

Robert Browning (1812-89)

1 *The Flight of the Duchess*

I.

You're my friend:

I was the man the Duke spoke to;

I helped the Duchess to cast off his yoke, too;

So here's the tale from beginning to end,

My friend!

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II.

Ours is a great wild country:

If you climb to our castle's top,

I don't see where your eye can stop;

For when you've passed the cornfield country,

Where vineyards leave off, flocks are packed,

And sheep-range leads to cattle-tract,

And cattle-tract to open-chase,

And open-chase to the very base

Of the mountain where, at a funeral pace,

Round about, solemn and slow,

One by one, row after row,

Up and up the pine-trees go,

So, like black priests up, and so

Down the other side again

To another greater, wilder country,

That's one vast red drear burnt-up plain,

Branched through and through with many a vein

Whence iron's dug, and copper's dealt;

Look right, look left, look straight before, —

Beneath they mine, above they smelt,

Copper-ore and iron-ore,

And forge and furnace mould and melt,

And so on, more and ever more,

Till at the last, for a bounding belt,

Comes the salt sand hoar of the great sea-shore,

— And the whole is our Duke's country.

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III.

I was born the day this present Duke was —
 (And O, says the song, ere I was old!)
In the castle where the other Duke was —
 (When I was happy and young, not old!) 35
I in the kennel, he in the bower:
We are of like age to an hour.
My father was huntsman in that day;
Who has not heard my father say
That, when a boar was brought to bay, 40
Three times, four times out of five,
With his huntspear he'd contrive
To get the killing-place transfixed,
And pin him true, both eyes betwixt?
And that's why the old Duke would rather 45
He lost a salt-pit than my father,
And loved to have him ever in call;
That's why my father stood in the hall
When the old Duke brought his infant out
 To show the people, and while they passed 50
The wondrous bantling round about,
 Was first to start at the outside blast
As the Kaiser's courier blew his horn
Just a month after the babe was born.
"And," quoth the Kaiser's courier, "since 55
"The Duke has got an heir, our Prince
 "Needs the Duke's self at his side:"
The Duke looked down and seemed to wince,
 But he thought of wars o'er the world wide,
Castles a-fire, men on their march, 60
The toppling tower, the crashing arch;
 And up he looked, and awhile he eyed
The row of crests and shields and banners
Of all achievements after all manners,
 And "ay," said the Duke with a surly pride. 65
 The more was his comfort when he died
At next year's end, in a velvet suit,
With a gilt glove on his hand, his foot
In a silken shoe for a leather boot,
Petticoated like a herald, 70
 In a chamber next to an ante-room,

Where he breathed the breath of page and groom,
 What he called stink, and they, perfume:
 — They should have set him on red Berold
 Mad with pride, like fire to manage! 75
 They should have got his cheek fresh tannage
 Such a day as to-day in the merry sunshine!
 Had they stuck on his fist a rough-foot merlin!
 (Hark, the wind's on the heath at its game!
 Oh for a noble falcon-lanner 80
 To flap each broad wing like a banner,
 And turn in the wind, and dance like flame!)
 Had they broached a white-beer cask from Berlin
 — Or if you incline to prescribe mere wine
 Put to his lips, when they saw him pine, 85
 A cup of our own Moldavia fine,
 Cotnar for instance, green as May sorrel
 And ropy with sweet, — we shall not quarrel.

IV.

So, at home, the sick tall yellow Duchess
 Was left with the infant in her clutches, 90
 She being the daughter of God knows who:
 And now was the time to revisit her tribe.
 Abroad and afar they went, the two,
 And let our people rail and gibe
 At the empty hall and extinguished fire, 95
 As loud as we liked, but ever in vain,
 Till after long years we had our desire,
 And back came the Duke and his mother again.

V.

And he came back the pertest little ape
 That ever affronted human shape; 100
 Full of his travel, struck at himself.
 You'd say, he despised our bluff old ways?
 — Not he! For in Paris they told the elf
 Our rough North land was the Land of Lays,
 The one good thing left in evil days; 105
 Since the Mid-Age was the Heroic Time,
 And only in wild nooks like ours
 Could you taste of it yet as in its prime,

And see true castles, with proper towers,
 Young-hearted women, old-minded men, 110
 And manners now as manners were then.
 So, all that the old Dukes had been, without knowing it,
 This Duke would fain know he was, without being it;
 'Twas not for the joy's self, but the joy of his showing it,
 Nor for the pride's self, but the pride of our seeing it, 115
 He revived all usages thoroughly worn-out,
 The souls of them fumed-forth, the hearts of them torn-out:
 And chief in the chase his neck he perilled
 On a lathy horse, all legs and length,
 With blood for bone, all speed, no strength; 120
 — They should have set him on red Berold
 With the red eye slow consuming in fire,
 And the thin stiff ear like an abbey-spire!

