

Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-61)

1 *The Romance of the Swan's Nest*

So the dreams depart,
So the fading phantoms flee,
And the sharp reality
Now must act its part.

WESTWOOD'S *Beads from a Rosary*.

I

Little Ellie sits alone
'Mid the beeches of a meadow,
By a stream-side on the grass,
And the trees are showering down
Doubles of their leaves in shadow, 5
On her shining hair and face.

II

She has thrown her bonnet by,
And her feet she has been dipping
In the shallow water's flow;
Now she holds them nakedly 10
In her hands, all sleek and dripping,
While she rooketh to and fro.

III

Little Ellie sits alone,
And the smile she softly uses,
Fills the silence like a speech, 15
While she thinks what shall be done, —
And the sweetest pleasure chooses
For her future within reach.

IV

Little Ellie in her smile
Chooses . . . 'I will have a lover, 20
Riding on a steed of steeds!
He shall love me without guile,

And to *him* I will discover
The swan's nest among the reeds.

V

'And the steed shall be red-roan, 25
And the lover shall be noble,
With an eye that takes the breath;
And the lute he plays upon,
Shall strike ladies into trouble,
As his sword strikes men to death. 30

VI

'And the steed it shall be shod
All in silver, housed in azure,
And the mane shall swim the wind;
And the hoofs along the sod
Shall flash onward and keep measure, 35
Till the shepherds look behind.

VII

But my lover will not prize
All the glory that he rides in,
When he gazes in my face.
He will say, "O Love, thine eyes 40
Build the shrine my soul abides in,
And I kneel here for thy grace."

VIII

"Then, aye, then — he shall kneel low,
With the red-roan steed anear him,
Which shall seem to understand — 45
Till I answer, "Rise and go!
For the world must love and fear him
Whom I gift with heart and hand."

IX

"Then he will arise so pale,
I shall feel my own lips tremble 50
With a yes I must not say,
Nathless maiden-brave, "Farewell,"
I will utter, and dissemble —

“Light to-morrow with to-day.”

X

“Then he’ll ride among the hills 55
To the wide world past the river,
There to put away all wrong,
To make straight distorted wills,
And to empty the broad quiver
Which the wicked bear along. 60

XI

“Three times shall a young foot-page
Swim the stream and climb the mountain
And kneel down beside my feet —
“Lo, my master sends this gage,
Lady, for thy pity’s counting! 65
What wilt thou exchange for it?”

XII

‘And the first time, I will send
A white rosebud for a guerdon, —
And the second time, a glove;
But the third time — I may bend 70
From my pride, and answer — “Pardon,
If he comes to take my love.”

XIII

“Then the young foot-page will run —
Then my lover will ride faster,
Till he kneeleth at my knee: 75
“I am a duke’s eldest son!
Thousand serfs do call me master, —
But, O Love, I love but *thee!*”

XIV

‘He will kiss me on the mouth
Then, and lead me as a lover 80
Through the crowds that praise his deeds:
And, when soul-tied by one troth,
Unto *him* I will discover
That swan’s nest among the reeds.’

XV

Little Ellie, with her smile 85
Not yet ended, rose up gaily,
Tied the bonnet, donned the shoe,
And went homeward, round a mile,
Just to see, as she did daily,
What more eggs were with the two. 90

XVI

Pushing through the elm-tree copse,
Winding up the stream, light-hearted,
Where the osier pathway leads —
Past the boughs she stoops — and stops.
Lo, the wild swan had deserted, 95
And a rat had gnawed the reeds.

XVII

Ellie went home sad and slow.
If she found the lover ever,
With his red-roan steed of steeds,
Sooth I know not! but I know 100
She could never show him — never,
That swan's nest among the reeds!

(From *The Poetical Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning
with Two Prose Essays*. Oxford UP, 1904)