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Mrs. Sutherland Orr

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LIFE AND LETTERS OF ROBERT BROWNING

by Mrs. Sutherland Orr

Second Edition

Preface

Such letters of Mr. Browning's as appear, whole or in part, in the

present volume have been in most cases given to me by the persons to

whom they were addressed, or copied by Miss Browning from the originals

under her care; but I owe to the daughter of the Rev. W. J. Fox--Mrs.

Bridell Fox--those written to her father and to Miss Flower; the two

interesting extracts from her father's correspondence with herself and

Mr. Browning's note to Mr. Robertson.

For my general material I have been largely indebted to Miss Browning.

Her memory was the only existing record of her brother's boyhood and

youth. It has been to me an unfailing as well as always accessible

authority for that subsequent period of his life which I could only know

in disconnected facts or his own fragmentary reminiscences. It is less

true, indeed, to say that she has greatly helped me in writing this

short biography than that without her help it could never have been

undertaken.

I thank my friends Mrs. R. Courtenay Bell and Miss Hickey for their

invaluable assistance in preparing the book for, and carrying it through

the press; and I acknowledge with real gratitude the advantages derived

by it from Mr. Dykes Campbell's large literary experience in his very

careful final revision of the proofs.

A. Orr. April 22, 1891.

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LIFE AND LETTERS OF ROBERT BROWNING

Chapter 1

Origin of the Browning Family--Robert Browning's Grandfather--His

position and Character--His first and second Marriage--Unkindness

towards his eldest Son, Robert Browning's Father--Alleged Infusion

of West Indian Blood through Robert Browning's Grandmother--Existing

Evidence against it--The Grandmother's Portrait.

A belief was current in Mr. Browning's lifetime that he had Jewish blood

in his veins. It received outward support from certain accidents of his

life, from his known interest in the Hebrew language and literature,

from his friendship for various members of the Jewish community in

London. It might well have yielded to the fact of his never claiming the

kinship, which could not have existed without his knowledge, and which,

if he had known it, he would, by reason of these very sympathies, have

been the last person to disavow. The results of more recent and more

systematic inquiry have shown the belief to be unfounded.

Our poet sprang, on the father's side, from an obscure or, as family

tradition asserts, a decayed branch, of an Anglo-Saxon stock settled,

at an early period of our history, in the south, and probably also

south-west, of England. A line of Brownings owned the manors of

Melbury-Sampford and Melbury-Osmond, in north-west Dorsetshire; their

last representative disappeared--or was believed to do so--in the time

of Henry VII., their manors passing into the hands of the Earls of

Ilchester, who still hold them.\* The name occurs after 1542 in different

parts of the country: in two cases with the affix of 'esquire', in two

also, though not in both coincidently, within twenty miles of Pentridge,

where the first distinct traces of the poet's family appear. Its cradle,

as he called it, was Woodyates, in the parish of Pentridge, on the

Wiltshire confines of Dorsetshire; and there his ancestors, of the third

and fourth generations, held, as we understand, a modest but independent

social position.

\* I am indebted for these facts, as well as for some others

referring to, or supplied by, Mr. Browning's uncles,

to some notes made for the Browning Society by Dr. Furnivall.

This fragment of history, if we may so call it, accords better with our

impression of Mr. Browning's genius than could any pedigree which more

palpably connected him with the 'knightly' and 'squirely' families whose

name he bore. It supplies the strong roots of English national life

to which we instinctively refer it. Both the vivid originality of that

genius and its healthy assimilative power stamp it as, in some sense,

the product of virgin soil; and although the varied elements which

entered into its growth were racial as well as cultural, and inherited

as well as absorbed, the evidence of its strong natural or physical

basis remains undisturbed.

Mr. Browning, for his own part, maintained a neutral attitude in the

matter. He neither claimed nor disclaimed the more remote genealogical

past which had presented itself as a certainty to some older members of

his family. He preserved the old framed coat-of-arms handed down to him

from his grandfather; and used, without misgiving as to his right to do

so, a signet-ring engraved from it, the gift of a favourite uncle, in

years gone by. But, so long as he was young, he had no reason to think

about his ancestors; and, when he was old, he had no reason to care

about them; he knew himself to be, in every possible case, the most

important fact in his family history.

Roi ne suis, ni Prince aussi,

Suis le seigneur de Conti,

he wrote, a few years back, to a friend who had incidentally questioned

him about it.

Our immediate knowledge of the family begins with Mr. Browning's

grandfather, also a Robert Browning, who obtained through Lord

Shaftesbury's influence a clerkship in the Bank of England, and entered

on it when barely twenty, in 1769. He served fifty years, and rose to

the position of Principal of the Bank Stock Office, then an important

one, and which brought him into contact with the leading financiers

of the day. He became also a lieutenant in the Honourable Artillery

Company, and took part in the defence of the Bank in the Gordon Riots

of 1789. He was an able, energetic, and worldly man: an Englishman, very

much of the provincial type; his literary tastes being limited to the

Bible and 'Tom Jones', both of which he is said to have read through

once a year. He possessed a handsome person and, probably, a vigorous

constitution, since he lived to the age of eighty-four, though

frequently tormented by gout; a circumstance which may help to account

for his not having seen much of his grandchildren, the poet and his

sister; we are indeed told that he particularly dreaded the lively boy's

vicinity to his afflicted foot. He married, in 1778, Margaret, daughter

of a Mr. Tittle by his marriage with Miss Seymour; and who was born

in the West Indies and had inherited property there. They had three

children: Robert, the poet's father; a daughter, who lived an uneventful

life and plays no part in the family history; and another son who died

an infant. The Creole mother died also when her eldest boy was only

seven years old, and passed out of his memory in all but an indistinct

impression of having seen her lying in her coffin. Five years later the

widower married a Miss Smith, who gave him a large family.

This second marriage of Mr. Browning's was a critical event in the life

of his eldest son; it gave him, to all appearance, two step-parents

instead of one. There could have been little sympathy between his father

and himself, for no two persons were ever more unlike, but there was yet

another cause for the systematic unkindness under which the lad grew

up. Mr. Browning fell, as a hard man easily does, greatly under the

influence of his second wife, and this influence was made by her

to subserve the interests of a more than natural jealousy of her

predecessor. An early instance of this was her banishing the dead lady's

portrait to a garret, on the plea that her husband did not need two

wives. The son could be no burden upon her because he had a little

income, derived from his mother's brother; but this, probably, only

heightened her ill-will towards him. When he was old enough to go to a

University, and very desirous of going--when, moreover, he offered to

do so at his own cost--she induced his father to forbid it, because,

she urged, they could not afford to send their other sons to college. An

earlier ambition of his had been to become an artist; but when he showed

his first completed picture to his father, the latter turned away and

refused to look at it. He gave himself the finishing stroke in the

parental eyes, by throwing up a lucrative employment which he had held

for a short time on his mother's West Indian property, in disgust at the

system of slave labour which was still in force there; and he paid for

this unpractical conduct as soon as he was of age, by the compulsory

reimbursement of all the expenses which his father, up to that date, had

incurred for him; and by the loss of his mother's fortune, which, at the

time of her marriage, had not been settled upon her. It was probably

in despair of doing anything better, that, soon after this, in his

twenty-second year, he also became a clerk in the Bank of England. He

married and settled in Camberwell, in 1811; his son and daughter were

born, respectively, in 1812 and 1814. He became a widower in 1849; and

when, four years later, he had completed his term of service at the

Bank, he went with his daughter to Paris, where they resided until his

death in 1866.

Dr. Furnivall has originated a theory, and maintains it as a conviction,

that Mr. Browning's grandmother was more than a Creole in the strict

sense of the term, that of a person born of white parents in the West

Indies, and that an unmistakable dash of dark blood passed from her to

her son and grandson. Such an occurrence was, on the face of it, not

impossible, and would be absolutely unimportant to my mind, and, I think

I may add, to that of Mr. Browning's sister and son. The poet and his

father were what we know them, and if negro blood had any part in their

composition, it was no worse for them, and so much the better for the

negro. But many persons among us are very averse to the idea of such

a cross; I believe its assertion, in the present case, to be entirely

mistaken; I prefer, therefore, touching on the facts alleged in favour

of it, to passing them over in a silence which might be taken to mean

indifference, but might also be interpreted into assent.

We are told that Mr. Browning was so dark in early life, that a nephew

who saw him in Paris, in 1837, mistook him for an Italian. He neither

had nor could have had a nephew; and he was not out of England at the

time specified. It is said that when Mr. Browning senior was residing on

his mother's sugar plantation at St. Kitt's, his appearance was held

to justify his being placed in church among the coloured members of the

congregation. We are assured in the strongest terms that the story has

no foundation, and this by a gentleman whose authority in all matters

concerning the Browning family Dr. Furnivall has otherwise accepted

as conclusive. If the anecdote were true it would be a singular

circumstance that Mr. Browning senior was always fond of drawing negro

heads, and thus obviously disclaimed any unpleasant association with

them.

I do not know the exact physical indications by which a dark strain is

perceived; but if they are to be sought in the colouring of eyes, hair,

and skin, they have been conspicuously absent in the two persons who in

the present case are supposed to have borne them. The poet's father had

light blue eyes and, I am assured by those who knew him best, a clear,

ruddy complexion. His appearance induced strangers passing him in the

Paris streets to remark, 'C'est un Anglais!' The absolute whiteness

of Miss Browning's skin was modified in her brother by a sallow tinge

sufficiently explained by frequent disturbance of the liver; but it

never affected the clearness of his large blue-grey eyes; and his hair,

which grew dark as he approached manhood, though it never became black,

is spoken of, by everyone who remembers him in childhood and youth,

as golden. It is no less worthy of note that the daughter of his early

friend Mr. Fox, who grew up in the little social circle to which he

belonged, never even heard of the dark cross now imputed to him; and a

lady who made his acquaintance during his twenty-fourth year, wrote a

sonnet upon him, beginning with these words:

Thy brow is calm, young Poet--pale and clear

As a moonlighted statue.

The suggestion of Italian characteristics in the Poet's face may serve,

however, to introduce a curious fact, which can have no bearing on the

main lines of his descent, but holds collateral possibilities concerning

it. His mother's name Wiedemann or Wiedeman appears in a merely

contracted form as that of one of the oldest families naturalized in

Venice. It became united by marriage with the Rezzonico; and, by a

strange coincidence, the last of these who occupied the palace now owned

by Mr. Barrett Browning was a Widman-Rezzonico. The present Contessa

Widman has lately restored her own palace, which was falling into ruin.

That portrait of the first Mrs. Browning, which gave so much umbrage

to her husband's second wife, has hung for many years in her grandson's

dining-room, and is well known to all his friends. It represents a

stately woman with an unmistakably fair skin; and if the face or hair

betrays any indication of possible dark blood, it is imperceptible to

the general observer, and must be of too slight and fugitive a nature

to enter into the discussion. A long curl touches one shoulder. One

hand rests upon a copy of Thomson's 'Seasons', which was held to be

the proper study and recreation of cultivated women in those days. The

picture was painted by Wright of Derby.

A brother of this lady was an adventurous traveller, and was said to

have penetrated farther into the interior of Africa than any other

European of his time. His violent death will be found recorded in a

singular experience of the poet's middle life.

Chapter 2

Robert Browning's Father--His Position in Life--Comparison between

him and his Son--Tenderness towards his Son--Outline of his Habits and

Character--His Death--Significant Newspaper Paragraph--Letter of

Mr. Locker-Lampson--Robert Browning's Mother--Her Character and

Antecedents--Their Influence upon her Son--Nervous Delicacy imparted to

both her Children--Its special Evidences in her Son.

It was almost a matter of course that Robert Browning's father should be

disinclined for bank work. We are told, and can easily imagine, that he

was not so good an official as the grandfather; we know that he did not

rise so high, nor draw so large a salary. But he made the best of

his position for his family's sake, and it was at that time both more

important and more lucrative than such appointments have since become.

Its emoluments could be increased by many honourable means not covered

by the regular salary. The working-day was short, and every additional

hour's service well paid. To be enrolled on the night-watch was also

very remunerative; there were enormous perquisites in pens, paper, and

sealing-wax.\* Mr. Browning availed himself of these opportunities of

adding to his income, and was thus enabled, with the help of his private

means, to gratify his scholarly and artistic tastes, and give his

children the benefit of a very liberal education--the one distinct ideal

of success in life which such a nature as his could form. Constituted as

he was, he probably suffered very little through the paternal unkindness

which had forced him into an uncongenial career. Its only palpable

result was to make him a more anxiously indulgent parent when his own

time came.

