

**“Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came” (1852; 1855)**  
from *Men and Women* (1855)

I.

My first thought was, he lied in every word,  
That hoary cripple, with malicious eye  
Askance to watch the working of his lie  
On mine, and mouth scarce able to afford  
Suppression of the glee, that pursed and scored 5  
Its edge, at one more victim gained thereby.

II.

What else should he be set for, with his staff?  
What, save to waylay with his lies, ensnare  
All travellers who might find him posted there,  
And ask the road? I guessed what skull-like laugh 10  
Would break, what crutch 'gin write my epitaph  
For pastime in the dusty thoroughfare,

III.

If at his counsel I should turn aside  
Into that ominous tract which, all agree,  
Hides the Dark Tower. Yet acquiescingly 15  
I did turn as he pointed: neither pride  
Nor hope rekindling at the end descried,  
So much as gladness that some end might be.

IV.

For, what with my whole world-wide wandering,  
What with my search drawn out thro' years, my hope 20  
Dwindled into a ghost not fit to cope  
With that obstreperous joy success would bring,  
I hardly tried now to rebuke the spring  
My heart made, finding failure in its scope.

V.

As when a sick man very near to death 25  
Seems dead indeed, and feels begin and end  
The tears and takes the farewell of each friend,  
And hears one bid the other go, draw breath  
Freelier outside, ("since all is o'er," he saith,  
"And the blow fallen no grieving can amend;") 30

VI.

While some discuss if near the other graves  
Be room enough for this, and when a day  
Suits best for carrying the corpse away,  
With care about the banners, scarves and staves:  
And still the man hears all, and only craves           35  
He may not shame such tender love and stay.

VII.

Thus, I had so long suffered in this quest,  
Heard failure prophesied so oft, been writ  
So many times among ``The Band"---to wit,  
The knights who to the Dark Tower's search addressed40  
Their steps---that just to fail as they, seemed best,  
And all the doubt was now---should I be fit?

VIII.

So, quiet as despair, I turned from him,  
That hateful cripple, out of his highway  
Into the path he pointed. All the day           45  
Had been a dreary one at best, and dim  
Was settling to its close, yet shot one grim  
Red leer to see the plain catch its estray.

IX.

For mark! no sooner was I fairly found  
Pledged to the plain, after a pace or two,           50  
Than, pausing to throw backward a last view  
O'er the safe road, 'twas gone; grey plain all round:  
Nothing but plain to the horizon's bound.  
I might go on; nought else remained to do.

X.

So, on I went. I think I never saw           55  
Such starved ignoble nature; nothing throve:  
For flowers---as well expect a cedar grove!  
But cockle, spurge, according to their law  
Might propagate their kind, with none to awe,  
You'd think; a burr had been a treasure-trove.           60

XI.

No! penury, inertness and grimace,  
In some strange sort, were the land's portion. "See  
"Or shut your eyes," said nature peevishly,  
"It nothing skills: I cannot help my case:  
"'Tis the Last judgment's fire must cure this place, 65  
"Calcine its clods and set my prisoners free."

XII.

If there pushed any ragged thistle-stalk  
Above its mates, the head was chopped; the bents  
Were jealous else. What made those holes and rents 70  
In the dock's harsh swarth leaves, bruised as to baulk  
All hope of greenness? 'tis a brute must walk  
Pushing their life out, with a brute's intents.

XIII.

As for the grass, it grew as scant as hair  
In leprosy; thin dry blades pricked the mud  
Which underneath looked kneaded up with blood. 75  
One stiff blind horse, his every bone a-stare,  
Stood stupefied, however he came there:  
Thrust out past service from the devil's stud!

XIV.

Alive? he might be dead for aught I know,  
With that red gaunt and colloped neck a-strain, 80  
And shut eyes underneath the rusty mane;  
Seldom went such grotesqueness with such woe;  
I never saw a brute I hated so;  
He must be wicked to deserve such pain.

XV.

I shut my eyes and turned them on my heart. 85  
As a man calls for wine before he fights,  
I asked one draught of earlier, happier sights,  
Ere fitly I could hope to play my part.  
Think first, fight afterwards---the soldier's art:  
One taste of the old time sets all to rights. 90

XVI.

Not it! I fancied Cuthbert's reddening face  
Beneath its garniture of curly gold,  
Dear fellow, till I almost felt him fold  
An arm in mine to fix me to the place,  
That way he used. Alas, one night's disgrace! 95  
Out went my heart's new fire and left it cold.

XVII.

Giles then, the soul of honour---there he stands  
Frank as ten years ago when knighted first.  
What honest man should dare (he said) he durst.  
Good---but the scene shifts---faugh! what hangman hands 100  
Pin to his breast a parchment? His own bands  
Read it. Poor traitor, spit upon and curst!

XVIII.