VI.

Well, such as he was, he must marry, we heard:
 And out of a convent, at the word, 125
 Came the lady, in time of spring.
 — Oh, old thoughts they cling, they cling!
 That day, I know, with a dozen oaths
 I clad myself in thick hunting-clothes
 Fit for the chase of urochs or buffle 130
 In winter-time when you need to muffle.
 But the Duke had a mind we should cut a figure,
 And so we saw the lady arrive:
 My friend, I have seen a white crane bigger!
 She was the smallest lady alive, 135
 Made in a piece of nature's madness,
 Too small, almost, for the life and gladness
 That over-filled her, as some hive
 Out of the bears' reach on the high trees
 Is crowded with its safe merry bees: 140
 In truth, she was not hard to please!
 Up she looked, down she looked, round at the mead,
 Straight at the castle, that's best indeed
 To look at from outside the walls:
 As for us, styled the "serfs and thralls," 145
 She as much thanked me as if she had said it,
 (With her eyes, do you understand?)

Because I patted her horse while I led it;
 And Max, who rode on her other hand,
 Said, no bird flew past but she inquired 150
 What its true name was, nor ever seemed tired —
 If that was an eagle she saw hover,
 And the green and grey bird on the field was the plover.
 When suddenly appeared the Duke:
 And as down she sprung, the small foot pointed 155
 On to my hand, — as with a rebuke,
 And as if his backbone were not jointed,
 The Duke stepped rather aside than forward,
 And welcomed her with his grandest smile;
 And, mind you, his mother all the while 160
 Chilled in the rear, like a wind to Nor'ward;
 And up, like a weary yawn, with its pullies
 Went, in a shriek, the rusty portcullis;
 And, like a glad sky the north-wind sullies,
 The lady's face stopped its play, 165
 As if her first hair had grown grey;
 For such things must begin some one day.

VII.

In a day or two she was well again;
 As who should say, "You labour in vain!
 "This is all a jest against God, who meant 170
 "I should ever be, as I am, content
 "And glad in his sight; therefore, glad I will be."
 So, smiling as at first went she.

VIII.

She was active, stirring, all fire —
 Could not rest, could not tire — 175
 To a stone she might have given life!
 (I myself loved once, in my day)
 — For a shepherd's, miner's, huntsman's wife,
 (I had a wife, I know what I say)
 Never in all the world such an one! 180
 And here was plenty to be done,
 And she that could do it, great or small,
 She was to do nothing at all.
 There was already this man in his post,

This in his station, and that in his office, 185
 And the Duke's plan admitted a wife, at most,
 To meet his eye, with the other trophies,
 Now outside the hall, now in it,
 To sit thus, stand thus, see and be seen,
 At the proper place in the proper minute, 190
 And die away the life between.
 And it was amusing enough, each infraction
 Of rule — (but for after-sadness that came)
 To hear the consummate self-satisfaction
 With which the young Duke and the old dame 195
 Would let her advise, and criticise,
 And, being a fool, instruct the wise,
 And, child-like, parcel out praise or blame:
 They bore it all in complacent guise,
 As though an artificer, after contriving 200
 A wheel-work image as if it were living,
 Should find with delight it could motion to strike him!
 So found the Duke, and his mother like him:
 The lady hardly got a rebuff —
 That had not been contemptuous enough, 205
 With his cursed smirk, as he nodded applause,
 And kept off the old mother-cat's claws.

IX.

So, the little lady grew silent and thin,
 Paling and ever paling,
 As the way is with a hid chagrin; 210
 And the Duke perceived that she was ailing,
 And said in his heart, "Tis done to spite me,
 "But I shall find in my power to right me!"
 Don't swear, friend! The old one, many a year,
 Is in hell, and the Duke's self . . . you shall hear. 215

X.