\* I have been told that, far from becoming careless in the

use of these things from his practically unbounded command

of them, he developed for them an almost superstitious

reverence. He could never endure to see a scrap of writing-

paper wasted.

Many circumstances conspired to secure to the coming poet a happier

childhood and youth than his father had had. His path was to be smoothed

not only by natural affection and conscientious care, but by literary

and artistic sympathy. The second Mr. Browning differed, in certain

respects, as much from the third as from the first. There were,

nevertheless, strong points in which, if he did not resemble, he at

least distinctly foreshadowed him; and the genius of the one would lack

some possible explanation if we did not recognize in great measure its

organized material in the other. Much, indeed, that was genius in the

son existed as talent in the father. The moral nature of the younger

man diverged from that of the older, though retaining strong points of

similarity; but the mental equipments of the two differed far less

in themselves than in the different uses to which temperament and

circumstances trained them.

The most salient intellectual characteristic of Mr. Browning senior was

his passion for reading. In his daughter's words, 'he read in season,

and out of season;' and he not only read, but remembered. As a

schoolboy, he knew by heart the first book of the 'Iliad', and all

the odes of Horace; and it shows how deeply the classical part of his

training must have entered into him, that he was wont, in later life, to

soothe his little boy to sleep by humming to him an ode of Anacreon. It

was one of his amusements at school to organize Homeric combats among

the boys, in which the fighting was carried on in the manner of the

Greeks and Trojans, and he and his friend Kenyon would arm themselves

with swords and shields, and hack at each other lustily, exciting

themselves to battle by insulting speeches derived from the Homeric

text.\*

\* This anecdote is partly quoted from Mrs. Andrew Crosse,

who has introduced it into her article 'John Kenyon and his

Friends',

'Temple Bar', April 1890. She herself received it from Mr.

Dykes Campbell.

Mr. Browning had also an extraordinary power of versifying, and taught

his son from babyhood the words he wished him to remember, by joining

them to a grotesque rhyme; the child learned all his Latin declensions

in this way. His love of art had been proved by his desire to adopt it

as a profession; his talent for it was evidenced by the life and power

of the sketches, often caricatures, which fell from his pen or pencil as

easily as written words. Mr. Barrett Browning remembers gaining a very

early elementary knowledge of anatomy from comic illustrated rhymes

(now in the possession of their old friend, Mrs. Fraser Corkran) through

which his grandfather impressed upon him the names and position of the

principal bones of the human body.

Even more remarkable than his delight in reading was the manner in

which Mr. Browning read. He carried into it all the preciseness of the

scholar. It was his habit when he bought a book--which was generally

an old one allowing of this addition--to have some pages of blank paper

bound into it. These he filled with notes, chronological tables, or such

other supplementary matter as would enhance the interest, or assist the

mastering, of its contents; all written in a clear and firm though by

no means formal handwriting. More than one book thus treated by him

has passed through my hands, leaving in me, it need hardly be said,

a stronger impression of the owner's intellectual quality than the

acquisition by him of the finest library could have conveyed. One of the

experiences which disgusted him with St. Kitt's was the frustration

by its authorities of an attempt he was making to teach a negro boy

to read, and the understanding that all such educative action was

prohibited.

In his faculties and attainments, as in his pleasures and appreciations,

he showed the simplicity and genuineness of a child. He was not only

ready to amuse, he could always identify himself with children, his

love for whom never failed him in even his latest years. His more than

childlike indifference to pecuniary advantages had been shown in early

life. He gave another proof of it after his wife's death, when he

declined a proposal, made to him by the Bank of England, to assist in

founding one of its branch establishments in Liverpool. He never indeed,

personally, cared for money, except as a means of acquiring old, i.e.

rare books, for which he had, as an acquaintance declared, the scent

of a hound and the snap of a bulldog. His eagerness to possess such

treasures was only matched by the generosity with which he parted with

them; and his daughter well remembers the feeling of angry suspicion

with which she and her brother noted the periodical arrival of a certain

visitor who would be closeted with their father for hours, and steal

away before the supper time, when the family would meet, with some

precious parcel of books or prints under his arm.

It is almost superfluous to say that he was indifferent to creature

comforts. Miss Browning was convinced that, if on any occasion she had

said to him, 'There will be no dinner to-day,' he would only have

looked up from his book to reply, 'All right, my dear, it is of no

consequence.' In his bank-clerk days, when he sometimes dined in Town,

he left one restaurant with which he was not otherwise dissatisfied,

because the waiter always gave him the trouble of specifying what he

would have to eat. A hundred times that trouble would not have deterred

him from a kindly act. Of his goodness of heart, indeed, many distinct

instances might be given; but even this scanty outline of his life has

rendered them superfluous.

Mr. Browning enjoyed splendid physical health. His early love of reading

had not precluded a wholesome enjoyment of athletic sports; and he was,

as a boy, the fastest runner and best base-ball player in his school. He

died, like his father, at eighty-four (or rather, within a few days of

eighty-five), but, unlike him, he had never been ill; a French friend

exclaimed when all was over, 'Il n'a jamais ete vieux.' His faculties

were so unclouded up to the last moment that he could watch himself

dying, and speculate on the nature of the change which was befalling

him. 'What do you think death is, Robert?' he said to his son; 'is it

a fainting, or is it a pang?' A notice of his decease appeared in an

American newspaper. It was written by an unknown hand, and bears a stamp

of genuineness which renders the greater part of it worth quoting.

'He was not only a ruddy, active man, with fine hair, that retained its

strength and brownness to the last, but he had a courageous spirit and a

remarkably intelligent mind. He was a man of the finest culture, and was

often, and never vainly, consulted by his son Robert concerning the more

recondite facts relating to the old characters, whose bones that poet

liked so well to disturb. His knowledge of old French, Spanish, and

Italian literature was wonderful. The old man went smiling and peaceful

to his long rest, preserving his faculties to the last, insomuch that

the physician, astonished at his continued calmness and good humour,

turned to his daughter, and said in a low voice, "Does this gentleman

know that he is dying?" The daughter said in a voice which the father

could hear, "He knows it;" and the old man said with a quiet smile,

"Death is no enemy in my eyes." His last words were spoken to his son

Robert, who was fanning him, "I fear I am wearying you, dear."'

Four years later one of his English acquaintances in Paris, Mr.

Frederick Locker, now Mr. Locker-Lampson, wrote to Robert Browning as

follows:

Dec. 26, 1870.

My dear Browning,--I have always thought that you or Miss Browning, or

some other capable person, should draw up a sketch of your excellent

father so that, hereafter, it might be known what an interesting man he

was.

I used often to meet you in Paris, at Lady Elgin's. She had a genuine

taste for poetry, and she liked being read to, and I remember you gave

her a copy of Keats' poems, and you used often to read his poetry to

her. Lady Elgin died in 1860, and I think it was in that year that Lady

Charlotte and I saw the most of Mr. Browning.\* He was then quite an

elderly man, if years could make him so, but he had so much vivacity of

manner, and such simplicity and freshness of mind, that it was difficult

to think him old.

\* Mr. Locker was then married to Lady Charlotte Bruce, Lady

Elgin's daughter.

I remember, he and your sister lived in an apartment in the Rue de

Grenelle, St. Germain, in quite a simple fashion, much in the way that

most people live in Paris, and in the way that all sensible people would

wish to live all over the world.

Your father and I had at least one taste and affection in common. He

liked hunting the old bookstalls on the 'quais', and he had a great

love and admiration for Hogarth; and he possessed several of Hogarth's

engravings, some in rare and early states of the plate; and he would

relate with glee the circumstances under which he had picked them up,

and at so small a price too! However, he had none of the 'petit-maitre'

weakness of the ordinary collector, which is so common, and which I own

to!--such as an infatuation for tall copies, and wide margins.

I remember your father was fond of drawing in a rough and ready fashion;

he had plenty of talent, I should think not very great cultivation; but

quite enough to serve his purpose, and to amuse his friends. He had a

thoroughly lively and \_healthy\_ interest in your poetry, and he showed me

some of your boyish attempts at versification.

Taking your dear father altogether, I quite believe him to have been one

of those men--interesting men--whom the world never hears of. Perhaps he

was shy--at any rate he was much less known than he ought to have been;

and now, perhaps, he only remains in the recollection of his family,

and of one or two superior people (like myself!) who were capable of

appreciating him. My dear Browning, I really hope you will draw up a

slight sketch of your father before it is too late. Yours, Frederick

Locker.

The judgments thus expressed twenty years ago are cordially re-stated

in the letter in which Mr. Locker-Lampson authorizes me to publish them.

The desired memoir was never written; but the few details which I have

given of the older Mr. Browning's life and character may perhaps stand

for it.

With regard to the 'strict dissent' with which her parents have been

taxed, Miss Browning writes to me: 'My father was born and educated in

the Church of England, and, for many years before his death, lived in

her communion. He became a Dissenter in middle life, and my mother, born

and brought up in the Kirk of Scotland, became one also; but they could

not be called bigoted, since we always in the evening attended the

preaching of the Rev. Henry Melvill\* (afterwards Canon of St. Paul's),

whose sermons Robert much admired.'\*\*

\* At Camden Chapel, Camberwell.

\*\* Mr. Browning was much interested, in later years, in

hearing Canon, perhaps then already Archdeacon, Farrar extol

his eloquence and ask whether he had known him. Mr. Ruskin

also spoke of him with admiration.

Little need be said about the poet's mother. She was spoken of by

Carlyle as 'the true type of a Scottish gentlewoman.' Mr. Kenyon

declared that such as she had no need to go to heaven, because they made

it wherever they were. But her character was all resumed in her son's

words, spoken with the tremulous emotion which so often accompanied his

allusion to those he had loved and lost: 'She was a divine woman.' She

was Scotch on the maternal side, and her kindly, gentle, but distinctly

evangelical Christianity must have been derived from that source. Her

father, William Wiedemann, a ship-owner, was a Hamburg German settled

in Dundee, and has been described by Mr. Browning as an accomplished

draughtsman and musician. She herself had nothing of the artist about

her, though we hear of her sometimes playing the piano; in all her

goodness and sweetness she seems to have been somewhat matter-of-fact.

But there is abundant indirect evidence of Mr. Browning's love of

music having come to him through her, and we are certainly justified in

holding the Scottish-German descent as accountable, in great measure

at least, for the metaphysical quality so early apparent in the poet's

mind, and of which we find no evidence in that of his father. His strong

religious instincts must have been derived from both parents, though

most anxiously fostered by his mother.

There is yet another point on which Mrs. Browning must have influenced

the life and destinies of her son, that of physical health, or, at

least, nervous constitution. She was a delicate woman, very anaemic

during her later years, and a martyr to neuralgia, which was perhaps a

symptom of this condition. The acute ailment reproduced itself in

her daughter in spite of an otherwise vigorous constitution. With the

brother, the inheritance of suffering was not less surely present, if

more difficult to trace. We have been accustomed to speaking of him as a

brilliantly healthy man; he was healthy, even strong, in many essential

respects. Until past the age of seventy he could take long walks without

fatigue, and endure an amount of social and general physical strain

which would have tried many younger men. He carried on until the last a

large, if not always serious, correspondence, and only within the latest

months, perhaps weeks of his life, did his letters even suggest that

physical brain-power was failing him. He had, within the limits which

his death has assigned to it, a considerable recuperative power. His

consciousness of health was vivid, so long as he was well; and it was

only towards the end that the faith in his probable length of days

occasionally deserted him. But he died of no acute disease, more than

seven years younger than his father, having long carried with him

external marks of age from which his father remained exempt. Till

towards the age of forty he suffered from attacks of sore-throat, not

frequent, but of an angry kind. He was constantly troubled by imperfect

action of the liver, though no doctor pronounced the evil serious. I

have spoken of this in reference to his complexion. During the last

twenty years, if not for longer, he rarely spent a winter without a

suffocating cold and cough; within the last five, asthmatic symptoms

established themselves; and when he sank under what was perhaps his

first real attack of bronchitis it was not because the attack was very

severe, but because the heart was exhausted. The circumstances of his

death recalled that of his mother; and we might carry the sad analogy

still farther in his increasing pallor, and the slow and not strong

pulse which always characterized him. This would perhaps be a mistake.

