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CROMWELL:

A PRIZE POEM,

RECITED IN THE THEATRE, OXFORD;

JUNE 28, 1843.

BY

MATTHEW ARNOLD,

BALLIOL COLLEGE.



OXFORD:

PRINTED AND PUBLISHED BY J. VINCENT.

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SYNOPSIS.

INTRODUCTION—The mountains and the sea the cradles of freedom—contrasted with the birth-place of Cromwell—His childhood and youth—The germs of his future character probably formed during his life of inaction.—Cromwell at the moment of his intended embarkation—Retrospect of his past life and profligate youth—Temptations held out by the prospect of a life of rest in America—How far such rest was allowable—Vision of his future life—Different persons represented in it—Charles the First—Cromwell himself—His victories and maritime glory—Pym—Strafford—Laud—Hampden—Falkland—Milton—Charles the First—Cromwell on his death-bed—His character—Dispersion of the vision—Conclusion,

CROMWELL.

Schrecklich ist es, deiner Wahrheit
Sterbliches Gefäss zu seyn.

SCHILLER.

High fate is their's, ye sleepless waves, whose ear
Learns Freedom's lesson from your voice of fear;
Whose spell-bound sense from childhood's hour hath
known

Familiar meanings in your mystic tone:
Sounds of deep import—voices that beguile
Age of its tears and childhood of its smile,
To yearn with speechless impulse to the free
And gladsome greetings of the buoyant sea!

^a High fate is their's, who where the silent sky
Stoops to the soaring mountains, live and die;

^a This is in allusion to the idea expressed in the twelfth of Mr. Wordsworth's Sonnets to Liberty:—

“Two voices are there: one is of the sea,” &c.

contrasting it with the fact of Cromwell's birth-place having been the fen country of Huntingdonshire, where he lived till he was forty years old.

Who scale the cloud-capt height, or sink to rest
In the deep stillness of its shelt'ring breast;—
Around whose feet the exulting waves have sung,
The eternal hills their giant shadows flung.

No wonders nurs'd thy childhood; not for thee
Did the waves chaunt their song of liberty!
Thine was no mountain home, where Freedom's form
Abides enthron'd amid the mist and storm,
And whispers to the listening winds, that swell
With solemn cadence round her citadel!
These had no sound for thee: that cold calm eye,
Lit with no rapture as the storm swept by,
To mark with shiver'd crest the reeling wave
Hide his torn head beneath his sunless cave;
Or hear, 'mid circling crags, the impatient cry
Of the pent winds, that scream in agony!
Yet all high sounds that mountain children hear,
Flash'd from thy soul upon thine inward ear;
All Freedom's mystic language—storms that roar
By hill or wave, the mountain or the shore,—
All these had stirr'd thy spirit, and thine eye
In common sights read secret sympathy;
Till all bright thoughts that hills or waves can yield,
Deck'd the dull waste, and the familiar field;
Or wondrous sounds from tranquil skies were borne
Far o'er the glistening sheets of windy corn:

Skies—that unbound by clasp of mountain chain,
 Slope stately down, and melt into the plain ;
 Sounds—such as erst the lone wayfaring man
^b Caught, as he journeyed, from the lips of Pan ;
^c Or that mysterious cry, that smote with fear,
 Like sounds from other worlds, the Spartan's ear,
 While, o'er the dusty plain, the murmurous throng
 Of Heaven's embattled myriads swept along.

Say not such dreams are idle : for the man
 Still toils to perfect what the child began ;
 And thoughts, that were but outlines, time engraves
 Deep on his life ; and childhood's baby waves,
 Made rough with care, become the changeful sea,
 Stemm'd by the strength of manhood fearlessly ;
 And fleeting thoughts, that on the lonely wild
 Swept o'er the fancy of that heedless child,
 Perchance had quicken'd with a living truth
 The cold dull soil of his unfruitful youth ;
 Till, with his daily life, a life, that threw
 Its shadows o'er the future, flower'd and grew,
 With common cares unmingling, and apart,
 Haunting the shrouded chambers of his heart ;
 Till life, unstirr'd by action, life became
 Threaded and lighten'd by a track of flame ;

^b Herod. vi. 106.

^c The vision of Demaratus on the plain of Eleusis. Herod. viii. 65.

An inward light, that, with its streaming ray,
 On the dark current of his changeless day
 Bound all his being with a silver chain—
 Like a swift river thro' a silent plain !

