

A Curse for a Nation

Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1861)

Prologue

I heard an angel speak last night,
And he said "Write!
Write a Nation's curse for me,
And send it over the Western Sea."

I faltered, taking up the word:
"Not so, my lord!
If curses must be, choose another
To send thy curse against my
brother.

"For I am bound by gratitude,
By love and blood,
To brothers of mine across the sea,
Who stretch out kindly hands to
me."

"Therefore," the voice said, "shalt
thou write
My curse to-night.
From the summits of love a curse is
driven,
As lightning is from the tops of
heaven."

"Not so," I answered. "Evermore
My heart is sore
For my own land's sins: for little
feet
Of children bleeding along the
street:

"For parked-up honors that gainsay
The right of way:
For almsgiving through a door that
is
Not open enough for two friends to
kiss:

"For love of freedom which abates
Beyond the Straits:
For patriot virtue starved to vice on
Self-praise, self-interest, and
suspicion:

"For an oligarchic parliament,
And bribes well-meant.
What curse to another land assign,
When heavy-souled for the sins of
mine?"

"Therefore," the voice said, "shalt
thou write
My curse to-night.
Because thou hast strength to see
and hate
A foul thing done within thy gate."

"Not so," I answered once again.
"To curse, choose men.
For I, a woman, have only known
How the heart melts and the tears
run down."

"Therefore," the voice said, "shalt
thou write
My curse to-night.
Some women weep and curse, I say
(And no one marvels), night and
day.

"And thou shalt take their part
to-night,
Weep and write.
A curse from the depths of
womanhood
Is very salt, and bitter, and good."

So thus I wrote, and mourned
indeed,
What all may read.
And thus, as was enjoined on me,
I send it over the Western Sea.

The Curse

Because ye have broken your own
chain
With the strain
Of brave men climbing a Nation's
height,
Yet thence bear down with brand
and thong
On souls of others, – for this wrong
This is the curse. Write.

Because yourselves are standing
straight
In the state
Of Freedom's foremost acolyte,
Yet keep calm footing all the time
On writhing bond-slaves, – for this
crime
This is the curse. Write.

Because ye prosper in God's name,
With a claim
To honor in the old world's sight,
Yet do the fiend's work perfectly
In strangling martyrs, – for this lie
This is the curse. Write.

Ye shall watch while kings conspire
Round the people's smouldering fire,
And, warm for your part,
Shall never dare – O shame!
To utter the thought into flame

Which burns at your heart.
This is the curse. Write.

Ye shall watch while nations strive
With the bloodhounds, die or
survive,
Drop faint from their jaws,
Or throttle them backward to death;
And only under your breath
Shall favor the cause.
This is the curse. Write.

Ye shall watch while strong men
draw
The nets of feudal law
To strangle the weak;
And, counting the sin for a sin,
Your soul shall be sadder within
Than the word ye shall speak.
This is the curse. Write.

When good men are praying erect
That Christ may avenge His elect
And deliver the earth,
The prayer in your ears, said low,
Shall sound like the tramp of a foe
That's driving you forth.
This is the curse. Write.

When wise men give you their
praise,
They shall praise in the heat of the
phrase,
As if carried too far.
When ye boast your own charters
kept true,
Ye shall blush; for the thing which
ye do
Derides what ye are.
This is the curse. Write.

When fools cast taunts at your gate,
Your scorn ye shall somewhat abate
As ye look o'er the wall;
For your conscience, tradition, and
name
Explode with a deadlier blame
Than the worst of them all.
This is the curse. Write.

Go, wherever ill deeds shall be
done,
Go, plant your flag in the sun
Beside the ill-doers!
And recoil from clenching the curse
Of God's witnessing Universe
With a curse of yours.
This is the curse. Write.