It is difficult to reconcile any idea of bloodlessness with the bounding

vitality of his younger body and mind. Any symptom of organic disease

could scarcely, in his case, have been overlooked. But so much is

certain: he was conscious of what he called a nervousness of nature

which neither father nor grandfather could have bequeathed to him. He

imputed to this, or, in other words, to an undue physical sensitiveness

to mental causes of irritation, his proneness to deranged liver, and

the asthmatic conditions which he believed, rightly or wrongly, to be

produced by it. He was perhaps mistaken in some of his inferences, but

he was not mistaken in the fact. He had the pleasures as well as the

pains of this nervous temperament; its quick response to every congenial

stimulus of physical atmosphere, and human contact. It heightened the

enjoyment, perhaps exaggerated the consciousness of his physical powers.

It also certainly in his later years led him to overdraw them. Many

persons have believed that he could not live without society; a

prolonged seclusion from it would, for obvious reasons, have been

unsuited to him. But the excited gaiety which to the last he carried

into every social gathering was often primarily the result of a moral

and physical effort which his temperament prompted, but his strength

could not always justify. Nature avenged herself in recurrent periods of

exhaustion, long before the closing stage had set in.

I shall subsequently have occasion to trace this nervous impressibility

through various aspects and relations of his life; all I now seek to

show is that this healthiest of poets and most real of men was not

compounded of elements of pure health, and perhaps never could have been

so. It might sound grotesque to say that only a delicate woman could

have been the mother of Robert Browning. The fact remains that of such

a one, and no other, he was born; and we may imagine, without being

fanciful, that his father's placid intellectual powers required for

their transmutation into poetic genius just this infusion of a vital

element not only charged with other racial and individual qualities, but

physically and morally more nearly allied to pain. Perhaps, even for his

happiness as a man, we could not have wished it otherwise.

Chapter 3

1812-1826

Birth of Robert Browning--His Childhood and Schooldays--Restless

Temperament--Brilliant Mental Endowments--Incidental

Peculiarities--Strong Religious Feeling--Passionate Attachment to his

Mother; Grief at first Separation--Fondness for Animals--Experiences of

School Life--Extensive Reading--Early Attempts in Verse--Letter from his

Father concerning them--Spurious Poems in Circulation--'Incondita'--Mr.

Fox--Miss Flower.

Robert Browning was born, as has been often repeated, at Camberwell, on

May 7, 1812, soon after a great comet had disappeared from the sky.

He was a handsome, vigorous, fearless child, and soon developed an

unresting activity and a fiery temper. He clamoured for occupation from

the moment he could speak. His mother could only keep him quiet when

once he had emerged from infancy by telling him stories--doubtless

Bible stories--while holding him on her knee. His energies were of

course destructive till they had found their proper outlet; but we do

not hear of his ever having destroyed anything for the mere sake of

doing so. His first recorded piece of mischief was putting a handsome

Brussels lace veil of his mother's into the fire; but the motive, which

he was just old enough to lisp out, was also his excuse: 'A pitty baze

[pretty blaze], mamma.' Imagination soon came to his rescue. It has

often been told how he extemporized verse aloud while walking round and

round the dining-room table supporting himself by his hands, when he was

still so small that his head was scarcely above it. He remembered having

entertained his mother in the very first walk he was considered old

enough to take with her, by a fantastic account of his possessions in

houses, &c., of which the topographical details elicited from her the

remark, 'Why, sir, you are quite a geographer.' And though this kind of

romancing is common enough among intelligent children, it distinguishes

itself in this case by the strong impression which the incident had left

on his own mind. It seems to have been a first real flight of dramatic

fancy, confusing his identity for the time being.

The power of inventing did not, however, interfere with his readiness to

learn, and the facility with which he acquired whatever knowledge came

in his way had, on one occasion, inconvenient results. A lady of reduced

fortunes kept a small elementary school for boys, a stone's-throw from

his home; and he was sent to it as a day boarder at so tender an age

that his parents, it is supposed, had no object in view but to get

rid of his turbulent activity for an hour or two every morning and

afternoon. Nevertheless, his proficiency in reading and spelling was

soon so much ahead of that of the biggest boy, that complaints broke

out among the mammas, who were sure there was not fair play. Mrs.----was

neglecting her other pupils for the sake of 'bringing on Master

Browning;' and the poor lady found it necessary to discourage Master

Browning's attendance lest she should lose the remainder of her flock.

This, at least, was the story as he himself remembered it. According to

Miss Browning his instructress did not yield without a parting shot.

She retorted on the discontented parents that, if she could give their

children 'Master Browning's intellect', she would have no difficulty

in satisfying them. After this came the interlude of home-teaching, in

which all his elementary knowledge must have been gained. As an older

child he was placed with two Misses Ready, who prepared boys for

entering their brother's (the Rev. Thomas Ready's) school; and in due

time he passed into the latter, where he remained up to the age of

fourteen.

He seems in those early days to have had few playmates beyond his

sister, two years younger than himself, and whom his irrepressible

spirit must sometimes have frightened or repelled. Nor do we hear

anything of childish loves; and though an entry appeared in his diary

one Sunday in about the seventh or eighth year of his age, 'married two

wives this morning,' it only referred to a vague imaginary appropriation

of two girls whom he had just seen in church, and whose charm probably

lay in their being much bigger than he. He was, however, capable of a

self-conscious shyness in the presence of even a little girl; and his

sense of certain proprieties was extraordinarily keen. He told a friend

that on one occasion, when the merest child, he had edged his way by the

wall from one point of his bedroom to another, because he was not fully

clothed, and his reflection in the glass could otherwise have been seen

through the partly open door.\*

\* Another anecdote, of a very different kind, belongs to an

earlier period, and to that category of pure naughtiness

which could not fail to be sometimes represented in the

conduct of so gifted a child. An old lady who visited his

mother, and was characterized in the family as 'Aunt Betsy',

had irritated him by pronouncing the word 'lovers' with the

contemptuous jerk which the typical old maid is sometimes

apt to impart to it, when once the question had arisen why a

certain 'Lovers' Walk' was so called. He was too nearly a

baby to imagine what a 'lover' was; he supposed the name

denoted a trade or occupation. But his human sympathy

resented Aunt Betsy's manner as an affront; and he

determined, after probably repeated provocation, to show her

something worse than a 'lover', whatever this might be. So

one night he slipped out of bed, exchanged his nightgown for

what he considered the appropriate undress of a devil,

completed this by a paper tail, and the ugliest face he

could make, and rushed into the drawing-room, where the old

lady and his mother were drinking tea. He was snatched up

and carried away before he had had time to judge the effect

of his apparition; but he did not think, looking back upon

the circumstances in later life, that Aunt Betsy had

deserved quite so ill of her fellow-creatures as he then

believed.

His imaginative emotions were largely absorbed by religion. The early

Biblical training had had its effect, and he was, to use his own words,

'passionately religious' in those nursery years; but during them and

many succeeding ones, his mother filled his heart. He loved her so much,

he has been heard to say, that even as a grown man he could not sit

by her otherwise than with an arm round her waist. It is difficult to

measure the influence which this feeling may have exercised on his later

life; it led, even now, to a strange and touching little incident

which had in it the incipient poet no less than the loving child. His

attendance at Miss Ready's school only kept him from home from Monday

till Saturday of every week; but when called upon to confront his first

five days of banishment he felt sure that he would not survive them. A

leaden cistern belonging to the school had in, or outside it, the raised

image of a face. He chose the cistern for his place of burial, and

converted the face into his epitaph by passing his hand over and over it

to a continuous chant of: 'In memory of unhappy Browning'--the ceremony

being renewed in his spare moments, till the acute stage of the feeling

had passed away.

The fondness for animals for which through life he was noted, was

conspicuous in his very earliest days. His urgent demand for 'something

to do' would constantly include 'something to be caught' for him: 'they

were to catch him an eft;' 'they were to catch him a frog.' He would

refuse to take his medicine unless bribed by the gift of a speckled frog

from among the strawberries; and the maternal parasol, hovering above

the strawberry bed during the search for this object of his desires,

remained a standing picture in his remembrance. But the love of the

uncommon was already asserting itself; and one of his very juvenile

projects was a collection of rare creatures, the first contribution to

which was a couple of lady-birds, picked up one winter's day on a wall

and immediately consigned to a box lined with cotton-wool, and labelled,

'Animals found surviving in the depths of a severe winter.' Nor did

curiosity in this case weaken the power of sympathy. His passion for

birds and beasts was the counterpart of his father's love of children,

only displaying itself before the age at which child-love naturally

appears. His mother used to read Croxall's Fables to his little sister

and him. The story contained in them of a lion who was kicked to death

by an ass affected him so painfully that he could no longer endure the

sight of the book; and as he dared not destroy it, he buried it between

the stuffing and the woodwork of an old dining-room chair, where it

stood for lost, at all events for the time being. When first he heard

the adventures of the parrot who insisted on leaving his cage, and who

enjoyed himself for a little while and then died of hunger and cold,

he--and his sister with him--cried so bitterly that it was found

necessary to invent a different ending, according to which the parrot

was rescued just in time and brought back to his cage to live peacefully

in it ever after.

As a boy, he kept owls and monkeys, magpies and hedgehogs, an eagle,

and even a couple of large snakes, constantly bringing home the more

portable creatures in his pockets, and transferring them to his mother

for immediate care. I have heard him speak admiringly of the skilful

tenderness with which she took into her lap a lacerated cat, washed

and sewed up its ghastly wound, and nursed it back to health. The great

intimacy with the life and habits of animals which reveals itself in his

works is readily explained by these facts.

Mr. Ready's establishment was chosen for him as the best in the

neighbourhood; and both there and under the preparatory training of that

gentleman's sisters, the young Robert was well and kindly cared for. The

Misses Ready especially concerned themselves with the spiritual welfare

of their pupils. The periodical hair-brushings were accompanied by the

singing, and fell naturally into the measure, of Watts's hymns; and Mr.

Browning has given his friends some very hearty laughs by illustrating

with voice and gesture the ferocious emphasis with which the brush would

swoop down in the accentuated syllables of the following lines:

Lord, 'tis a pleasant thing to stand

In gardens planted by Thy hand.

. . . . .

Fools never raise their thoughts so high,

Like 'brutes' they live, like \_brutes\_ they die.

He even compelled his mother to laugh at it, though it was sorely

against her nature to lend herself to any burlesquing of piously

intended things.\* He had become a bigger boy since the episode of the

cistern, and had probably in some degree outgrown the intense piety of

his earlier childhood. This little incident seems to prove it. On the

whole, however, his religious instincts did not need strengthening,

though his sense of humour might get the better of them for a moment;

and of secular instruction he seems to have received as little from the

one set of teachers as from the other. I do not suppose that the mental

training at Mr. Ready's was more shallow or more mechanical than that

of most other schools of his own or, indeed, of a much later period; but

the brilliant abilities of Robert Browning inspired him with a certain

contempt for it, as also for the average schoolboy intelligence to

which it was apparently adapted. It must be for this reason that, as he

himself declared, he never gained a prize, although these rewards were

showered in such profusion that the only difficulty was to avoid

them; and if he did not make friends at school (for this also has been

somewhere observed),\*\* it can only be explained in the same way. He

was at an intolerant age, and if his schoolfellows struck him as more

backward or more stupid than they need be, he is not likely to have

taken pains to conceal the impression. It is difficult, at all events,

to think of him as unsociable, and his talents certainly had their

amusing side. Miss Browning tells me that he made his schoolfellows

act plays, some of which he had written for them; and he delighted his

friends, not long ago, by mimicking his own solemn appearance on some

breaking-up or commemorative day, when, according to programme, 'Master

Browning' ascended a platform in the presence of assembled parents and

friends, and, in best jacket, white gloves, and carefully curled hair,

with a circular bow to the company and the then prescribed waving

of alternate arms, delivered a high-flown rhymed address of his own

composition.

\* In spite of this ludicrous association Mr. Browning always

recognized great merit in Watts's hymns, and still more in

Dr. Watts himself, who had devoted to this comparatively

humble work intellectual powers competent to far higher

things.

\*\* It was in no case literally true. William, afterwards

Sir William, Channel was leaving Mr. Ready when Browning

went to him; but a friendly acquaintance began, and was

afterwards continued, between the two boys; and a closer

friendship, formed with a younger brother Frank, was only

interrupted by his death. Another school friend or

acquaintance recalled himself as such to the poet's memory

some ten or twelve years ago. A man who has reached the age

at which his boyhood becomes of interest to the world may

even have survived many such relations.