Well, early in autumn, at first winter-warning,
 When the stag had to break with his foot, of a morning,
 A drinking-hole out of the fresh tender ice
 That covered the pond till the sun, in a trice,
 Loosening it, let out a ripple of gold, 220
 And another and another, and faster and faster,

Till, dimpling to blindness, the wide water rolled:
 Then it so chanced that the Duke our master
 Asked himself what were the pleasures in season,
 And found, since the calendar bade him be hearty, 225
 He should do the Middle Age no treason
 In resolving on a hunting-party.
 Always provided, old books showed the way of it!
 What meant old poets by their strictures?
 And when old poets had said their say of it, 230
 How taught old painters in their pictures?
 We must revert to the proper channels,
 Workings in tapestry, paintings on panels,
 And gather up woodcraft's authentic traditions:
 Here was food for our various ambitions, 235
 As on each case, exactly stated —
 To encourage your dog, now, the properest chirrup,
 Or best prayer to Saint Hubert on mounting your stirrup —
 We of the household took thought and debated.
 Blessed was he whose back ached with the jerkin 240
 His sire was wont to do forest-work in;
 Blesseder he who nobly sunk "ohs"
 And "ahs" while he tugged on his grandsire's trunk-hose;
 What signified hats if they had no rims on,
 Each slouching before and behind like the scallop, 245
 And able to serve at sea for a shallop,
 Loaded with lacquer and looped with crimson?
 So that the deer now, to make a short rhyme on't,
 What with our Venerers, Prickers and Verderers,
 Might hope for real hunters at length and not murderers, 250
 And oh the Duke's tailor, he had a hot time on't!

XI.

Now you must know that when the first dizziness
 Of flap-hats and buff-coats and jack-boots subsided,
 The Duke put this question, "The Duke's part provided,
 "Had not the Duchess some share in the business?" 255
 For out of the mouth of two or three witnesses
 Did he establish all fit-or-unfitnesses:
 And, after much laying of heads together,
 Somebody's cap got a notable feather
 By the announcement with proper unction 260

And that Jacynth the tire-woman, ready in waiting,
 Stayed in call outside, what need of relating?
 And since Jacynth was like a June rose, why, a fervent
 Adorer of Jacynth of course was your servant; 305
 And if she had the habit to peep through the casement,
 How could I keep at any vast distance?
 And so, as I say, on the lady's persistence,
 The Duke, dumb-stricken with amazement,
 Stood for a while in a sultry smother, 310
 And then, with a smile that partook of the awful,
 Turned her over to his yellow mother
 To learn what was held decorous and lawful;
 And the mother smelt blood with a cat-like instinct,
 As her cheek quick whitened thro' all its quince-tinct. 315
 Oh, but the lady heard the whole truth at once!
 What meant she? — Who was she? — Her duty and station,
 The wisdom of age and the folly of youth, at once,
 Its decent regard and its fitting relation —
 In brief, my friend, set all the devils in hell free 320
 And turn them out to carouse in a belfry
 And treat the priests to a fifty-part canon,
 And then you may guess how that tongue of hers ran on!
 Well, somehow or other it ended at last
 And, licking her whiskers, out she passed; 325
 And after her, — making (he hoped) a face
 Like Emperor Nero or Sultan Saladin,
 Stalked the Duke's self with the austere grace
 Of ancient hero or modern paladin,
 From door to staircase — oh such a solemn 330
 Unbending of the vertebral column!

XII.

However, at sunrise our company mustered;
 And here was the huntsman bidding unkennel,
 And there 'neath his bonnet the pricker blustered,
 With feather dank as a bough of wet fennel; 335
 For the court-yard walls were filled with fog
 You might have cut as an axe chops a log —
 Like so much wool for colour and bulkiness;
 And out rode the Duke in a perfect sulkiness,
 Since, before breakfast, a man feels but queasily, 340

And a sinking at the lower abdomen
 Begins the day with indifferent omen.
 And lo, as he looked around uneasily,
 The sun ploughed the fog up and drove it asunder
 This way and that from the valley under; 345
 And, looking through the court-yard arch,
 Down in the valley, what should meet him
 But a troop of Gipsies on their march?
 No doubt with the annual gifts to greet him.

XIII.

