

An entertaining
book about
Browning.

In selecting Mr. G. K. Chesterton to prepare the volume on Robert Browning for the series of "English Men of Letters" (Macmillan), the editor was doubtless aware that the resulting book would be anything but humdrum, and may very reasonably have entertained some misgivings as to the experiment. For Mr. Chesterton is a young writer who is chiefly characterized by unexpectedness, and is determined to be original at all costs. He has certainly produced an entertaining book, and a book which is, on the whole, reasonable in its conclusions, although these are often stated in somewhat startling terms. Mr. Chesterton's chief literary affectation is para-

dox, as when he says that "Browning's love-poetry is the finest love-poetry in the world, because it does not talk about raptures, and ideals, and gates of heaven, but about window-panes, and gloves, and garden walls," or when he calmly remarks, *à propos* of the elopement with Elizabeth Barrett, that "he had always had the courage to tell the truth; and now it was demanded of him to have the greater courage to tell a lie, and he told it with perfect cheerfulness and lucidity." This sort of cleverness, and the other sort that finds expression in such incidental observations as "Paul founded a civilization by keeping an ethical diary," is apt to pall upon the reader who discovers it upon every page; but such is Mr. Chesterton's way, and the defects of his qualities must be forgiven for the sake of the qualities themselves, which are freshness of mind, keenness of penetration, and freedom from the obvious *clichés* of criticism. The author strains his points now and then, as when, speaking of the poet's last hour with his wife, he goes on to say: "He, closing the door of that room behind him, closed a door in himself, and none ever saw Browning upon earth again, but only a splendid surface." This comes dangerously near to being nonsense. The materials for a study of Browning are so easily brought together that there has been no question of research in this work. There are the letters, and there is Mrs. Orr's biography, and there are the poems. The Browning Society has brought out a few facts of its own, and many anecdotes are current in books of literary gossip. These are Mr. Chesterton's sources; the rest he has evolved from his imagination. Speaking of the cryptic titles of the later poems, he tells of "a lady I once knew who had merely read the title of 'Pacchiarotto and How He Worked in Distemper,' and thought that Pacchiarotto was the name of a dog, whom no attacks of canine disease could keep from the fulfilment of his duty." We must be pardoned for entertaining a dark suspicion that this lady is a myth. Mr. Chesterton has a good deal to say about Browning's alleged obscurity, and the upshot of it all is about what Mr. Swinburne has said in discussing the same subject. Browning's vision was lightning-like in its swiftness of action and sharpness of revelation, and he did not think it necessary to help men of duller and slower vision to see all that he did; or, rather, he could not comprehend how much duller and slower of vision the ordinary run of mortals are. As our author puts it, "Sordello" was "the most glorious compliment that has ever been paid to the average man."