And during the busy idleness of his schooldays, or, at all events, in

the holidays in which he rested from it, he was learning, as perhaps

only those do learn whose real education is derived from home. His

father's house was, Miss Browning tells me, literally crammed with

books; and, she adds, 'it was in this way that Robert became very early

familiar with subjects generally unknown to boys.' He read omnivorously,

though certainly not without guidance. One of the books he best and

earliest loved was 'Quarles' Emblemes', which his father possessed in

a seventeenth century edition, and which contains one or two very

tentative specimens of his early handwriting. Its quaint, powerful lines

and still quainter illustrations combined the marvellous with what he

believed to be true; and he seemed specially identified with its world

of religious fancies by the fact that the soul in it was always depicted

as a child. On its more general grounds his reading was at once largely

literary and very historical; and it was in this direction that the

paternal influence was most strongly revealed. 'Quarles' Emblemes'

was only one of the large collection of old books which Mr. Browning

possessed; and the young Robert learnt to know each favourite author in

the dress as well as the language which carried with it the life of his

period. The first edition of 'Robinson Crusoe'; the first edition of

Milton's works, bought for him by his father; a treatise on astrology

published twenty years after the introduction of printing; the original

pamphlet 'Killing no Murder' (1559), which Carlyle borrowed for his

'Life of Cromwell'; an equally early copy of Bernard Mandeville's

'Bees'; very ancient Bibles--are some of the instances which occur to

me. Among more modern publications, 'Walpole's Letters' were familiar to

him in boyhood, as well as the 'Letters of Junius' and all the works of

Voltaire.

Ancient poets and poetry also played their necessary part in the mental

culture superintended by Robert Browning's father: we can indeed imagine

no case in which they would not have found their way into the boy's

life. Latin poets and Greek dramatists came to him in their due time,

though his special delight in the Greek language only developed itself

later. But his loving, lifelong familiarity with the Elizabethan school,

and indeed with the whole range of English poetry, seems to point to

a more constant study of our national literature. Byron was his chief

master in those early poetic days. He never ceased to honour him as the

one poet who combined a constructive imagination with the more technical

qualities of his art; and the result of this period of aesthetic

training was a volume of short poems produced, we are told, when he was

only twelve, in which the Byronic influence was predominant.

The young author gave his work the title of 'Incondita', which conveyed

a certain idea of deprecation. He was, nevertheless, very anxious to see

it in print; and his father and mother, poetry-lovers of the old

school, also found in it sufficient merit to justify its publication.

No publisher, however, could be found; and we can easily believe that

he soon afterwards destroyed the little manuscript, in some mingled

reaction of disappointment and disgust. But his mother, meanwhile, had

shown it to an acquaintance of hers, Miss Flower, who herself admired

its contents so much as to make a copy of them for the inspection of her

friend, the well-known Unitarian minister, Mr. W. J. Fox. The copy was

transmitted to Mr. Browning after Mr. Fox's death by his daughter, Mrs.

Bridell-Fox; and this, if no other, was in existence in 1871, when, at

his urgent request, that lady also returned to him a fragment of verse

contained in a letter from Miss Sarah Flower. Nor was it till much later

that a friend, who had earnestly begged for a sight of it, definitely

heard of its destruction. The fragment, which doubtless shared the same

fate, was, I am told, a direct imitation of Coleridge's 'Fire, Famine,

and Slaughter'.

These poems were not Mr. Browning's first. It would be impossible to

believe them such when we remember that he composed verses long before

he could write; and a curious proof of the opposite fact has recently

appeared. Two letters of the elder Mr. Browning have found their way

into the market, and have been bought respectively by Mr. Dykes Campbell

and Sir F. Leighton. I give the more important of them. It was addressed

to Mr. Thomas Powell:

Dear Sir,--I hope the enclosed may be acceptable as curiosities. They

were written by Robert when quite a child. I once had nearly a hundred

of them. But he has destroyed all that ever came in his way, having a

great aversion to the practice of many biographers in recording every

trifling incident that falls in their way. He has not the slightest

suspicion that any of his very juvenile performances are in existence.

I have several of the originals by me. They are all extemporaneous

productions, nor has any one a single alteration. There was one amongst

them 'On Bonaparte'--remarkably beautiful--and had I not seen it in

his own handwriting I never would have believed it to have been the

production of a child. It is destroyed. Pardon my troubling you with

these specimens, and requesting you never to mention it, as Robert

would be very much hurt. I remain, dear sir, Your obedient servant, R.

Browning. Bank: March 11, 1843.

The letter was accompanied by a sheet of verses which have been sold

and resold, doubtless in perfect good faith, as being those to which the

writer alludes. But Miss Browning has recognized them as her father's

own impromptu epigrams, well remembered in the family, together with

the occasion on which they were written. The substitution may, from the

first, have been accidental.

We cannot think of all these vanished first-fruits of Mr. Browning's

genius without a sense of loss, all the greater perhaps that there can

have been little in them to prefigure its later forms. Their faults seem

to have lain in the direction of too great splendour of language and too

little wealth of thought; and Mr. Fox, who had read 'Incondita' and been

struck by its promise, confessed afterwards to Mr. Browning that he had

feared these tendencies as his future snare. But the imitative first

note of a young poet's voice may hold a rapture of inspiration which

his most original later utterances will never convey. It is the child

Sordello, singing against the lark.

Not even the poet's sister ever saw 'Incondita'. It was the only one of

his finished productions which Miss Browning did not read, or even

help him to write out. She was then too young to be taken into his

confidence. Its writing, however, had one important result. It procured

for the boy-poet a preliminary introduction to the valuable literary

patron and friend Mr. Fox was subsequently to be. It also supplies the

first substantial record of an acquaintance which made a considerable

impression on his personal life.

The Miss Flower, of whom mention has been made, was one of two sisters,

both sufficiently noted for their artistic gifts to have found a place

in the new Dictionary of National Biography. The elder, Eliza or Lizzie,

was a musical composer; the younger, best known as Sarah Flower Adams,

a writer of sacred verse. Her songs and hymns, including the well-known

'Nearer, my God, to Thee', were often set to music by her sister.\* They

sang, I am told, delightfully together, and often without accompaniment,

their voices perfectly harmonizing with each other. Both were, in their

different ways, very attractive; both interesting, not only from their

talents, but from their attachment to each other, and the delicacy which

shortened their lives. They died of consumption, the elder in 1846, at

the age of forty-three; the younger a year later. They became acquainted

with Mrs. Browning through a common friend, Miss Sturtevant; and the

young Robert conceived a warm admiration for Miss Flower's talents,

and a boyish love for herself. She was nine years his senior; her own

affections became probably engaged, and, as time advanced, his feeling

seems to have subsided into one of warm and very loyal friendship. We

hear, indeed, of his falling in love, as he was emerging from his teens,

with a handsome girl who was on a visit at his father's house. But the

fancy died out 'for want of root.' The admiration, even tenderness, for

Miss Flower had so deep a 'root' that he never in latest life mentioned

her name with indifference. In a letter to Mr. Dykes Campbell, in 1881,

he spoke of her as 'a very remarkable person.' If, in spite of his

denials, any woman inspired 'Pauline', it can have been no other than

she. He began writing to her at twelve or thirteen, probably on the

occasion of her expressed sympathy with his first distinct effort at

authorship; and what he afterwards called 'the few utterly insignificant

scraps of letters and verse' which formed his part of the correspondence

were preserved by her as long as she lived. But he recovered and

destroyed them after his return to England, with all the other

reminiscences of those early years. Some notes, however, are extant,

dated respectively, 1841, 1842, and 1845, and will be given in their due

place.

\* She also wrote a dramatic poem in five acts, entitled

'Vivia Perpetua', referred to by Mrs. Jameson in her 'Sacred

and Legendary Art', and by Leigh Hunt, when he spoke of her

in 'Blue-Stocking Revels', as 'Mrs. Adams, rare mistress of

thought and of tears.'

Mr. Fox was a friend of Miss Flower's father (Benjamin Flower, known as

editor of the 'Cambridge Intelligencer'), and, at his death, in 1829,

became co-executor to his will, and a kind of guardian to his daughters,

then both unmarried, and motherless from their infancy. Eliza's

principal work was a collection of hymns and anthems, originally

composed for Mr. Fox's chapel, where she had assumed the entire

management of the choral part of the service. Her abilities were not

confined to music; she possessed, I am told, an instinctive taste and

judgment in literary matters which caused her opinion to be much valued

by literary men. But Mr. Browning's genuine appreciation of her musical

genius was probably the strongest permanent bond between them. We shall

hear of this in his own words.

Chapter 4

1826-1833

First Impressions of Keats and Shelley--Prolonged Influence

of Shelley--Details of Home Education--Its Effects--Youthful

Restlessness--Counteracting Love of Home--Early Friendships: Alfred

Domett, Joseph Arnould, the Silverthornes--Choice of Poetry as a

Profession--Alternative Suggestions; mistaken Rumours concerning

them--Interest in Art--Love of good Theatrical Performances--Talent for

Acting--Final Preparation for Literary Life.

At the period at which we have arrived, which is that of his leaving

school and completing his fourteenth year, another and a significant

influence was dawning on Robert Browning's life--the influence of the

poet Shelley. Mr. Sharp writes,\* and I could only state the facts

in similar words, 'Passing a bookstall one day, he saw, in a box

of second-hand volumes, a little book advertised as "Mr. Shelley's

Atheistical Poem: very scarce."' . . . 'From vague remarks in reply to

his inquiries, and from one or two casual allusions, he learned that

there really was a poet called Shelley; that he had written several

volumes; that he was dead.' . . . 'He begged his mother to procure him

Shelley's works, a request not easily complied with, for the excellent

reason that not one of the local booksellers had even heard of the

poet's name. Ultimately, however, Mrs. Browning learned that what she

sought was procurable at the Olliers', in Vere Street, London.'

\* 'Life of Browning', pp. 30, 31.

Mrs. Browning went to Messrs. Ollier, and brought back 'most of

Shelley's writings, all in their first edition, with the exception of

"The Cenci".' She brought also three volumes of the still less known

John Keats, on being assured that one who liked Shelley's works would

like these also.

Keats and Shelley must always remain connected in this epoch of

Mr. Browning's poetic growth. They indeed came to him as the two

nightingales which, he told some friends, sang together in the May-night

which closed this eventful day: one in the laburnum in his father's

garden, the other in a copper beech which stood on adjoining

ground--with the difference indeed, that he must often have listened

to the feathered singers before, while the two new human voices sounded

from what were to him, as to so many later hearers, unknown heights and

depths of the imaginative world. Their utterance was, to such a spirit

as his, the last, as in a certain sense the first, word of what

poetry can say; and no one who has ever heard him read the 'Ode to a

Nightingale', and repeat in the same subdued tones, as if continuing

his own thoughts, some line from 'Epipsychidion', can doubt that they

retained a lasting and almost equal place in his poet's heart. But the

two cannot be regarded as equals in their relation to his life, and it

would be a great mistake to impute to either any important influence

upon his genius. We may catch some fleeting echoes of Keats's melody

in 'Pippa Passes'; it is almost a commonplace that some measure

of Shelleyan fancy is recognizable in 'Pauline'. But the poetic

individuality of Robert Browning was stronger than any circumstance

through which it could be fed. It would have found nourishment in desert

air. With his first accepted work he threw off what was foreign to

his poetic nature, to be thenceforward his own never-to-be-subdued and

never-to-be-mistaken self. If Shelley became, and long remained for him,

the greatest poet of his age--of almost any age--it was not because he

held him greatest in the poetic art, but because in his case, beyond

all others, he believed its exercise to have been prompted by the truest

spiritual inspiration.

It is difficult to trace the process by which this conviction formed

itself in the boy's mind; still more to account for the strong personal

tenderness which accompanied it. The facts can have been scarcely known

which were to present Shelley to his imagination as a maligned and

persecuted man. It is hard to judge how far such human qualities as we

now read into his work, could be apparent to one who only approached him

through it. But the extra-human note in Shelley's genius irresistibly

suggested to the Browning of fourteen, as it still did to the Browning

of forty, the presence of a lofty spirit, one dwelling in the communion

of higher things. There was often a deep sadness in his utterance; the

consecration of an early death was upon him. And so the worship rooted

itself and grew. It was to find its lyrical expression in 'Pauline'; its

rational and, from the writer's point of view, philosophic justification

in the prose essay on Shelley, published eighteen years afterwards.

