

CASA GUIDI WINDOWS.

PART I.

I.

I HEARD last night a little child go singing
'Neath Casa Guidi windows, by the church,
“ *O bella libertà, O bella!*” stringing
The same words still on notes he went in search
So high for, you concluded the upspringing
Of such a nimble bird to sky from perch
Must leave the whole bush in a tremble green ;
And that the heart of Italy must beat,

B

While such a voice had leave to rise serene
 'Twixt church and palace of a Florence street!—
A little child, too, who not long had been
 By mother's finger steadied on his feet;
And still *O bella libertà* he sang.

II.

Then I thought, musing, of the innumerable
 Sweet songs which for this Italy outrang
From older singers' lips, who sang not thus
 Exultingly and purely, yet, with pang
Sheathed into music, touched the heart of us
 So finely that the pity scarcely pained!
I thought how Filicaja led on others,
 Bewailers for their Italy enchained,
And how they called her childless among mothers,

Widow of empires, ay, and scarce refrained
Cursing her beauty to her face, as brothers
Might a shamed sister,—“ Had she been less fair
She were less wretched,”—how, evoking so
From congregated wrong and heaped despair
Of men and women writhing under blow,
Harrowed and hideous in their filthy lair,
A personating Image, wherein woe
Was wrapt in beauty from offending much,
They called it Cybele, or Niobe,
Or laid it corpse-like on a bier for such,
Where the whole world might drop for Italy
Those cadenced tears which burn not where they
touch,—
“ Juliet of nations, canst thou die as we ?
And was the violet crown that crowned thy head

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Elizabeth Barrett Browning
Excerpt
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So over large, though new buds made it rough,
 It slipped down and across thine eyelids dead,
O sweet, fair Juliet?—Of such songs enough;
 Too many of such complaints! Behold, instead,
Void at Verona, Juliet's marble trough!
 And void as that is, are all images
Men set between themselves and actual wrong,
 To catch the weight of pity, meet the stress
Of conscience; though 'tis easier to gaze long
 On personations, masks, and effigies,
Than to see live weak creatures crushed by strong.

III.

For me who stand in Italy to-day,
Where worthier poets stood and sang before,
 I kiss their footsteps, yet their words gainsay:

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I can but muse in hope upon this shore
Of golden Arno, as it shoots away
Straight through the heart of Florence, 'neath the four
Bent bridges, seeming to strain off like bows,
And tremble, while the arrowy undertide
Shoots on and cleaves the marble as it goes,
And strikes up palace-walls on either side,
And froths the cornice out in glittering rows,
With doors and windows quaintly multiplied,
And terrace-sweeps, and gazers upon all,
By whom if flower or kerchief were thrown out,
From any lattice there, the same would fall
Into the river underneath, no doubt,—
It runs so close and fast 'twixt wall and wall.
How beautiful! The mountains from without
Listen in silence for the word said next,

(What word will men say?) here where Giotto planted

His campanile, like an unperplexed

Question to Heaven, concerning the things granted

To a great people, who, being greatly vexed

In act, in aspiration keep undaunted!

(What word says God?) The sculptor's Night and

Day,

And Dawn and Twilight, wait in marble scorn,

Like dogs couched on a dunghill, on the clay

From whence the Medicean stamp's outworn,—

The final putting off of all such sway

By all such hands, and freeing of the unborn

In Florence, and the world outside his Florence.

That's Michel Angelo! his statues wait

In the small chapel of the dim St. Lawrence!

Day's eyes are breaking bold and passionate

Over his shoulder, and will flash abhorrence
On darkness, and with level looks meet fate,
When once loose from that marble film of theirs :
The Night has wild dreams in her sleep ; the Dawn
Is haggard as the sleepless : Twilight wears
A sort of horror : as the veil withdrawn
"Twixt the artist's soul and works had left them
heirs
Of the deep thoughts which would not quail nor fawn,
His angers and contempts, his hope and love ;
For not without a meaning did he place
Princely Urbino on the seat above
With everlasting shadow on his face ;
While the slow dawns and twilights disapprove
The ashes of his long-extinguished race,
Which never shall clog more the feet of men.

I do believe, divinest Angelo,
 That winter-hour, in Via Larga, when
Thou wert commanded to build up in snow
 Some marvel of thine art, which straight again
Dissolved beneath the sun's Italian glow,
 While thine eyes, still broad with the plastic
 passion,
Thawed, too, in drops of wounded manhood, . . . since,
 Mocking alike thine art and indignation,
Laughed at the palace-window the new prince, . . .
 " Aha ! this genius needs for exaltation,
When all's said, and howe'er the proud may wince,
 A little marble from our princely mines ! "

I do believe that hour thou laughedst too,

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For the whole world and for thy Florentines,
After those few tears—which were only few !
That as, beneath the sun, the grand white lines
Of thy snow-statue trembled and withdrew,—
The head, erect as Jove's, being palsied first,
The eyelids flattened, the full brow turned blank,—
When the right hand, upraised as if it cursed,
Dropped, a mere snowball, and the people sank
Their voices, though a louder laughter burst
From the window,—Michel, then, thy soul could thank
God and the prince, for promise and presage,
And laugh the laugh back, I think, verily,
Thine eyes being purged by tears of righteous rage,
To read a wrong into a prophecy,
And measure a true great man's heritage
Against a mere Grand-duke's posterity.

I think thy soul said then, “ I do not need
A pryncedom and its quarries, after all ;
For if I write, paint, carve a word, indeed,
On book or board or dust, on floor or wall,
The same is kept of God who taketh heed
That not a letter of the meaning fall,
Or ere it touch and teach His world’s deep heart,
Outlasting, therefore, all your lordships, Sir !
So keep your stone, beseech you, for your part,
To cover up your grave-place and refer
The proper titles ! *I* live by my art !
The thought I threw into this snow shall stir
This gazing people when their gaze is done ;
And the tradition of your act and mine,
When all the snow is melted in the sun,
Shall gather up, for unborn men, a sign