘And as, when now we wake from dreams,  
 ‘We say, while we recall them, “Fool,  
 ‘“To let the chance slip, linger cool  
 ‘“When such adventure offered! Just  
 ‘“A bridge to cross, a dwarf to thrust  
 ‘“Aside, a wicked mage to stab—  
 ‘“And, lo ye, I had kissed Queen Mab,”—  
 ‘So shall we marvel why we grudged  
 ‘Our labours here, and idly judged  
 ‘Of Heaven, we might have gained, but lose!  
 ‘Lose? Talk of loss, and I refuse  
 ‘To plead at all! I speak no worse  
 ‘Nor better than my ancient nurse  
 ‘When she would tell me in my youth  
 ‘I well deserved that shapes uncouth  
 ‘Should fright and tease me in my sleep—  
 ‘Why did I not in memory keep  
 ‘Her precept for the evil’s cure?  
 ‘“Pinch your own arm, boy, and be sure  
 ‘“You’ll wake forthwith!””

XV.

And as I said  
 This nonsense, throwing back my head  
 With light complacent laugh, 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,—  
As when great conflagrations kill  
Night overhead, and rise and sink,  
Reflected. Now the fire would shrink  
And wither oft the blasted face  
Of heaven, and I distinct could 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,  
 An unevadeable, 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: there, my life had end  
 And my choice with it—best defend,  
 Applaud them! I resolved to say,  
 So was I framed by Thee, this way  
 ‘I put to use Thy senses here!  
 ‘It was so beautiful, so near,  
 ‘Thy world,—what could I do but choose  
 ‘My part there? Nor did I refuse  
 ‘To look above the transient boon  
 ‘In time—but it was hard so soon  
 ‘As in a short life, to give up  
 ‘Such beauty: I had put the cup  
 ‘Undrained of half its fullness, 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,  
 ‘Has made its complement a Hell?

XVII.

A final belch of fire like blood,  
 Overbroke all, next, in one flood  
 Of doom. Then fire was sky, and sky

Was fire, and both, one extasy,  
Then ashes. But I heard no noise  
(Whatever was) because a Voice  
Beside me spoke thus, "All is done,  
"Time end's, Eternity's begun,  
"And thou art judged for evermore!"

XVIII.

I looked up; all was as before;  
Of that cloud-Tophet overhead,  
No trace was left: I saw instead  
The common round me, and the sky  
Above, stretched drear and emptily  
Of life: 'twas the last watch of night,  
Except what brings the morning quite,  
When the armed angel, conscience-clear  
His task nigh done, leans o'er his spear  
And gazes on the earth he guards,  
Safe one night more through all its wards,  
Till God relieve him at his post.  
'A dream—a waking dream at most!  
(I spoke out quick that I might shake  
The horrid nightmare off, and wake.)  
'The world's gone, yet the world is here?  
'Are not all things as they appear?  
'Is Judgment past for me alone?  
'—And where had place the Great White Throne?  
'The rising of the Quick and Dead?  
'Where stood they, small and great? Who read  
'The sentence from the Opened Book?'  
So, by degrees, the blood forsook  
My heart, and let it beat afresh:  
I knew I should break through the mesh  
Of horror, and breathe presently—  
When, lo, again, the Voice by me!

XIX.

I saw . . . Oh, brother, 'mid far sands  
The palm-tree-cinctured city stands,—  
Bright-white beneath, as Heaven, bright-blue,  
Above it, while the years pursue  
Their course, unable to abate  
Its paradisaal laugh at fate:  
One morn,—the Arab staggers blind  
O'er a new tract of death, calcined  
To ashes, silence, nothingness,—  
Striving, with dizzy wits, to guess

Whence fell the blow: 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 Dread, 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.

XX.

“All is come to pass.  
 “Such shows are over for each soul  
 “They had respect to. In the roll  
 “Of Judgment which convinced mankind  
 “Of sin, stood many, bold and blind,  
 “Terror must burn the truth into:  
 “Their fate for them!—thou had'st to do  
 “With absolute omnipotence,  
 “Able its judgments to dispense  
 “To the whole race, as every one  
 “Were its sole object: that is done:  
 “God is, thou art,—the rest is hurled  
 “To nothingness for thee. This world,  
 “This finite life, thou hast preferred,  
 “In disbelief of God's own word,  
 “To Heaven and to Infinity.  
 “Here, the probation was for thee,  
 “To show thy soul the earthly mixed  
 “With Heavenly, it must choose betwixt.  
 “The earthly joys lay palpable,—  
 “A taint, in each, distinct as well;

“The Heavenly flitted, faint and rare,  
 “Above them, but as truly were  
 “Taintless, so in their nature, best.  
 “Thy choice was earth: thou didst attest  
 “Twas fitter spirit should subserve  
 “The flesh, than flesh refine to nerve  
 “Beneath the spirit’s play. Advance  
 “No claim to their inheritance  
 “Who chose the spirit’s fugitive  
 “Brief gleams, and thought, ‘This were to live  
 “Indeed, if rays, completely pure  
 “From flesh that dulls them, should endure,—  
 “Not shoot in meteor-light athwart  
 “Our earth, to show how cold and swart  
 “It lies beneath their fire, but stand  
 “As stars should, destined to expand,  
 “Prove veritable worlds, our home!’  
 “Thou said’st,—‘Let Spirit star the dome  
 “Of sky, that flesh may miss no peak,  
 “No nook of earth,—I shall not seek  
 “Its service further!’ Thou art shut  
 “Out of the Heaven of Spirit; glut  
 “Thy sense upon the world: ’tis thine  
 “For ever—take it!”

