

**Robert Browning**

*Christmas Eve*

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I

Out of the little chapel I burst  
Into the fresh night-air again.  
Five minutes full, I waited first  
In the doorway, to escape the rain  
That drove in gusts down the common's centre  
At the edge of which the chapel stands,  
Before I plucked up heart to enter.  
Heaven knows how many sorts of hands  
Reached past me, groping for the latch  
Of the inner door that hung on catch  
More obstinate the more they fumbled,  
Till, giving way at last with a scold  
Of the crazy hinge, in squeezed or tumbled  
One sheep more to the rest in fold,  
And left me irresolute, standing sentry  
In the sheepfold's lath-and-plaster entry,  
Six feet long by three feet wide,  
Partitioned off from the vast inside—  
I blocked up half of it at least.  
No remedy; the rain kept driving.  
They eyed me much as some wild beast,  
That congregation, still arriving,  
Some of them by the main road, white  
A long way past me into the night,  
Skirting the common, then diverging;

Not a few suddenly emerging  
From the common's self thro' the paling-gaps  
—They house in the gravel-pits perhaps,  
Where the road stops short with its safeguard border  
Of lamps, as tired of such disorder;—  
But the most turned in yet more abruptly  
From a certain squalid knot of alleys,  
Where the town's bad blood once slept corruptly,  
Which now the little chapel rallies  
And leads into day again,—its priestliness  
Lending itself to hide their beastliness  
So cleverly (thanks in part to the mason),  
And putting so cheery a whitewashed face on  
Those neophytes too much in lack of it,  
That, where you cross the common as I did,  
And meet the party thus presided,  
"Mount Zion" with Love-lane at the back of it,  
They front you as little disconcerted  
As, bound for the hills, her fate averted,  
And her wicked people made to mind him,  
Lot might have marched with Gomorrah  
behind him.

II

Well, from the road, the lanes or the common,  
In came the flock: the fat weary woman,  
Panting and bewildered, down-clapping