Now, in your land, Gipsies reach you, only 350
 After reaching all lands beside;
 North they go, South they go, trooping or lonely,
 And still, as they travel far and wide,
 Catch they and keep now a trace here, a trace there,
 That puts you in mind of a place here, a place there. 355
 But with us, I believe they rise out of the ground,
 And nowhere else, I take it, are found
 With the earth-tint yet so freshly embrowned:
 Born, no doubt, like insects which breed on
 The very fruit they are meant to feed on. 360
 For the earth — not a use to which they don't turn it,
 The ore that grows in the mountain's womb,
 Or the sand in the pits like a honeycomb,
 They sift and soften it, bake it and burn it —
 Whether they weld you, for instance, a snaffle 365
 With side-bars never a brute can baffle;
 Or a lock that's a puzzle of wards within wards;
 Or, if your colt's fore-foot inclines to curve inwards,
 Horseshoes they hammer which turn on a swivel
 And won't allow the hoof to shrivel. 370
 Then they cast bells like the shell of the winkle
 That keep a stout heart in the ram with their tinkle;
 But the sand — they pinch and pound it like otters;
 Commend me to Gipsy glass-makers and potters!
 Glasses they'll blow you, crystal-clear, 375
 Where just a faint cloud of rose shall appear,
 As if in pure water you dropped and let die
 A bruised black-blooded mulberry;
 And that other sort, their crowning pride,

With long white threads distinct inside, 380
 Like the lake-flower's fibrous roots which dangle
 Loose such a length and never tangle,
 Where the bold sword-lily cuts the clear waters,
 And the cup-lily couches with all the white daughters:
 Such are the works they put their hand to, 385
 The uses they turn and twist iron and sand to.
 And these made the troop, which our Duke saw sally
 Toward his castle from out of the valley,
 Men and women, like new-hatched spiders,
 Come out with the morning to greet our riders. 390
 And up they wound till they reached the ditch,
 Whereat all stopped save one, a witch
 That I knew, as she hobbled from the group,
 By her gait directly and her stoop,
 I, whom Jacynth was used to importune 395
 To let that same witch tell us our fortune.
 The oldest Gipsy then above ground;
 And, sure as the autumn season came round,
 She paid us a visit for profit or pastime,
 And every time, as she swore, for the last time. 400
 And presently she was seen to sidle
 Up to the Duke till she touched his bridle,
 So that the horse of a sudden reared up
 As under its nose the old witch peered up
 With her worn-out eyes, or rather eye-holes 405
 Of no use now but to gather brine,
 And began a kind of level whine
 Such as they used to sing to their viols
 When their ditties they go grinding
 Up and down with nobody minding: 410
 And then, as of old, at the end of the humming
 Her usual presents were forthcoming
 — A dog-whistle blowing the fiercest of trebles,
 (Just a sea-shore stone holding a dozen fine pebbles,) 415
 Or a porcelain mouth-piece to screw on a pipe-end, —
 And so she awaited her annual stipend.
 But this time, the Duke would scarcely vouchsafe
 A word in reply; and in vain she felt
 With twitching fingers at her belt
 For the purse of sleek pine-martin pelt, 420

Ready to put what he gave in her pouch safe, —
 Till, either to quicken his apprehension,
 Or possibly with an after-intention,
 She was come, she said, to pay her duty
 To the new Duchess, the youthful beauty. 425
 No sooner had she named his lady,
 Than a shine lit up the face so shady,
 And its smirk returned with a novel meaning —
 For it struck him, the babe just wanted weaning;
 If one gave her a taste of what life was and sorrow, 430
 She, foolish to-day, would be wiser tomorrow;
 And who so fit a teacher of trouble
 As this sordid crone bent well-nigh double?
 So, glancing at her wolf-skin vesture,
 (If such it was, for they grow so hirsute 435
 That their own fleece serves for natural fur-suit)
 He was contrasting, 'twas plain from his gesture,
 The life of the lady so flower-like and delicate
 With the loathsome squalor of this helicat.
 I, in brief, was the man the Duke beckoned 440
 From out of the throng, and while I drew near
 He told the crone — as I since have reckoned
 By the way he bent and spoke into her ear
 With circumspection and mystery —
 The main of the lady's history, 445
 Her frowardness and ingratitude:
 And for all the crone's submissive attitude
 I could see round her mouth the loose plaits tightening,
 And her brow with assenting intelligence brightening,
 As though she engaged with hearty good-will 450
 Whatever he now might enjoin to fulfil,
 And promised the lady a thorough frightening.
 And so, just giving her a glimpse
 Of a purse, with the air of a man who imp
 The wing of the hawk that shall fetch the hernshaw, 455
 He bade me take the Gipsy mother
 And set her telling some story or other
 Of hill or dale, oak-wood or fernshaw,
 To wile away a weary hour
 For the lady left alone in her bower, 460
 Whose mind and body craved exertion