It may appear inconsistent with the nature of this influence that

it began by appealing to him in a subversive form. The Shelley whom

Browning first loved was the Shelley of 'Queen Mab', the Shelley who

would have remodelled the whole system of religious belief, as of human

duty and rights; and the earliest result of the new development was

that he became a professing atheist, and, for two years, a practising

vegetarian. He returned to his natural diet when he found his eyesight

becoming weak. The atheism cured itself; we do not exactly know when or

how. What we do know is, that it was with him a passing state of moral

or imaginative rebellion, and not one of rational doubt. His mind was

not so constituted that such doubt could fasten itself upon it; nor

did he ever in after-life speak of this period of negation except as

an access of boyish folly, with which his maturer self could have no

concern. The return to religious belief did not shake his faith in his

new prophet. It only made him willing to admit that he had misread him.

This Shelley period of Robert Browning's life--that which intervened

between 'Incondita' and 'Pauline'--remained, nevertheless, one of

rebellion and unrest, to which many circumstances may have contributed

besides the influence of the one mind. It had been decided that he was

to complete, or at all events continue, his education at home; and,

knowing the elder Mr. Browning as we do, we cannot doubt that the best

reasons, of kindness or expediency, led to his so deciding. It was none

the less, probably, a mistake, for the time being. The conditions of

home life were the more favourable for the young poet's imaginative

growth; but there can rarely have been a boy whose moral and mental

health had more to gain by the combined discipline and freedom of a

public school. His home training was made to include everything which

in those days went to the production of an accomplished gentleman, and

a great deal therefore that was physically good. He learned music,

singing, dancing, riding, boxing, and fencing, and excelled in the

more active of these pursuits. The study of music was also serious, and

carried on under two masters. Mr. John Relfe, author of a valuable work

on counterpoint, was his instructor in thorough-bass; Mr. Abel, a pupil

of Moscheles, in execution. He wrote music for songs which he himself

sang; among them Donne's 'Go and catch a falling star'; Hood's 'I will

not have the mad Clytie'; Peacock's 'The mountain sheep are sweeter';

and his settings, all of which he subsequently destroyed, were, I am

told, very spirited. His education seems otherwise to have been purely

literary. For two years, from the age of fourteen to that of sixteen,

he studied with a French tutor, who, whether this was intended or not,

imparted to him very little but a good knowledge of the French language

and literature. In his eighteenth year he attended, for a term or two,

a Greek class at the London University. His classical and other

reading was probably continued. But we hear nothing in the programme of

mathematics, or logic--of any, in short, of those subjects which train,

even coerce, the thinking powers, and which were doubly requisite for

a nature in which the creative imagination was predominant over all the

other mental faculties, great as these other faculties were. And, even

as poet, he suffered from this omission: since the involutions and

overlappings of thought and phrase, which occur in his earlier and again

in his latest works, must have been partly due to his never learning to

follow the processes of more normally constituted minds. It would be

a great error to suppose that they ever arose from the absence of a

meaning clearly felt, if not always clearly thought out, by himself. He

was storing his memory and enriching his mind; but precisely in so

doing he was nourishing the consciousness of a very vivid and urgent

personality; and, under the restrictions inseparable from the life of a

home-bred youth, it was becoming a burden to him. What outlet he found

in verse we do not know, because nothing survives of what he may then

have written. It is possible that the fate of his early poems, and,

still more, the change of ideals, retarded the definite impulse towards

poetic production. It would be a relief to him to sketch out and

elaborate the plan of his future work--his great mental portrait gallery

of typical men and women; and he was doing so during at least the later

years which preceded the birth of 'Pauline'. But even this must have

been the result of some protracted travail with himself; because it was

only the inward sense of very varied possibilities of existence which

could have impelled him towards this kind of creation. No character he

ever produced was merely a figment of the brain.

It was natural, therefore, that during this time of growth he should

have been, not only more restless, but less amiable than at any other.

The always impatient temper assumed a quality of aggressiveness. He

behaved as a youth will who knows himself to be clever, and believes

that he is not appreciated, because the crude or paradoxical forms which

his cleverness assumes do not recommend it to his elders' minds. He

set the judgments of those about him at defiance, and gratuitously

proclaimed himself everything that he was, and some things that he was

not. All this subdued itself as time advanced, and the coming man in him

could throw off the wayward child. It was all so natural that it might

well be forgotten. But it distressed his mother, the one being in the

world whom he entirely loved; and deserves remembering in the tender

sorrow with which he himself remembered it. He was always ready to

say that he had been worth little in his young days; indeed, his

self-depreciation covered the greater part of his life. This was,

perhaps, one reason of the difficulty of inducing him to dwell upon

his past. 'I am better now,' he has said more than once, when its

reminiscences have been invoked.

One tender little bond maintained itself between his mother and himself

so long as he lived under the paternal roof; it was his rule never to go

to bed without giving her a good-night kiss. If he was out so late that

he had to admit himself with a latch-key, he nevertheless went to her

in her room. Nor did he submit to this as a necessary restraint; for,

except on the occasions of his going abroad, it is scarcely on record

that he ever willingly spent a night away from home. It may not stand

for much, or it may stand to the credit of his restlessness, that,

when he had been placed with some gentleman in Gower Street, for the

convenience of attending the University lectures, or for the sake of

preparing for them, he broke through the arrangement at the end of a

week; but even an agreeable visit had no power to detain him beyond a

few days.

This home-loving quality was in curious contrast to the natural

bohemianism of youthful genius, and the inclination to wildness which

asserted itself in his boyish days. It became the more striking as he

entered upon the age at which no reasonable amount of freedom can

have been denied to him. Something, perhaps, must be allowed for the

pecuniary dependence which forbade his forming any expensive habits of

amusement; but he also claims the credit of having been unable to accept

any low-life pleasures in place of them. I do not know how the idea can

have arisen that he willingly sought his experience in the society

of 'gipsies and tramps'. I remember nothing in his works which even

suggests such association; and it is certain that a few hours spent at a

fair would at all times have exhausted his capability of enduring it.

In the most audacious imaginings of his later life, in the most

undisciplined acts of his early youth, were always present curious

delicacies and reserves. There was always latent in him the real

goodness of heart which would not allow him to trifle consciously with

other lives. Work must also have been his safeguard when the habit of it

had been acquired, and when imagination, once his master, had learned to

serve him.

One tangible cause of his youthful restlessness has been implied in the

foregoing remarks, but deserves stating in his sister's words: 'The

fact was, poor boy, he had outgrown his social surroundings. They were

absolutely good, but they were narrow; it could not be otherwise; he

chafed under them.' He was not, however, quite without congenial society

even before the turning-point in his outward existence which was reached

in the publication of 'Pauline'; and one long friendly acquaintance,

together with one lasting friendship, had their roots in these early

Camberwell days. The families of Joseph Arnould and Alfred Domett

both lived at Camberwell. These two young men were bred to the legal

profession, and the former, afterwards Sir Joseph Arnould, became

a judge in Bombay. But the father of Alfred Domett had been one of

Nelson's captains, and the roving sailor spirit was apparent in his

son; for he had scarcely been called to the Bar when he started for New

Zealand on the instance of a cousin who had preceded him, but who was

drowned in the course of a day's surveying before he could arrive. He

became a member of the New Zealand Parliament, and ultimately, for a

short time, of its Cabinet; only returning to England after an absence

of thirty years. This Mr. Domett seems to have been a very modest man,

besides a devoted friend of Robert Browning's, and on occasion a warm

defender of his works. When he read the apostrophe to 'Alfred, dear

friend,' in the 'Guardian Angel', he had reached the last line before it

occurred to him that the person invoked could be he. I do not think that

this poem, and that directly addressed to him under the pseudonym of

'Waring', were the only ones inspired by the affectionate remembrance

which he had left in their author's mind.

Among his boy companions were also the three Silverthornes, his

neighbours at Camberwell, and cousins on the maternal side. They appear

to have been wild youths, and had certainly no part in his intellectual

or literary life; but the group is interesting to his biographer.

The three brothers were all gifted musicians; having also, probably,

received this endowment from their mother's father. Mr. Browning

conceived a great affection for the eldest, and on the whole most

talented of the cousins; and when he had died--young, as they all

did--he wrote 'May and Death' in remembrance of him. The name of

'Charles' stands there for the old, familiar 'Jim', so often uttered by

him in half-pitying, and all-affectionate allusion, in his later years.

Mrs. Silverthorne was the aunt who paid for the printing of 'Pauline'.

It was at about the time of his short attendance at University College

that the choice of poetry as his future profession was formally made. It

was a foregone conclusion in the young Robert's mind; and little less

in that of his father, who took too sympathetic an interest in his son's

life not to have seen in what direction his desires were tending. He

must, it is true, at some time or other, have played with the thought of

becoming an artist; but the thought can never have represented a wish.

If he had entertained such a one, it would have met not only with no

opposition on his father's part, but with a very ready assent, nor

does the question ever seem to have been seriously mooted in the family

councils. It would be strange, perhaps, if it had. Mr. Browning became

very early familiar with the names of the great painters, and also

learned something about their work; for the Dulwich Gallery was within a

pleasant walk of his home, and his father constantly took him there. He

retained through life a deep interest in art and artists, and became a

very familiar figure in one or two London studios. Some drawings made

by him from the nude, in Italy, and for which he had prepared himself by

assiduous copying of casts and study of human anatomy, had, I believe,

great merit. But painting was one of the subjects in which he never

received instruction, though he modelled, under the direction of his

friend Mr. Story; and a letter of his own will presently show that, in

his youth at least, he never credited himself with exceptional artistic

power. That he might have become an artist, and perhaps a great one,

is difficult to doubt, in the face of his brilliant general ability and

special gifts. The power to do a thing is, however, distinct from the

impulse to do it, and proved so in the present case.

More importance may be given to an idea of his father's that he should

qualify himself for the Bar. It would naturally coincide with the

widening of the social horizon which his University College classes

supplied; it was possibly suggested by the fact that the closest friends

he had already made, and others whom he was perhaps now making, were

barristers. But this also remained an idea. He might have been placed in

the Bank of England, where the virtual offer of an appointment had been

made to him through his father; but the elder Browning spontaneously

rejected this, as unworthy of his son's powers. He had never, he said,

liked bank work himself, and could not, therefore, impose it on him.

We have still to notice another, and a more mistaken view of the

possibilities of Mr. Browning's life. It has been recently stated,

doubtless on the authority of some words of his own, that the Church was

a profession to which he once felt himself drawn. But an admission of

this kind could only refer to that period of his childhood when natural

impulse, combined with his mother's teaching and guidance, frequently

caused his fancy and his feelings to assume a religious form. From the

time when he was a free agent he ceased to be even a regular churchgoer,

though religion became more, rather than less, an integral part of his

inner life; and his alleged fondness for a variety of preachers meant

really that he only listened to those who, from personal association

or conspicuous merit, were interesting to him. I have mentioned Canon

Melvill as one of these; the Rev. Thomas Jones was, as will be

seen, another. In Venice he constantly, with his sister, joined the

congregation of an Italian minister of the little Vaudois church there.\*

\* Mr. Browning's memory recalled a first and last effort at

preaching, inspired by one of his very earliest visits to a

place of worship. He extemporized a surplice or gown,

climbed into an arm-chair by way of pulpit, and held forth

so vehemently that his scarcely more than baby sister was

frightened and began to cry; whereupon he turned to an

imaginary presence, and said, with all the sternness which

the occasion required, 'Pew-opener, remove that child.'

It would be far less surprising if we were told, on sufficient

authority, that he had been disturbed by hankerings for the stage. He

was a passionate admirer of good acting, and would walk from London to

Richmond and back again to see Edmund Kean when he was performing there.

We know how Macready impressed him, though the finer genius of Kean

became very apparent to his retrospective judgment of the two; and it

was impossible to see or hear him, as even an old man, in some momentary

personation of one of Shakespeare's characters, above all of Richard

III., and not feel that a great actor had been lost in him.

So few professions were thought open to gentlemen in Robert Browning's

eighteenth year, that his father's acquiescence in that which he had

chosen might seem a matter scarcely less of necessity than of kindness.

