

Selected Extracts from :-

Christmas Eve by Robert Browning (1850)

--Passed in, I sent my elbow spikewise
At the shutting door, and entered likewise,
Received the hinge`s accustomed greeting,
And crossed the threshold`s magic pentacle,
And found myself in full conventicle,
--To wit, in Zion Chapel Meeting,
On the Christmas-Eve of `Forty-nine,
Which, calling its flock to their special clover,
Found all assembled and one sheep over,
Whose lot, as the weather pleased, was mine.

I very soon had enough of it.
The hot smell and the human noises,
And my neighbour`s coat, the greasy cuff of it,
Were a pebble-stone that a child`s hand poises,
Compared with the pig-of-lead-like pressure
Of the preaching man`s immense stupidity,
As he poured his doctrine forth, full measure,
To meet his audience`s avidity.

My gorge rose at the nonsense and stuff of it;
So, saying like Eve when she plucked the apple,
"I wanted a taste, and now there`s enough of it,"
I flung out of the little chapel.

But wherefore be harsh on a single case?
After how many modes, this Christmas Eve,
Does the self-same weary thing take place?
The same endeavour to make you believe,
And with much the same effect, no more:
Each method abundantly convincing,
As I say, to those convinced before,
But scarce to be swallowed without wincing
By the not-as-yet-convinced. For me,
I have my own church equally:
And in this church my faith sprang first!
(I said, as I reached the rising ground,
And the wind began again, with a burst
Of rain in my face, and a glad rebound
From the heart beneath, as if, God speeding me,
I entered his church-door, nature leading me)
--In youth I look to these very skies,

And probing their immensities,
I found God there, his visible power;
Yet felt in my heart, amid all its sense
Of the power, an equal evidence
That his love, there too, was the nobler dower.

And I shall behold thee, face to face,
O God, and in thy light retrace
How in all I loved here, still wast thou!
Whom pressing to, then, as I fain would now,
I shall find as able to satiate
The love, thy gift, as my spirit`s wonder
Thou art able to quicken and sublimate,
With this sky of thine, that I now walk under,
And glory in thee for, as I gaze
Thus, thus! Oh, let men keep their ways
Of seeking thee in a narrow shrine--
Be this my way! And this is mine!

All at once I looked up with terror.
He was there.
He himself with his human air.
On the narrow pathway, just before.
I saw the back of him, no more--
He had left the chapel, then, as I.
I forgot all about the sky.
No face: only the sight
Of a sweepy garment, vast and white,
With a hem that I could recognize.
I felt terror, no surprise;
My mind filled with the cataract,
At one bound of the mighty fact.
"I remember, he did say
"Doubtless that, to this world`s end,
"Where two or three should meet and pray,
"He would be in their midst, their friend;
"Certainly he was there with them!"
And my pulses leaped for joy
Of the golden thought without alloy,
Then I saw his very vesture`s hem.