Asleep of a sudden and there continue
 The whole time sleeping as profoundly 500
 As one of the boars my father would pin you
 'Twixt the eyes where life holds garrison,
 — Jacynth forgive me the comparison!
 But where I begin my own narration
 Is a little after I took my station 505
 To breathe the fresh air from the balcony,
 And, having in those days a falcon eye,
 To follow the hunt thro' the open country,
 From where the bushes thinlier crested
 The hillocks, to a plain where's not one tree. 510
 When, in a moment, my ear was arrested
 By — was it singing, or was it saying,
 Or a strange musical instrument playing
 In the chamber? — and to be certain
 I pushed the lattice, pulled the curtain, 515
 And there lay Jacynth asleep,
 Yet as if a watch she tried to keep,
 In a rosy sleep along the floor
 With her head against the door;
 While in the midst, on the seat of state, 520
 Was a queen — the Gipsy woman late,
 With head and face downbent
 On the lady's head and face intent:
 For, coiled at her feet like a child at ease,
 The lady sat between her knees 525
 And o'er them the lady's clasped hands met,
 And on those hands her chin was set,
 And her upturned face met the face of the crone
 Wherein the eyes had grown and grown
 As if she could double and quadruple 530
 At pleasure the play of either pupil
 — Very like, by her hands' slow fanning,
 As up and down like a gor-crow's flappers
 They moved to measure, or bell-clappers.
 I said "Is it blessing, is it banning, 535
 "Do they applaud you or burlesque you —
 "Those hands and fingers with no flesh on?"
 But, just as I thought to spring in to the rescue,
 At once I was stopped by the lady's expression:

For it was life her eyes were drinking 540
From the crone's wide pair above unwinking,
— Life's pure fire received without shrinking,
Into the heart and breast whose heaving
Told you no single drop they were leaving,
— Life, that filling her, passed redundant 545
 Into her very hair, back swerving
Over each shoulder, loose and abundant,
 As her head thrown back showed the white throat curving;
And the very tresses shared in the pleasure,
Moving to the mystic measure, 550
Bounding as the bosom bounded.
I stopped short, more and more confounded,
As still her cheeks burned and eyes glistened,
As she listened and she listened:
When all at once a hand detained me, 555
The selfsame contagion gained me,
And I kept time to the wondrous chime,
Making out words and prose and rhyme,
Till it seemed that the music furled
 Its wings like a task fulfilled, and dropped 560
 From under the words it first had propped,
And left them midway in the world:
Word took word as hand takes hand,
I could hear at last, and understand,
And when I held the unbroken thread, 565
The Gipsy said: —

“And so at last we find my tribe.
 “And so I set thee in the midst,
“And to one and all of them describe
 “What thou saidst and what thou didst, 570
“Our long and terrible journey through,
“And all thou art ready to say and do
“In the trials that remain:
“I trace them the vein and the other vein
“That meet on thy brow and part again, 575
“Making our rapid mystic mark;
 “And I bid my people prove and probe
 “Each eye's profound and glorious globe
“Till they detect the kindred spark

“In those depths so dear and dark, 580
 “Like the spots that snap and burst and flee,
 “Circling over the midnight sea.
 “And on that round young cheek of thine
 “I make them recognize the tinge,
 “As when of the costly scarlet wine 585
 “They drip so much as will impinge
 “And spread in a thinnest scale afloat
 “One thick gold drop from the olive’s coat
 “Over a silver plate whose sheen
 “Still thro’ the mixture shall be seen. 590
 “For so I prove thee, to one and all,
 “Fit, when my people ope their breast,
 “To see the sign, and hear the call,
 “And take the vow, and stand the test
 “Which adds one more child to the rest — 595
 “When the breast is bare and the arms are wide,
 “And the world is left outside.
 “For there is probation to decree,
 “And many and long must the trials be
 “Thou shalt victoriously endure, 600
 “If that brow is true and those eyes are sure;
 “Like a jewel-finder’s fierce assay
 “Of the prize he dug from its mountain-tomb —
 “Let once the vindicating ray
 “Leap out amid the anxious gloom, 605
 “And steel and fire have done their part
 “And the prize falls on its finder’s heart;
 “So, trial after trial past,
 “Wilt thou fall at the very last
 “Breathless, half in trance 610
 “With the thrill of the great deliverance,
 “Into our arms for evermore;
 “And thou shalt know, those arms once curled
 “About thee, what we knew before,
 “How love is the only good in the world. 615
 “Henceforth be loved as heart can love,
 “Or brain devise, or hand approve!
 “Stand up, look below,
 “It is our life at thy feet we throw
 “To step with into light and joy; 620