But we must seek the kindness not only in this first, almost inevitable,

assent to his son's becoming a writer, but in the subsequent unfailing

readiness to support him in his literary career. 'Paracelsus',

'Sordello', and the whole of 'Bells and Pomegranates' were published at

his father's expense, and, incredible as it appears, brought no return

to him. This was vividly present to Mr. Browning's mind in what Mrs.

Kemble so justly defines as those 'remembering days' which are the

natural prelude to the forgetting ones. He declared, in the course of

these, to a friend, that for it alone he owed more to his father than to

anyone else in the world. Words to this effect, spoken in conversation

with his sister, have since, as it was right they should, found their

way into print. The more justly will the world interpret any incidental

admission he may ever have made, of intellectual disagreement between

that father and himself.

When the die was cast, and young Browning was definitely to adopt

literature as his profession, he qualified himself for it by reading and

digesting the whole of Johnson's Dictionary. We cannot be surprised to

hear this of one who displayed so great a mastery of words, and so deep

a knowledge of the capacities of the English language.

Chapter 5

1833-1835

'Pauline'--Letters to Mr. Fox--Publication of the Poem; chief

Biographical and Literary Characteristics--Mr. Fox's Review in the

'Monthly Repository'; other Notices--Russian Journey--Desired diplomatic

Appointment--Minor Poems; first Sonnet; their Mode of Appearance--'The

Trifler'--M. de Ripert-Monclar--'Paracelsus'--Letters to Mr. Fox

concerning it; its Publication--Incidental Origin of 'Paracelsus'; its

inspiring Motive; its Relation to 'Pauline'--Mr. Fox's Review of it in

the 'Monthly Repository'--Article in the 'Examiner' by John Forster.

Before Mr. Browning had half completed his twenty-first year he had

written 'Pauline, a Fragment of a Confession'. His sister was in the

secret, but this time his parents were not. This is why his aunt,

hearing that 'Robert' had 'written a poem,' volunteered the sum

requisite for its publication. Even this first instalment of success did

not inspire much hope in the family mind, and Miss Browning made pencil

copies of her favourite passages for the event, which seemed only too

possible, of her never seeing the whole poem again. It was, however,

accepted by Saunders and Otley, and appeared anonymously in 1833.

Meanwhile the young author had bethought himself of his early

sympathizer, Mr. Fox, and he wrote to him as follows (the letter is

undated):

Dear Sir,--Perhaps by the aid of the subjoined initials and a little

reflection, you may recollect an oddish sort of boy, who had the honour

of being introduced to you at Hackney some years back--at that time

a sayer of verse and a doer of it, and whose doings you had a little

previously commended after a fashion--(whether in earnest or not God

knows): that individual it is who takes the liberty of addressing one

whose slight commendation then, was more thought of than all the gun

drum and trumpet of praise would be now, and to submit to you a free and

easy sort of thing which he wrote some months ago 'on one leg' and which

comes out this week--having either heard or dreamed that you contribute

to the 'Westminster'.

Should it be found too insignificant for cutting up, I shall no less

remain, Dear sir, Your most obedient servant, R. B.

I have forgotten the main thing--which is to beg you not to spoil

a loophole I have kept for backing out of the thing if necessary,

'sympathy of dear friends,' &c. &c., none of whom know anything about

it.

Monday Morning; Rev.--Fox.

The answer was clearly encouraging, and Mr. Browning wrote again:

Dear Sir,--In consequence of your kind permission I send, or will send,

a dozen copies of 'Pauline' and (to mitigate the infliction) Shelley's

Poem--on account of what you mentioned this morning. It will perhaps

be as well that you let me know their safe arrival by a line to R. B.

junior, Hanover Cottage, Southampton Street, Camberwell. You must not

think me too encroaching, if I make the getting back 'Rosalind and

Helen' an excuse for calling on you some evening--the said 'R. and

H.' has, I observe, been well thumbed and sedulously marked by an

acquaintance of mine, but I have not time to rub out his labour of love.

I am, dear sir, Yours very really, R. Browning. Camberwell: 2 o'clock.

At the left-hand corner of the first page of this note is written: 'The

parcel--a "Pauline" parcel--is come. I send one as a witness.'

On the inner page is written:

'Impromptu on hearing a sermon by the Rev. T. R.--pronounced "heavy"--

'A \_heavy\_ sermon!--sure the error's great, For not a word Tom uttered

\_had its weight\_.'

A third letter, also undated, but post-marked March 29, 1833, refers

probably to the promise or announcement of a favourable notice. A fourth

conveys Mr. Browning's thanks for the notice itself:

My dear Sir,--I have just received your letter, which I am desirous of

acknowledging before any further mark of your kindness reaches me;--I

can only offer you my simple thanks--but they are of the sort that one

can give only once or twice in a life: all things considered, I think

you are almost repaid, if you imagine what I must feel--and it will have

been worth while to have made a fool of myself, only to have obtained a

'case' which leaves my fine fellow Mandeville at a dead lock.

As for the book--I hope ere long to better it, and to deserve your

goodness.

In the meantime I shall not forget the extent to which I am, dear sir,

Your most obliged and obedient servant R. B. S. & O.'s, Conduit St.,

Thursday m-g.

I must intrude on your attention, my dear sir, once more than I had

intended--but a notice like the one I have read will have its effect at

all hazards.

I can only say that I am very proud to feel as grateful as I do, and

not altogether hopeless of justifying, by effort at least, your most

generous 'coming forward'. Hazlitt wrote his essays, as he somewhere

tells us, mainly to send them to some one in the country who had 'always

prophesied he would be something'!--I shall never write a line without

thinking of the source of my first praise, be assured. I am, dear sir,

Yours most truly and obliged, Robert Browning. March 31, 1833.

Mr. Fox was then editor of a periodical called the 'Monthly Repository',

which, as his daughter, Mrs. Bridell-Fox, writes in her graceful

article on Robert Browning, in the 'Argosy' for February 1890, he was

endeavouring to raise from its original denominational character into

a first-class literary and political journal. The articles comprised in

the volume for 1833 are certainly full of interest and variety, at once

more popular and more solid than those prescribed by the present fashion

of monthly magazines. He reviewed 'Pauline' favourably in its April

number--that is, as soon as it had appeared; and the young poet thus

received from him an introduction to what should have been, though it

probably was not, a large circle of intelligent readers.

The poem was characterized by its author, five years later, in a

fantastic note appended to a copy of it, as 'the only remaining crab

of the shapely Tree of Life in my Fool's Paradise.' This name is ill

bestowed upon a work which, however wild a fruit of Mr. Browning's

genius, contains, in its many lines of exquisite fancy and deep pathos,

so much that is rich and sweet. It had also, to discard metaphor,

its faults of exaggeration and confusion; and it is of these that Mr.

Browning was probably thinking when he wrote his more serious apologetic

preface to its reprint in 1868. But these faults were partly due to his

conception of the character which he had tried to depict; and partly to

the inherent difficulty of depicting one so complex, in a succession

of mental and moral states, irrespectively of the conditions of time,

place, and circumstance which were involved in them. Only a very

powerful imagination could have inspired such an attempt. A still more

conspicuous effort of creative genius reveals itself at its close. The

moment chosen for the 'Confession' has been that of a supreme moral or

physical crisis. The exhaustion attendant on this is directly expressed

by the person who makes it, and may also be recognized in the vivid, yet

confusing, intensity of the reminiscences of which it consists. But

we are left in complete doubt as to whether the crisis is that of

approaching death or incipient convalescence, or which character it

bears in the sufferer's mind; and the language used in the closing pages

is such as to suggest, without the slightest break in poetic continuity,

alternately the one conclusion and the other. This was intended by

Browning to assist his anonymity; and when the writer in 'Tait's

Magazine' spoke of the poem as a piece of pure bewilderment, he

expressed the natural judgment of the Philistine, while proving himself

such. If the notice by J. S. Mill, which this criticism excluded, was

indeed--as Mr. Browning always believed--much more sympathetic, I can

only record my astonishment; for there never was a large and cultivated

intelligence one can imagine less in harmony than his with the poetic

excesses, or even the poetic qualities, of 'Pauline'. But this is a

digression.

Mr. Fox, though an accomplished critic, made very light of the artistic

blemishes of the work. His admiration for it was as generous as it was

genuine; and, having recognized in it the hand of a rising poet, it was

more congenial to him to hail that poet's advent than to register his

shortcomings.

'The poem,' he says, 'though evidently a hasty and imperfect sketch, has

truth and life in it, which gave us the thrill, and laid hold of us with

the power, the sensation of which has never yet failed us as a test of

genius.'

But it had also, in his mind, a distinguishing characteristic, which

raised it above the sphere of merely artistic criticism. The article

continues:

'We have never read anything more purely confessional. The whole

composition is of the spirit, spiritual. The scenery is in the chambers

of thought; the agencies are powers and passions; the events are

transitions from one state of spiritual existence to another.'

And we learn from the context that he accepted this confessional and

introspective quality as an expression of the highest emotional life--of

the essence, therefore, of religion. On this point the sincerest

admirers of the poem may find themselves at issue with Mr. Fox. Its

sentiment is warmly religious; it is always, in a certain sense,

spiritual; but its intellectual activities are exercised on entirely

temporal ground, and this fact would generally be admitted as the

negation of spirituality in the religious sense of the word. No

difference, however, of opinion as to his judgment of 'Pauline' can

lessen our appreciation of Mr. Fox's encouraging kindness to its author.

No one who loved Mr. Browning in himself, or in his work, can read the

last lines of this review without a throb of affectionate gratitude

for the sympathy so ungrudgingly, and--as he wrote during his latest

years--so opportunely given:

'In recognizing a poet we cannot stand upon trifles nor fret ourselves

about such matters [as a few blemishes]. Time enough for that

afterwards, when larger works come before us. Archimedes in the bath had

many particulars to settle about specific gravities and Hiero's crown,

but he first gave a glorious leap and shouted 'Eureka!''

Many persons have discovered Mr. Browning since he has been known to

fame. One only discovered him in his obscurity.

Next to that of Mr. Fox stands the name of John Forster among the first

spontaneous appreciators of Mr. Browning's genius; and his admiration

was, in its own way, the more valuable for the circumstances which

precluded in it all possible, even unconscious, bias of personal

interest or sympathy. But this belongs to a somewhat later period of our

history.

I am dwelling at some length on this first experience of Mr. Browning's

literary career, because the confidence which it gave him determined its

immediate future, if not its ultimate course--because, also, the poem

itself is more important to the understanding of his mind than perhaps

any other of his isolated works. It was the earliest of his dramatic

creations; it was therefore inevitably the most instinct with himself;

and we may regard the 'Confession' as to a great extent his own, without

for an instant ignoring the imaginative element which necessarily and

certainly entered into it. At one moment, indeed, his utterance is so

emphatic that we should feel it to be direct, even if we did not know it

to be true. The passage beginning, 'I am made up of an intensest life,'

conveys something more than the writer's actual psychological state. The

feverish desire of life became gradually modified into a more or less

active intellectual and imaginative curiosity; but the sense of

an individual, self-centred, and, as it presented itself to him,

unconditioned existence, survived all the teachings of experience, and

often indeed unconsciously imposed itself upon them.

I have already alluded to that other and more pathetic fragment of

distinct autobiography which is to be found in the invocation to the

'Sun-treader'. Mr. Fox, who has quoted great part of it, justly declares

that 'the fervency, the remembrance, the half-regret mingling with

its exultation, are as true as its leading image is beautiful.' The

'exultation' is in the triumph of Shelley's rising fame; the regret, for

the lost privilege of worshipping in solitary tenderness at an obscure

shrine. The double mood would have been characteristic of any period of

Mr. Browning's life.

The artistic influence of Shelley is also discernible in the natural

imagery of the poem, which reflects a fitful and emotional fancy instead

of the direct poetic vision of the author's later work.

'Pauline' received another and graceful tribute two months later than

the review. In an article of the 'Monthly Repository', and in the course

of a description of some luxuriant wood-scenery, the following passage

occurs:

'Shelley and Tennyson are the best books for this place. . . . They are

natives of this soil; literally so; and if planted would grow as surely

as a crowbar in Kentucky sprouts tenpenny nails. 'Probatum est.' Last

autumn L----dropped a poem of Shelley's down there in the wood,\* amongst

the thick, damp, rotting leaves, and this spring some one found a

delicate exotic-looking plant, growing wild on the very spot, with

'Pauline' hanging from its slender stalk. Unripe fruit it may be, but of

pleasant flavour and promise, and a mellower produce, it may be hoped,

will follow.'