**XXI.**

‘How? Is mine,  
 ‘The world?’ (I cried, while my soul broke  
 Out in a transport) ‘Hast thou spoke  
 ‘Plainly in that? Earth’s exquisite  
 ‘Treasures of wonder and delight,  
 ‘For me?’

**XXII.**

The austere Voice returned,—  
 “So soon made happy? Hadst thou learned  
 “What God accounteth happiness,  
 “Thou wouldst not find it hard to guess  
 “What Hell may be His punishment  
 “For those who doubt if God invent  
 “Better than they. Let such men rest  
 “Content with what they judged the best.  
 “Let the Unjust usurp at will:  
 “The Filthy shall be filthy still:  
 “Miser, there waits the gold for thee!  
 “Hater, indulge thine enmity!  
 “And thou, whose heaven, self-ordained,

“Was to enjoy earth unrestrained,  
“Do it! Take all the ancient show!  
“The woods shall wave, the rivers flow,  
“And men apparently pursue  
“Their works, as they were wont to do,  
“While living in probation yet:  
“I promise not thou shalt forget  
“The past, now gone to its account,  
“But leave thee with the old amount  
“Of faculties, nor less nor more,  
“Unvisited, as heretofore,  
“By God’s free spirit, that makes an end.  
“So, once more, take thy world; expend  
“Eternity upon its shows,—  
“Flung thee as freely as one rose  
“Out of a summer’s opulence,  
“Over the Eden-barrier whence  
“Thou art excluded, Knock in vain!”

XXIII.

I sate up. All was still again.  
I breathed free: to my heart, back fled  
The warmth. ‘But, all the world!’ (I said)  
I stooped and picked a leaf of fern,  
And recollected I might learn  
From books, how many myriad sorts  
Exist, if one may trust reports,  
Each as distinct and beautiful  
As this, the very first I cull.  
Think, from the first leaf to the last!  
Conceive, then, earth’s resources! Vast  
Exhaustless beauty, endless change  
Of wonder! and this foot shall range  
Alps, Andes,—and this eye devour  
The bee-bird and the aloe-flower?

XXIV.

And 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 not one  
“Was able, in a million,

“To feel that any marvel lay  
 “In objects round his feet all day;  
 “Nor 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 reflodge!  
 “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!”

XXV.

Though sharp despairs  
 Shot through me, I held up, bore on.  
 ‘What is it though my trust is gone  
 ‘From natural things? Henceforth my part  
 ‘Be less with Nature than with Art!  
 ‘For Art supplants, gives mainly worth  
 ‘To Nature; ’tis Man stamps the earth—  
 ‘And I will seek his impress, seek  
 ‘The statuary of the Greek,  
 ‘Italy’s painting—there my choice  
 ‘Shall fix!’

XXVI.

“Obtain it,” said the Voice.  
 “The one form with its single act,  
 “Which sculptors laboured to abstract,  
 “The one face, painters tried to draw,  
 “With its one look, from throngs they saw!  
 “And that perfection in their soul,  
 “These only hinted at? The whole,  
 “They were but parts of? What each laid  
 “His claim to glory on?—afraid  
 “His fellow-men should give him rank  
 “By the poor tentatives he shrank  
 “Smitten at heart from, all the more,  
 “That gazers pressed in to adore!  
 “‘Shall I be judged by only these?’  
 “If such his soul’s capacities,  
 “Even while he trod the earth,—think, now  
 “What pomp in Buonarotti’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 if they 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. And pass  
“Life’s line,—and what has earth to do,  
“Its utmost beauty’s appanage,  
“With the requirements 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:  
“But transfer the 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 you dispense  
“The thousand sounds and sights that broke  
“In, on him, at the chisel’s stroke,—  
“So, in God’s eyes, the earth’s first stuff  
“Was, neither more nor less, enough

“To house man’s soul, man’s need fulfil.  
 “You 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!”

XXVII.