“Not a power of life but we employ
 “To satisfy thy nature’s want;
 “Art thou the tree that props the plant,
 “Or the climbing plant that seeks the tree —
 “Canst thou help us, must we help thee? 625
 “If any two creatures grew into one,
 “They would do more than the world has done:
 “Though each apart were never so weak,
 “Ye vainly through the world should seek
 “For the knowledge and the might 630
 “Which in such union grew their right:
 “So, to approach at least that end,
 “And blend, — as much as may be, blend
 “Thee with us or us with thee, —
 “As climbing plant or propping tree, 635
 “Shall some one deck thee, over and down,
 “Up and about, with blossoms and leaves?
 “Fix his heart’s fruit for thy garland-crown,
 “Cling with his soul as the gourd-vine cleaves,
 “Die on thy boughs and disappear 640
 “While not a leaf of thine is sere?
 “Or is the other fate in store,
 “And art thou fitted to adore,
 “To give thy wondrous self away,
 “And take a stronger nature’s sway? 645
 “I foresee and could foretell
 “Thy future portion, sure and well:
 “But those passionate eyes speak true, speak true,
 “Let them say what thou shalt do!
 “Only be sure thy daily life, 650
 “In its peace or in its strife,
 “Never shall be unobserved;
 “We pursue thy whole career,
 “And hope for it, or doubt, or fear, —
 “Lo, hast thou kept thy path or swerved, 655
 “We are beside thee in all thy ways,
 “With our blame, with our praise,
 “Our shame to feel, our pride to show,
 “Glad, angry — but indifferent, no!
 “Whether it be thy lot to go, 660
 “For the good of us all, where the haters meet

“In the crowded city’s horrible street;
 “Or thou step alone through the morass
 “Where never sound yet was
 “Save the dry quick clap of the stork’s bill, 665
 “For the air is still, and the water still,
 “When the blue breast of the dipping coot
 “Dives under, and all is mute.
 “So, at the last shall come old age,
 “Decrepit as befits that stage; 670
 “How else wouldst thou retire apart
 “With the hoarded memories of thy heart,
 “And gather all to the very least
 “Of the fragments of life’s earlier feast,
 “Let fall through eagerness to find 675
 “The crowning dainties yet behind?
 “Ponder on the entire past
 “Laid together thus at last,
 “When the twilight helps to fuse
 “The first fresh with the faded hues, 680
 “And the outline of the whole,
 “As round eve’s shades their framework roll,
 “Grandly fronts for once thy soul.
 “And then as, ’mid the dark, a gleam
 “Of yet another morning breaks, 685
 “And like the hand which ends a dream,
 “Death, with the might of his sunbeam,
 “Touches the flesh and the soul awakes,
 “Then —— ”

Ay, then indeed something would happen?

But what? For here her voice changed like a bird’s; 690
 There grew more of the music and less of the words;
 Had Jacynth only been by me to clap pen
 To paper and put you down every syllable
 With those clever clerkly fingers,
 All I’ve forgotten as well as what lingers 695
 In this old brain of mine that’s but ill able
 To give you even this poor version
 Of the speech I spoil, as it were, with stammering
 — More fault of those who had the hammering
 Of prosody into me and syntax, 700