\* Mr. Browning's copy of 'Rosalind and Helen', which he had lent

to Miss Flower, and which she lost in this wood on a picnic.

This and a bald though well-meant notice in the 'Athenaeum'

exhaust its literary history for this period.\*

\* Not quite, it appears. Since I wrote the above words,

Mr. Dykes Campbell has kindly copied for me the following extract

from the 'Literary Gazette' of March 23, 1833:

'Pauline: a Fragment of a Confession', pp. 71. London, 1833.

Saunders and Otley.

'Somewhat mystical, somewhat poetical, somewhat sensual,

and not a little unintelligible,--this is a dreamy volume,

without an object, and unfit for publication.'

The anonymity of the poem was not long preserved; there was no reason

why it should be. But 'Pauline' was, from the first, little known or

discussed beyond the immediate circle of the poet's friends; and when,

twenty years later, Dante Gabriel Rossetti unexpectedly came upon it

in the library of the British Museum, he could only surmise that it had

been written by the author of 'Paracelsus'.

The only recorded event of the next two years was Mr. Browning's

visit to Russia, which took place in the winter of 1833-4. The Russian

consul-general, Mr. Benckhausen, had taken a great liking to him, and

being sent to St. Petersburg on some special mission, proposed that

he should accompany him, nominally in the character of secretary.

The letters written to his sister during this, as during every other

absence, were full of graphic description, and would have been a mine

of interest for the student of his imaginative life. They are,

unfortunately, all destroyed, and we have only scattered reminiscences

of what they had to tell; but we know how strangely he was impressed

by some of the circumstances of the journey: above all, by the endless

monotony of snow-covered pine-forest, through which he and his companion

rushed for days and nights at the speed of six post-horses, without

seeming to move from one spot. He enjoyed the society of St. Petersburg,

and was fortunate enough, before his return, to witness the breaking-up

of the ice on the Neva, and see the Czar perform the yearly ceremony

of drinking the first glass of water from it. He was absent about three

months.

The one active career which would have recommended itself to him in his

earlier youth was diplomacy; it was that which he subsequently desired

for his son. He would indeed not have been averse to any post of

activity and responsibility not unsuited to the training of a gentleman.

Soon after his return from Russia he applied for appointment on a

mission which was to be despatched to Persia; and the careless wording

of the answer which his application received made him think for a moment

that it had been granted. He was much disappointed when he learned,

through an interview with the 'chief', that the place was otherwise

filled.

In 1834 he began a little series of contributions to the 'Monthly

Repository', extending into 1835-6, and consisting of five poems. The

earliest of these was a sonnet, not contained in any edition of Mr.

Browning's works, and which, I believe, first reappeared in Mr. Gosse's

article in the 'Century Magazine', December 1881; now part of his

'Personalia'. The second, beginning 'A king lived long ago', was to be

published, with alterations and additions, as one of 'Pippa's' songs.

'Porphyria's Lover' and 'Johannes Agricola in Meditation' were reprinted

together in 'Bells and Pomegranates' under the heading of 'Madhouse

Cells'. The fifth consisted of the Lines beginning 'Still ailing, Wind?

wilt be appeased or no?' afterwards introduced into the sixth section of

'James Lee's Wife'. The sonnet is not very striking, though hints of the

poet's future psychological subtlety are not wanting in it; but his most

essential dramatic quality reveals itself in the last three poems.

This winter of 1834-5 witnessed the birth, perhaps also the extinction,

of an amateur periodical, established by some of Mr. Browning's friends;

foremost among these the young Dowsons, afterwards connected with Alfred

Domett. The magazine was called the 'Trifler', and published in monthly

numbers of about ten pages each. It collapsed from lack of pocket-money

on the part of the editors; but Mr. Browning had written for it one

letter, February 1833, signed with his usual initial Z, and entitled

'Some strictures on a late article in the 'Trifler'.' This boyish

production sparkles with fun, while affecting the lengthy quaintnesses

of some obsolete modes of speech. The article which it attacks was 'A

Dissertation on Debt and Debtors', where the subject was, I imagine,

treated in the orthodox way: and he expends all his paradox in showing

that indebtedness is a necessary condition of human life, and all his

sophistry in confusing it with the abstract sense of obligation. It is,

perhaps, scarcely fair to call attention to such a mere argumentative

and literary freak; but there is something so comical in a defence of

debt, however transparent, proceeding from a man to whom never in his

life a bill can have been sent in twice, and who would always have

preferred ready-money payment to receiving a bill at all, that I may be

forgiven for quoting some passages from it.

For to be man is to be a debtor:--hinting but slightly at the grand and

primeval debt implied in the idea of a creation, as matter too hard

for ears like thine, (for saith not Luther, What hath a cow to do with

nutmegs?) I must, nevertheless, remind thee that all moralists

have concurred in considering this our mortal sojourn as indeed an

uninterrupted state of debt, and the world our dwelling-place as

represented by nothing so aptly as by an inn, wherein those who lodge

most commodiously have in perspective a proportionate score to reduce,\*

and those who fare least delicately, but an insignificant shot to

discharge--or, as the tuneful Quarles well phraseth it--

He's most in \_debt\_ who lingers out the day,

Who dies betimes has less and less to pay.

So far, therefore, from these sagacious ethics holding that

Debt cramps the energies of the soul, &c.

as thou pratest, 'tis plain that they have willed on the very outset

to inculcate this truth on the mind of every man,--no barren and

inconsequential dogma, but an effectual, ever influencing and productive

rule of life,--that he is born a debtor, lives a debtor--aye, friend,

and when thou diest, will not some judicious bystander,--no recreant as

thou to the bonds of nature, but a good borrower and true--remark, as

did his grandsire before him on like occasions, that thou hast 'paid the

\_debt\_ of nature'? Ha! I have thee 'beyond the rules', as one (a bailiff)

may say!

\* Miss Hickey, on reading this passage, has called my

attention to the fact that the sentiment which it parodies

is identical with that expressed in these words of

'Prospice',

. . . in a minute pay glad life's arrears

Of pain, darkness, and cold.

Such performances supplied a distraction to the more serious work of

writing 'Paracelsus', which was to be concluded in March 1835, and which

occupied the foregoing winter months. We do not know to what extent Mr.

Browning had remained in communication with Mr. Fox; but the following

letters show that the friend of 'Pauline' gave ready and efficient help

in the strangely difficult task of securing a publisher for the new

poem.

The first is dated April 2, 1835.

Dear Sir,--I beg to acknowledge the receipt of your

letter:--Sardanapalus 'could not go on multiplying kingdoms'--nor I

protestations--but I thank you very much.

You will oblige me indeed by forwarding the introduction to Moxon. I

merely suggested him in particular, on account of his good name and

fame among author-folk, besides he has himself written--as the Americans

say--'more poetry 'an you can shake a stick at.' So I hope we shall come

to terms.

I also hope my poem will turn out not utterly unworthy your kind

interest, and more deserving your favour than anything of mine you have

as yet seen; indeed I all along proposed to myself such an endeavour,

for it will never do for one so distinguished by past praise to prove

nobody after all--'nous verrons'. I am, dear sir, Yours most truly and

obliged Robt. Browning.

On April 16 he wrote again as follows:

Dear Sir,

Your communication gladdened the cockles of my heart. I lost no time

in presenting myself to Moxon, but no sooner was Mr. Clarke's letter

perused than the Moxonian visage loured exceedingly thereat--the

Moxonian accent grew dolorous thereupon:--'Artevelde' has not paid

expenses by about thirty odd pounds. Tennyson's poetry is 'popular at

Cambridge', and yet of 800 copies which were printed of his last,

some 300 only have gone off: Mr. M. hardly knows whether he shall ever

venture again, &c. &c., and in short begs to decline even inspecting,

&c. &c.

I called on Saunders and Otley at once, and, marvel of marvels, do

really think there is some chance of our coming to decent terms--I shall

know at the beginning of next week, but am not over-sanguine.

You will 'sarve me out'? two words to that; being the man you are, you

must need very little telling from me, of the real feeling I have of

your criticism's worth, and if I have had no more of it, surely I

am hardly to blame, who have in more than one instance bored you

sufficiently: but not a particle of your article has been rejected or

neglected by your observant humble servant, and very proud shall I be

if my new work bear in it the marks of the influence under which it was

undertaken--and if I prove not a fit compeer of the potter in Horace

who anticipated an amphora and produced a porridge-pot. I purposely

keep back the subject until you see my conception of its

capabilities--otherwise you would be planning a vase fit to give the

go-by to Evander's best crockery, which my cantharus would cut but a

sorry figure beside--hardly up to the ansa.

But such as it is, it is very earnest and suggestive--and likely I hope

to do good; and though I am rather scared at the thought of a \_fresh eye\_

going over its 4,000 lines--discovering blemishes of all sorts which

my one wit cannot avail to detect, fools treated as sages, obscure

passages, slipshod verses, and much that worse is,--yet on the whole

I am not much afraid of the issue, and I would give something to be

allowed to read it some morning to you--for every rap o' the knuckles I

should get a clap o' the back, I know.

I have another affair on hand, rather of a more popular nature, I

conceive, but not so decisive and explicit on a point or two--so I

decide on trying the question with this:--I really shall \_need\_ your

notice, on this account; I shall affix my name and stick my arms akimbo;

there are a few precious bold bits here and there, and the drift and

scope are awfully radical--I am 'off' for ever with the other side, but

must by all means be 'on' with yours--a position once gained, worthier

works shall follow--therefore a certain writer\* who meditated a notice

(it matters not laudatory or otherwise) on 'Pauline' in the 'Examiner',

must be benignant or supercilious as he shall choose, but in no case an

idle spectator of my first appearance on any stage (having previously

only dabbled in private theatricals) and bawl 'Hats off!' 'Down in

front!' &c., as soon as I get to the proscenium; and he may depend that

tho' my 'Now is the winter of our discontent' be rather awkward, yet

there shall be occasional outbreaks of good stuff--that I shall warm as

I get on, and finally wish 'Richmond at the bottom of the seas,' &c. in

the best style imaginable.

\* Mr. John Stuart Mill.

Excuse all this swagger, I know you will, and

(The signature has been cut off; evidently for an autograph.)

Mr. Effingham Wilson was induced to publish the poem, but more, we

understand, on the ground of radical sympathies in Mr. Fox and the

author than on that of its intrinsic worth.

The title-page of 'Paracelsus' introduces us to one of the warmest

friendships of Mr. Browning's life. Count de Ripert-Monclar was a young

French Royalist, one of those who had accompanied the Duchesse de Berri

on her Chouan expedition, and was then, for a few years, spending his

summers in England; ostensibly for his pleasure, really--as he

confessed to the Browning family--in the character of private agent of

communication between the royal exiles and their friends in France. He

was four years older than the poet, and of intellectual tastes which

created an immediate bond of union between them. In the course of one of

their conversations, he suggested the life of Paracelsus as a possible

subject for a poem; but on second thoughts pronounced it unsuitable,

because it gave no room for the introduction of love: about which, he

added, every young man of their age thought he had something quite new

to say. Mr. Browning decided, after the necessary study, that he would

write a poem on Paracelsus, but treating him in his own way. It was

dedicated, in fulfilment of a promise, to the friend to whom its

inspiration had been due.

The Count's visits to England entirely ceased, and the two friends

did not meet for twenty years. Then, one day, in a street in Rome, Mr.

Browning heard a voice behind him crying, 'Robert!' He turned, and

there was 'Amedee'. Both were, by that time, married; the Count--then, I

believe, Marquis--to an English lady, Miss Jerningham. Mrs. Browning, to

whom of course he was introduced, liked him very much.\*

\* A minor result of the intimacy was that Mr. Browning

became member, in 1835, of the Institut Historique, and in

1836 of the Societe Francaise de Statistique Universelle, to

both of which learned bodies his friend belonged.

Mr. Browning did treat Paracelsus in his own way; and in so doing

produced a character--at all events a history--which, according

to recent judgments, approached far nearer to the reality than any

conception which had until then been formed of it. He had carefully

collected all the known facts of the great discoverer's life, and

interpreted them with a sympathy which was no less an intuition of their

truth than a reflection of his own genius upon them. We are enabled

in some measure to judge of this by a paper entitled 'Paracelsus, the

Reformer of Medicine', written by Dr. Edward Berdoe for the Browning

Society, and read at its October meeting in 1888; and in the difficulty

which exists for most of us of verifying the historical data of

Mr. Browning's poem, it becomes a valuable guide to, as well as an

interesting comment upon it.