I cried in anguish, ‘Mind, the mind,  
 ‘So miserably cast behind,  
 ‘To gain what had been wisely lost!  
 ‘Oh, let me strive to make the most  
 ‘Of the poor stunted soul, I nipped  
 ‘Of budding wings, else well equipt  
 ‘For voyage from summer isle to isle!  
 ‘And though she needs must reconcile  
 ‘Ambition to the life on ground,  
 ‘Still, I can profit by late found  
 ‘But precious knowledge. Mind is best—  
 ‘I will seize mind, forego the rest  
 ‘And try how far my tethered strength  
 ‘May crawl in this poor breadth and length.  
 ‘—Let me, since I can fly no more,  
 ‘At least spin dervish-like about  
 ‘(Till giddy rapture almost doubt  
 ‘I fly) through circling sciences,  
 ‘Philosophies and histories!  
 ‘Should the whirl slacken there, then Verse,  
 ‘Fining to music, shall asperse  
 ‘Fresh and fresh fire-dew, till I strain  
 ‘Intoxicate, half-break my chain!  
 ‘Not joyless, though more favoured feet

‘Stand calm, where I want wings to beat  
‘The floor? At least earth’s bond is broke!’”

XXVIII.

Then, (sickening even while I spoke  
‘Let me alone! No answer, pray,  
‘To this! I know what Thou wilt say  
‘All still is earth’s,—to Know, as much  
‘As Feel its truths, which if we touch  
‘With sense or apprehend in soul,  
‘What matter? I have reached the goal—  
“‘Whereto does Knowledge serve!’” will burn  
‘My eyes, too sure, at every turn!  
‘I cannot look back now, nor stake  
‘Bliss on the race, for running’s sake.  
‘The goal’s a ruin like the rest!’—  
—“And so much worse thy latter quest,  
(Added the Voice) “that even on earth  
“Whenever, in man’s soul, had birth  
“Those intuitions, grasps of guess,  
“That pull the more into the less,  
“Making the finite comprehend  
“Infinity, the bard would spend  
“Such praise alone, upon his craft,  
“As, when wind-lyres obey the waft,  
“Goes to the craftsman who arranged  
“The seven strings, changed them and rechanged—  
“Knowing it was the South that harped.  
“He felt his song, in singing, warped,  
“Distinguished his and God’s part: whence  
“A world of spirit as of sense  
“Was plain to him, yet not too plain,  
“Which he could traverse, not remain  
“A guest in:—else were permanent  
“Heaven upon earth, its gleams were meant  
“To sting with hunger for the light,—  
“Made visible in Verse, despite  
“The veiling weakness,—truth by means  
“Of fable, showing while it screens,—  
“Since highest truth, man e’er supplied,  
“Was ever fable on outside.  
“Such gleams made bright the earth an age;  
“Now, the whole sum’s his heritage!  
“Take up thy world, it is allowed,  
“Thou who hast entered in the cloud!

XXIX.

Then I—‘Behold, my spirit bleeds,  
‘Catches no more at broken reeds,—  
‘But lilies flower those reeds above—  
‘I let the world go, and take love!  
‘Love survives in me, albeit those  
‘I loved are henceforth masks and shows,  
‘Not loving men and women: still  
‘I mind how love repaired all ill,  
‘Cured wrong, soothed grief, made earth amends  
‘With parents, brothers, children, friends!  
‘Some semblance of a woman yet  
‘With eyes to help me to forget,  
‘Shall live with me; and I will match  
‘Departed love with love, attach  
‘Its fragments to my whole, nor scorn  
‘Tho poorest of the grains of corn  
‘I save from shipwreck on this isle,  
‘Trusting its barrenness may smile  
‘With happy foodful green one day,  
‘More precious for the pains. I pray,  
‘For love, then, only!’

xxx.

At the word,  
The Form, I looked to have been stirred  
With pity and approval, rose  
O’er me, as when the headsman throws  
Axe over shoulder to make end—  
I fell prone, letting Him expend  
His wrath, while, thus, the inflicting Voice  
Smote me. “Is this thy final choice?  
Love is the best? ’Tis somewhat late!  
“And all thou dost enumerate  
“Of power and beauty in the world,  
“The mightiness of love was curled  
“Inextricably round about.  
“Love lay within it and without,  
“To clasp thee,—but in vain! Thy soul  
“Still shrunk from Him who made the whole,  
“Still set deliberate aside  
“His love!—Now take love! Well betide  
“Thy tardy conscience! Haste to take  
“The show of love for the name’s sake,  
“Remembering every moment Who  
“Reside creating thee unto

“These ends, and these for thee, was said  
“To undergo death in thy stead  
“In flesh like thine: so ran the tale.  
“What doubt in thee could countervail  
“Belief in it? Upon the ground  
“That in the story had been found  
““Too much love? How could God love *so*?”  
“He who in all his works below  
“Adapted to the needs of man,  
“Made love the basis of the plan,—  
“*Did* love, as was demonstrated:  
“While man, who was so fit instead,  
“To hate, as every day gave proof,—  
“You thought man, for his kind’s behoof,  
“Both could and would invent that scheme  
“Of perfect love—’twould well beseem  
“Cain’s nature thou wast wont to praise,  
“Not tally with God’s usual ways!”

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?