And did it, not with hobnails but tintacks!
 But to return from this excursion, —
 Just, do you mark, when the song was sweetest,
 The peace most deep and the charm completest,
 There came, shall I say, a snap — 705
 And the charm vanished!
 And my sense returned, so strangely banished,
 And, starting as from a nap,
 I knew the crone was bewitching my lady,
 With Jacynth asleep; and but one spring made I 710
 Down from the casement, round to the portal,
 Another minute and I had entered, —
 When the door opened, and more than mortal
 Stood, with a face where to my mind centred
 All beauties I ever saw or shall see, 715
 The Duchess: I stopped as if struck by palsy.
 She was so different, happy and beautiful,
 I felt at once that all was best,
 And that I had nothing to do, for the rest,
 But wait her commands, obey and be dutiful. 720
 Not that, in fact, there was any commanding;
 I saw the glory of her eye,
 And the brow's height and the breast's expanding,
 And I was hers to live or to die.
 As for finding what she wanted, 725
 You know God Almighty granted
 Such little signs should serve wild creatures
 To tell one another all their desires,
 So that each knows what his friend requires,
 And does its bidding without teachers. 730
 I preceded her; the crone
 Followed silent and alone;
 I spoke to her, but she merely jabbered
 In the old style; both her eyes had slunk
 Back to their pits; her stature shrunk; 735
 In short, the soul in its body sunk
 Like a blade sent home to its scabbard.
 We descended, I preceding;
 Crossed the court with nobody heeding;
 All the world was at the chase, 740
 The courtyard like a desert-place,

The stable emptied of its small fry;
 I saddled myself the very palfrey
 I remember patting while it carried her,
 The day she arrived and the Duke married her. 745
 And, do you know, though it's easy deceiving
 Oneself in such matters, I can't help believing
 The lady had not forgotten it either,
 And knew the poor devil so much beneath her
 Would have been only too glad for her service 750
 To dance on hot ploughshares like a Turk dervise,
 But, unable to pay proper duty where owing it,
 Was reduced to that pitiful method of showing it:
 For though the moment I began setting
 His saddle on my own nag of Berold's begetting, 755
 (Not that I meant to be obtrusive)
 She stopped me, while his rug was shifting,
 By a single rapid finger's lifting,
 And, with a gesture kind but conclusive,
 And a little shake of the head, refused me, — 760
 I say, although she never used me,
 Yet when she was mounted, the Gipsy behind her,
 And I ventured to remind her,
 I suppose with a voice of less steadiness
 Than usual, for my feeling exceeded me, 765
 — Something to the effect that I was in readiness
 Whenever God should please she needed me, —
 Then, do you know, her face looked down on me
 With a look that placed a crown on me,
 And she felt in her bosom, — mark, her bosom — 770
 And, as a flower-tree drops its blossom,
 Dropped me . . . ah, had it been a purse
 Of silver, my friend, or gold that's worse,
 Why, you see, as soon as I found myself
 So understood, — that a true heart so may gain 775
 Such a reward, — I should have gone home again,
 Kissed Jacynth, and soberly drowned myself!
 It was a little plait of hair
 Such as friends in a convent make
 To wear, each for the other's sake, — 780
 This, see, which at my breast I wear,
 Ever did (rather to Jacynth's grudging),

And ever shall, till the Day of Judgment.
 And then, — and then, — to cut short, — this is idle,
 These are feelings it is not good to foster, — 785
 I pushed the gate wide, she shook the bridle,
 And the palfrey bounded, — and so we lost her.

XVI.

When the liquor's out why clink the cannikin?
 I did think to describe you the panic in
 The redoubtable breast of our master the mannikin, 790
 And what was the pitch of his mother's yellowness,
 How she turned as a shark to snap the spare-rib
 Clean off, sailors say, from a pearl-diving Carib,
 When she heard, what she called the flight of the feloness
 — But it seems such child's play, 795
 What they said and did with the lady away!
 And to dance on, when we've lost the music,
 Always made me — and no doubt makes you — sick.
 Nay, to my mind, the world's face looked so stern
 As that sweet form disappeared through the postern, 800
 She that kept it in constant good humour,
 It ought to have stopped; there seemed nothing to do more.
 But the world thought otherwise and went on,
 And my head's one that its spite was spent on:
 Thirty years are fled since that morning, 805
 And with them all my head's adorning.
 Nor did the old Duchess die outright,
 As you expect, of suppressed spite,
 The natural end of every adder
 Not suffered to empty its poison-bladder: 810
 But she and her son agreed, I take it,
 That no one should touch on the story to wake it,
 For the wound in the Duke's pride rankled fiery,
 So, they made no search and small inquiry —
 And when fresh Gipsies have paid us a visit, I've 815
 Noticed the couple were never inquisitive,
 But told them they're folks the Duke don't want here,
 And bade them make haste and cross the frontier.
 Brief, the Duchess was gone and the Duke was glad of it,
 And the old one was in the young one's stead, 820
 And took, in her place, the household's head,

And a blessed time the household had of it!
 And were I not, as a man may say, cautious
 How I trench, more than needs, on the nauseous,
 I could favour you with sundry touches 825
 Of the paint-smutches with which the Duchess
 Heightened the mellowness of her cheek's yellowness
 (To get on faster) until at last her
 Cheek grew to be one master-plaster
 Of mucus and fucus from mere use of ceruse: 830
 In short, she grew from scalp to udder
 Just the object to make you shudder.