High thoughts were his, when by the gleaming
 flood,
 With heart new strung, and stern resolve, he stood ;
 Where rode the tall dark ships, whose loosen'd sail
 All idly flutter'd in the eastern gale ;
 High thoughts were his ;—but Memory's glance the
 while
 Fell on the cherish'd past with tearful smile ;
 And peaceful joys and gentler thoughts swept by,
 Like summer lightnings o'er a darken'd sky.
 The peace of childhood, and the thoughts that roam,
 Like loving shadows, round that childhood's home ;
 Joys that had come and vanish'd, half unknown,
 Then slowly brighten'd, as the days had flown ;
 Years that were sweet or sad, becalm'd or toss'd
 On life's wild waves—the living and the lost.
 Youth stain'd with follies : and the thoughts of ill
 Crush'd, as they rose, by manhood's sterner will.
 Repentant prayers, that had been strong to save—
 And the first sorrow, which is childhood's grave !

^d Eight ships, lying in the Thames, and ready to sail, were detained by order of Council.—*Hume*, vi. 309.

All shapes that haunt remembrance ; soft and fair,
Like a green land at sunset, all were there !
Eyes that he knew, old faces, unforget,
Gaz'd sadly down on his unrestful lot,
And Memory's calm clear voice, and mournful eye,
Chill'd every buoyant hope that floated by ;
Like frozen winds on southern vales that blow
From a far land—the children of the snow—
O'er flowering plain, and blossom'd meadow fling
The cold dull shadow of their icy wing.

Then Fancy's roving visions, bold and free,
A moment dispossess'd reality.
All airy hopes that idle hearts can frame,
Like dreams between two sorrows, went and came :
Fond hearts that fain would clothe the unwelcome
truth
Of toilsome manhood in the dreams of youth,
To bend in rapture at some idol throne,
Some lifeless soulless phantom of their own ;
Some shadowy vision of a tranquil life,
Of joys unclouded, years unstirr'd by strife ;
Of sleep unshadow'd by a dream of woe ;
Of many a lawny hill, and streams with silver flow ;
Of giant mountains by the western main,
The sunless forest, and the sealike plain ;
Those lingering hopes of coward hearts, that still
Would play the traitor to the stedfast will,

One moment's space, perchance, might charm his eye
From the stern future, and the years gone by.
One moment's space might waft him far away
To western shores—the death-place of the day!
Might paint the calm, sweet peace—the rest of home,
Far o'er the pathless waste of labouring foam—
Peace, that recall'd his childish hours anew,
More calm, more deep, than childhood ever knew!
Green happy places—like a flowery lea
Between the barren mountains and the stormy sea.

O pleasant rest, if once the race were run!
O happy slumber, if the day were done!
Dreams that were sweet at eve, at morn were sin;
With cares to conquer, and a goal to win!
His were no tranquil years—no languid sleep—
No life of dreams—no home beyond the deep—
No softening ray—no visions false and wild—
No glittering hopes on life's grey distance smiled—
Like isles of sunlight on a mountain's brow,
Lit by a wandering gleam, we know not how,
Far on the dim horizon, when the sky
With glooming clouds broods dark and heavily.

Then his eye slumber'd, and the chain was broke
That bound his spirit, and his heart awoke;
Then—like a kingly river—swift and strong
The future roll'd its gathering tides along!

The shout of onset and the shriek of fear
Smote, like the rush of waters, on his ear ;
And his eye kindled with the kindling fray,
The surging battle and the mail'd array !
All wondrous deeds the coming days should see,
And the long Vision of the years to be.
Pale phantom hosts, like shadows, faint and far,
Councils, and armies, and the pomp of war !
And one sway'd all, who wore a kingly crown,
Until another rose and smote him down.
A form that tower'd above his brother men ;
A form he knew—but it was shrouded then !
With stern, slow steps—unseen—yet still the same,
By leaguer'd tower and tented field it came ;
By Naseby's hill, o'er Marston's heathy waste,
By Worcester's field the warrior-vision pass'd !
From their deep base, thy beetling cliffs, Dunbar,
Rang, as he trode them, with the voice of war !
The soldier kindled at his words of fire ;
The statesman quail'd before his glance of ire !
Worn was his brow with cares no thought could scan ;
His step was loftier than the steps of man ;
* And the winds told his glory—and the wave
Sonorous witness to his empire gave !

* "It is just to say, that the maritime glory of England may first be traced from the era of the commonwealth in a track of continuous light."—*Hallam's Const. Hist.* ii.

What forms are these, that with complaining sound,
 And slow, reluctant steps are gathering round?
 Forms that, with him, shall tread life's changing
 stage,

Cross his lone path, or share his pilgrimage.