Better this present than a past like that;  
Back therefore to my darkening path again!  
No sound, no sight as far as eye could strain. 105  
Will the night send a howlet or a bat?  
I asked: when something on the dismal flat  
Came to arrest my thoughts and change their train.

XIX.

A sudden little river crossed my path  
As unexpected as a serpent comes. 110  
No sluggish tide congenial to the glooms;  
This, as it frothed by, might have been a bath  
For the fiend's glowing hoof---to see the wrath  
Of its black eddy bespate with flakes and spumes.

XX.

So petty yet so spiteful! All along, 115  
Low scrubby alders kneeled down over it;  
Drenched willows flung them headlong in a fit  
Of route despair, a suicidal throng:  
The river which had done them all the wrong,  
Whate'er that was, rolled by, deterred no whit. 120

XXI.

Which, while I forded,---good saints, how I feared  
To set my foot upon a dead man's cheek,  
Each step, or feel the spear I thrust to seek  
For hollows, tangled in his hair or beard!  
---It may have been a water-rat I speared, 125  
But, ugh! it sounded like a baby's shriek.

XXII.

Glad was I when I reached the other bank.  
Now for a better country. Vain presage!  
Who were the strugglers, what war did they wage, 130  
Whose savage trample thus could pad the dank  
Soil to a splash? Toads in a poisoned tank,  
Or wild cats in a red-hot iron cage---

XXIII.

The fight must so have seemed in that fell cirque.  
What penned them there, with all the plain to choose?  
No foot-print leading to that horrid mews, 135  
None out of it. Mad brewage set to work  
Their brains, no doubt, like galley-slaves the Turk  
Pits for his pastime, Christians against Jews.

XXIV.

And more than that---a furlong on---why, there!  
What bad use was that engine for, that wheel, 140  
Or brake, not wheel---that harrow fit to reel  
Men's bodies out like silk? with all the air  
Of Tophet's tool, on earth left unaware,  
Or brought to sharpen its rusty teeth of steel.

XXV.

Then came a bit of stubbed ground, once a wood, 145  
Next a marsh, it would seem, and now mere earth  
Desperate and done with; (so a fool finds mirth,  
Makes a thing and then mars it, till his mood  
Changes and off he goes!) within a rood---  
Bog, clay and rubble, sand and stark black dearth. 150

XXVI.

Now blotches rankling, coloured gay and grim,  
Now patches where some leanness of the soil's  
Broke into moss or substances like boils;  
Then came some palsied oak, a cleft in him  
Like a distorted mouth that splits its rim  
Gaping at death, and dies while it recoils.

XXVII.

And just as far as ever from the end!  
Nought in the distance but the evening, nought  
To point my footstep further! At the thought,  
A great black bird, Apollyon's bosom-friend,  
Sailed past, nor beat his wide wing dragon-penned  
That brushed my cap---perchance the guide I sought.

XXVIII.

For, looking up, aware I somehow grew,  
'Spite of the dusk, the plain had given place  
All round to mountains---with such name to grace  
Mere ugly heights and heaps now stolen in view.  
How thus they had surprised me,---solve it, you!  
How to get from them was no clearer case.

XXIX.

Yet half I seemed to recognize some trick  
Of mischief happened to me, God knows when---  
In a bad dream perhaps. Here ended, then,  
Progress this way. When, in the very nick  
Of giving up, one time more, came a click  
As when a trap shuts---you're inside the den!

XXX.

Burningly it came on me all at once,  
This was the place! those two hills on the right,  
Crouched like two bulls locked horn in horn in fight;  
While to the left, a tall scalped mountain... Dunce,  
Dotard, a-dozing at the very nonce,  
After a life spent training for the sight!

XXXI.

What in the midst lay but the Tower itself?  
The round squat turret, blind as the fool's heart,  
Built of brown stone, without a counter-part  
In the whole world. The tempest's mocking elf  
Points to the shipman thus the unseen shelf           185  
He strikes on, only when the timbers start.

XXXII.

Not see? because of night perhaps?---why, day  
Came back again for that! before it left,  
The dying sunset kindled through a cleft:  
The hills, like giants at a hunting, lay,           190  
Chin upon hand, to see the game at bay,---  
``Now stab and end the creature---to the heft!"

XXXIII.

Not hear? when noise was everywhere! it tolled  
Increasing like a bell. Names in my ears  
Of all the lost adventurers my peers,---           195  
How such a one was strong, and such was bold,  
And such was fortunate, yet, each of old  
Lost, lost! one moment knelled the woe of years.

XXXIV.

There they stood, ranged along the hill-sides, met  
To view the last of me, a living frame           200  
For one more picture! in a sheet of flame  
I saw them and I knew them all. And yet  
Dauntless the slug-horn to my lips I set,  
And blew. ``Childe Roland to the Dark Tower came."