XVII.

You're my friend —
 What a thing friendship is, world without end!
 How it gives the heart and soul a stir-up 835
 As if somebody broached you a glorious runlet,
 And poured out, all lovelily, sparkingly, sunlit,
 Our green Moldavia, the streaky syrup,
 Cotnar as old as the time of the Druids —
 Friendship may match with that monarch of fluids; 840
 Each supple a dry brain, fills you its ins-and-outs,
 Gives your life's hour-glass a shake when the thin sand doubts
 Whether to run on or stop short, and guarantees
 Age is not all made of stark sloth and arrant ease.
 I have seen my little lady once more, 845
 Jacynth, the Gipsy, Berold, and the rest of it,
 For to me spoke the Duke, as I told you before;
 I always wanted to make a clean breast of it:
 And now it is made — why, my heart's blood, that went trickle,
 Trickle, but anon, in such muddy driblets, 850
 Is pumped up brisk now, through the main ventricle,
 And genially floats me about the giblets.
 I'll tell you what I intend to do:
 I must see this fellow his sad life through —
 He is our Duke, after all, 855
 And I, as he says, but a serf and thrall.
 My father was born here, and I inherit
 His fame, a chain he bound his son with;
 Could I pay in a lump I should prefer it,
 But there's no mine to blow up and get done with: 860

So, I must stay till the end of the chapter.
 For, as to our middle-age-manners-adapter,
 Be it a thing to be glad on or sorry on,
 Some day or other, his head in a morion
 And breast in a hauberk, his heels he'll kick up, 865
 Slain by an onslaught fierce of hiccup.
 And then, when red doth the sword of our Duke rust,
 And its leathern sheath lie o'ergrown with a blue crust,
 Then I shall scrape together my earnings:
 For, you see, in the churchyard Jacynth reposes, 870
 And our children all went the way of the roses:
 It's a long lane that knows no turnings.
 One needs but little tackle to travel in:
 So, just one stout cloak shall I indue:
 And for a staff, what beats the javelin 875
 With which his boars my father pinned you?
 And then, for a purpose you shall hear presently,
 Taking some Cotnar, a tight plump skinful
 I shall go journeying, who but I, pleasantly!
 Sorrow is vain and despondency sinful. 880
 What's a man's age? He must hurry more, that's all;
 Cram in a day, what his youth took a year to hold:
 When we mind labour, then only, we're too old —
 What age had Methusalem when he begat Saul?
 And at last, as its haven some buffeted ship sees, 885
 (Come all the way from the north-parts with sperm oil)
 I hope to get safely out of the turmoil
 And arrive one day at the land of the Gipsies,
 And find my lady, or hear the last news of her
 From some old thief and son of Lucifer, 890
 His forehead chapleted green with wreathy hop,
 Sunburned all over like an Æthiop.
 And when my Cotnar begins to operate
 And the tongue of the rogue to run at a proper rate,
 And our wine-skin, tight once, shows each flaccid dent, 895
 I shall drop in with — as if by accident —
 “You never knew, then, how it all ended,
 “What fortune good or bad attended
 “The little lady your Queen befriended?”
 — And when that's told me, what's remaining? 900
 This world's too hard for my explaining.

The same wise judge of matters equine
 Who still preferred some slim four-year-old
 To the big-boned stock of mighty Berold,
 And, for strong Cotnar, drank French weak wine, 905
 He also must be such a lady's scorner!
 Smooth Jacob still robs homely Esau:
 Now up, now down, the world's one see-saw.
 — So, I shall find out some snug corner
 Under a hedge, like Orson the wood-knight, 910
 Turn myself round and bid the world good night;
 And sleep a sound sleep till the trumpet's blowing
 Wakes me (unless priests cheat us laymen)
 To a world where will be no further throwing
 Pearls before swine that can't value them. Amen! 915

1845

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