There, as he gazed, a wond'rous band—they came,
 Pym's look of hate, and Strafford's glance of flame.
 There Laud, with noiseless steps and glittering eye,
 In priestly garb, a frail old man, went by.

His drooping head bowed meekly on his breast;
 His hands were folded, like a saint at rest!

'There Hampden bent him o'er his saddle bow,
 And death's cold dews bedimm'd his earnest brow.

Still turn'd to watch the battle—still forgot
 Himself, his sufferings, in his country's lot!

§ There Falkland ey'd the strife that would not cease,
 Shook back his tangled locks, and murmur'd—

“Peace!”

With feet that spurn'd the ground, lo! Milton there
 Stood like a statue; and his face was fair—
 Fair beyond human beauty; and his eye,
 That knew not earth, soar'd upwards to the sky!

^r “His head bending down, and his hands resting on his horse's neck, he was seen riding from the field.”—*Lord Nugent's Memorials of Hampden*, ii. 435.

§ “In his clothes and habit, which he had minded before always with more neatness and industry, he was now, not only incurious, but negligent.”—*Clarendon*.

^a He, too, was there—it was the princely boy,
The child-companion of his childish joy!
But oh! how chang'd—those deathlike features wore
Childhood's bright glance, and sunny smile no more!
That brow so sad, so pale, so full of care —
What trace of careless childhood linger'd there?
What spring of youth in that majestic mien,
So sadly calm, so kingly, so serene?
No—all was chang'd—the monarch wept alone,
Between a ruin'd church and shatter'd throne!
Friendless and hopeless—like a lonely tree,
On some bare headland, straining mournfully,
That all night long its weary moan doth make
To the vex'd waters of a mountain lake!
Still, as he gaz'd, the phantom's mournful glance
Shook the deep slumber of his deathlike trance;
Like some forgotten strain that haunts us still,
That calm eye follow'd, turn him where he will;
Till the pale monarch, and the long array,
Pass'd, like a morning mist, in tears away!

Then all his dream was troubled, and his soul
Thrill'd with a dread no slumber could control;
On that dark form his eyes had gaz'd before,
Nor known it then;—but it was veil'd no more!
In broad clear light the ghastly vision shone,—
That form was his,—those features were his own!

^b Alluding to the stories of Cromwell's childish intimacy with Charles the First.

The night of terrors and the day of care,
 The years of toil, all, all were written there !
 Sad faces watch'd around him, and his breath
 Came faint and feeble in the embrace of death.
^l The gathering tempest, with its voice of fear,
^h His latest loftiest music, smote his ear !
^l That day of boundless hope and promise high,
 That day that hail'd his triumphs, saw him die !
 Then from those whitening lips, as death drew near,
^m The imprisoning chains fell off, and all was clear !
 Like lowering clouds, that at the close of day,
 Bath'd in a blaze of sunset, melt away ;
 And with its clear calm tones, that dying prayer
 Cheer'd all the failing hearts that sorrow'd there !

A Life—whose ways no human thought could scan,—
 A life—that was not as the life of man ;
 A life—that wrote its purpose with a sword,
 Moulding itself in action, not in word !

ⁱ Clarendon mentions a great storm which attended the death of Cromwell.

^k " He was a great lover of music, and he entertained the most skilful in that science in his pay and family."—*Perfect Politician*.

^l Cromwell died on his fortunate day, the anniversary of Dunbar and Worcester,—September 3rd.

^m There is a remarkable contrast between the perfect clearness of the celebrated prayer Cromwell is recorded to have uttered on his death bed, and the confusedness of the speeches which are attributed to him.

Rent with tumultuous thoughts, whose conflict rung
Deep thro' his soul, and chok'd his faltering tongue;
A heart that reck'd not of the countless dead,
That strew'd the blood-stain'd path where Empire led;
A daring hand, that shrunk not to fulfil
The thought that spurr'd it; and a dauntless will,
Bold action's parent; and a piercing ken
Thro' the dark chambers of the hearts of men;
To read each thought, and teach that master mind
The fears and hopes and passions of mankind;
All these were thine—Oh thought of fear!—and thou
Stretch'd on that bed of death, art nothing now.

Then all his vision faded, and his soul
Sprang from its sleep! and lo, the waters roll
Once more beneath him; and the fluttering sail,
Where the dark ships rode proudly, woo'd the gale;
And the wind murmur'd round him, and he stood
Once more alone beside the gleaming flood.

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