Dr. Berdoe reminds us that we cannot understand the real Paracelsus

without reference to the occult sciences so largely cultivated in his

day, as also to the mental atmosphere which produced them; and he quotes

in illustration a passage from the writings of that Bishop of Spanheim

who was the instructor of Paracelsus, and who appears as such in the

poem. The passage is a definition of divine magic, which is apparently

another term for alchemy; and lays down the great doctrine of all

mediaeval occultism, as of all modern theosophy--of a soul-power equally

operative in the material and the immaterial, in nature and in the

consciousness of man.

The same clue will guide us, as no other can, through what is apparently

conflicting in the aims and methods, anomalous in the moral experience,

of the Paracelsus of the poem. His feverish pursuit, among the things of

Nature, of an ultimate of knowledge, not contained, even in fragments,

in her isolated truths; the sense of failure which haunts his most

valuable attainments; his tampering with the lower or diabolic magic,

when the divine has failed; the ascetic exaltation in which he begins

his career; the sudden awakening to the spiritual sterility which has

been consequent on it; all these find their place, if not always their

counterpart, in the real life.

The language of Mr. Browning's Paracelsus, his attitude towards himself

and the world, are not, however, quite consonant with the alleged facts.

They are more appropriate to an ardent explorer of the world of abstract

thought than to a mystical scientist pursuing the secret of existence.

He preserves, in all his mental vicissitudes, a loftiness of tone and a

unity of intention, difficult to connect, even in fancy, with the real

man, in whom the inherited superstitions and the prognostics of true

science must often have clashed with each other. Dr. Berdoe's picture

of the 'Reformer' drawn more directly from history, conveys this double

impression. Mr. Browning has rendered him more simple by, as it were,

recasting him in the atmosphere of a more modern time, and of his own

intellectual life. This poem still, therefore, belongs to the same group

as 'Pauline', though, as an effort of dramatic creation, superior to it.

We find the Poet with still less of dramatic disguise in the deathbed

revelation which forms so beautiful a close to the story. It supplies a

fitter comment to the errors of the dramatic Paracelsus, than to those

of the historical, whether or not its utterance was within the compass

of historical probability, as Dr. Berdoe believes. In any case it was

the direct product of Mr. Browning's mind, and expressed what was to

be his permanent conviction. It might then have been an echo of German

pantheistic philosophies. From the point of view of science--of modern

science at least--it was prophetic; although the prophecy of one for

whom evolution could never mean less or more than a divine creation

operating on this progressive plan.

The more striking, perhaps, for its personal quality are the evidences

of imaginative sympathy, even direct human insight, in which the poem

abounds. Festus is, indeed, an essentially human creature: the

man--it might have been the woman--of unambitious intellect and large

intelligence of the heart, in whom so many among us have found comfort

and help. We often feel, in reading 'Pauline', that the poet in it was

older than the man. The impression is more strongly and more definitely

conveyed by this second work, which has none of the intellectual

crudeness of 'Pauline', though it still belongs to an early phase of the

author's intellectual life. Not only its mental, but its moral maturity,

seems so much in advance of his uncompleted twenty-third year.

To the first edition of 'Paracelsus' was affixed a preface, now long

discarded, but which acquires fresh interest in a retrospect of the

author's completed work; for it lays down the constant principle

of dramatic creation by which that work was to be inspired. It also

anticipates probable criticism of the artistic form which on this, and

so many subsequent occasions, he selected for it.

'I am anxious that the reader should not, at the very outset--mistaking

my performance for one of a class with which it has nothing in

common--judge it by principles on which it was never moulded, and

subject it to a standard to which it was never meant to conform. I

therefore anticipate his discovery, that it is an attempt, probably more

novel than happy, to reverse the method usually adopted by writers whose

aim it is to set forth any phenomenon of the mind or the passions,

by the operation of persons and events; and that, instead of having

recourse to an external machinery of incidents to create and evolve the

crisis I desire to produce, I have ventured to display somewhat minutely

the mood itself in its rise and progress, and have suffered the agency

by which it is influenced and determined, to be generally discernible

in its effects alone, and subordinate throughout, if not altogether

excluded: and this for a reason. I have endeavoured to write a poem, not

a drama: the canons of the drama are well known, and I cannot but think

that, inasmuch as they have immediate regard to stage representation,

the peculiar advantages they hold out are really such only so long as

the purpose for which they were at first instituted is kept in view. I

do not very well understand what is called a Dramatic Poem, wherein all

those restrictions only submitted to on account of compensating good

in the original scheme are scrupulously retained, as though for some

special fitness in themselves--and all new facilities placed at an

author's disposal by the vehicle he selects, as pertinaciously rejected.

. . .'

Mr. Fox reviewed this also in the 'Monthly Repository'. The article

might be obtained through the kindness of Mrs. Bridell-Fox; but it will

be sufficient for my purpose to refer to its closing paragraph, as given

by her in the 'Argosy' of February 1890. It was a final expression of

what the writer regarded as the fitting intellectual attitude towards a

rising poet, whose aims and methods lay so far beyond the range of

the conventional rules of poetry. The great event in the history of

'Paracelsus' was John Forster's article on it in the 'Examiner'. Mr.

Forster had recently come to town. He could barely have heard Mr.

Browning's name, and, as he afterwards told him, was perplexed in

reading the poem by the question of whether its author was an old or a

young man; but he knew that a writer in the 'Athenaeum' had called it

rubbish, and he had taken it up as a probable subject for a piece of

slashing criticism. What he did write can scarcely be defined as praise.

It was the simple, ungrudging admission of the unequivocal power, as

well as brilliant promise, which he recognized in the work. This

mutual experience was the introduction to a long and, certainly on Mr.

Browning's part, a sincere friendship.

Chapter 6

1835-1838

Removal to Hatcham; some Particulars--Renewed Intercourse with the

second Family of Robert Browning's Grandfather--Reuben Browning--William

Shergold Browning--Visitors at Hatcham--Thomas Carlyle--Social Life--New

Friends and Acquaintance--Introduction to Macready--New Year's Eve

at Elm Place--Introduction to John Forster--Miss Fanny Haworth--Miss

Martineau--Serjeant Talfourd--The 'Ion' Supper--'Strafford'--Relations

with Macready--Performance of 'Strafford'--Letters concerning it

from Mr. Browning and Miss Flower--Personal Glimpses of Robert

Browning--Rival Forms of Dramatic Inspiration--Relation of 'Strafford'

to 'Sordello'--Mr. Robertson and the 'Westminster Review'.

It was soon after this time, though the exact date cannot be recalled,

that the Browning family moved from Camberwell to Hatcham. Some such

change had long been in contemplation, for their house was now too

small; and the finding one more suitable, in the latter place, had

decided the question. The new home possessed great attractions. The

long, low rooms of its upper storey supplied abundant accommodation for

the elder Mr. Browning's six thousand books. Mrs. Browning was suffering

greatly from her chronic ailment, neuralgia; and the large garden,

opening on to the Surrey hills, promised her all the benefits of country

air. There were a coach-house and stable, which, by a curious,

probably old-fashioned, arrangement, formed part of the house, and were

accessible from it. Here the 'good horse', York, was eventually put up;

and near this, in the garden, the poet soon had another though humbler

friend in the person of a toad, which became so much attached to him

that it would follow him as he walked. He visited it daily, where it

burrowed under a white rose tree, announcing himself by a pinch of

gravel dropped into its hole; and the creature would crawl forth, allow

its head to be gently tickled, and reward the act with that loving

glance of the soft full eyes which Mr. Browning has recalled in one of

the poems of 'Asolando'.

This change of residence brought the grandfather's second family, for

the first time, into close as well as friendly contact with the first.

Mr. Browning had always remained on outwardly friendly terms with

his stepmother; and both he and his children were rewarded for this

forbearance by the cordial relations which grew up between themselves

and two of her sons. But in the earlier days they lived too far apart

for frequent meeting. The old Mrs. Browning was now a widow, and,

in order to be near her relations, she also came to Hatcham, and

established herself there in close neighbourhood to them. She had then

with her only a son and a daughter, those known to the poet's friends

as Uncle Reuben and Aunt Jemima; respectively nine years, and one year,

older than he. 'Aunt Jemima' married not long afterwards, and is chiefly

remembered as having been very amiable, and, in early youth, to use

her nephew's words, 'as beautiful as the day;' but kindly, merry

'Uncle Reuben', then clerk in the Rothschilds' London bank,\* became a

conspicuous member of the family circle. This does not mean that the

poet was ever indebted to him for pecuniary help; and it is desirable

that this should be understood, since it has been confidently asserted

that he was so. So long as he was dependent at all, he depended

exclusively on his father. Even the use of his uncle's horse, which

might have been accepted as a friendly concession on Mr. Reuben's part,

did not really represent one. The animal stood, as I have said, in Mr.

Browning's stable, and it was groomed by his gardener. The promise of

these conveniences had induced Reuben Browning to buy a horse instead of

continuing to hire one. He could only ride it on a few days of the week,

and it was rather a gain than a loss to him that so good a horseman as

his nephew should exercise it during the interval.

\* This uncle's name, and his business relations with the

great Jewish firm, have contributed to the mistaken theory

of the poet's descent.

Uncle Reuben was not a great appreciator of poetry--at all events of

his nephew's; and an irreverent remark on 'Sordello', imputed to a more

eminent contemporary, proceeded, under cover of a friend's name, from

him. But he had his share of mental endowments. We are told that he was

a good linguist, and that he wrote on finance under an assumed name. He

was also, apparently, an accomplished classic. Lord Beaconsfield is said

to have declared that the inscription on a silver inkstand, presented to

the daughter of Lionel Rothschild on her marriage, by the clerks at New

Court, 'was the most appropriate thing he had ever come across;' and

that whoever had selected it must be one of the first Latin scholars of

the day. It was Mr. Reuben Browning.

Another favourite uncle was William Shergold Browning, though less

intimate with his nephew and niece than he would have become if he had

not married while they were still children, and settled in Paris, where

his father's interest had placed him in the Rothschild house. He is

known by his 'History of the Huguenots', a work, we are told, 'full of

research, with a reference to contemporary literature for almost every

occurrence mentioned or referred to.' He also wrote the 'Provost of

Paris', and 'Hoel Morven', historical novels, and 'Leisure Hours', a

collection of miscellanies; and was a contributor for some years to

the 'Gentleman's Magazine'. It was chiefly from this uncle that Miss

Browning and her brother heard the now often-repeated stories of their

probable ancestors, Micaiah Browning, who distinguished himself at the

siege of Derry, and that commander of the ship 'Holy Ghost' who conveyed

Henry V. to France before the battle of Agincourt, and received the

coat-of-arms, with its emblematic waves, in reward for his service.

Robert Browning was also indebted to him for the acquaintance of M. de

Ripert-Monclar; for he was on friendly terms with the uncle of the young

count, the Marquis de Fortia, a learned man and member of the Institut,

and gave a letter of introduction--actually, I believe, to his brother

Reuben--at the Marquis's request.\*

\* A grandson of William Shergold, Robert Jardine Browning,

graduated at Lincoln College, was called to the Bar, and is

now Crown Prosecutor in New South Wales; where his name

first gave rise to a report that he was Mr. Browning's son,

while the announcement of his marriage was, for a moment,

connected with Mr. Browning himself. He was also intimate

with the poet and his sister, who liked him very much.

The friendly relations with Carlyle, which resulted in his high estimate

of the poet's mother, also began at Hatcham. On one occasion he took

his brother, the doctor, with him to dine there. An earlier and much

attached friend of the family was Captain Pritchard, cousin to the noted

physician Dr. Blundell. He enabled the young Robert, whom he knew from

the age of sixteen, to attend some of Dr. Blundell's lectures; and this

aroused in him a considerable interest in the sciences connected with

medicine, though, as I shall have occasion to show, no knowledge of

either disease or its treatment ever seems to have penetrated into his

life. A Captain Lloyd is indirectly associated with 'The Flight of the

Duchess'. That poem was not completed according to its original plan;

and it was the always welcome occurrence of a visit from this gentleman

which arrested its completion. Mr. Browning vividly remembered how the

click of the garden gate, and the sight of the familiar figure advancing

towards the house, had broken in upon his work and dispelled its first

inspiration.

The appearance of 'Paracelsus' did not give the young poet his just

place in popular judgment and public esteem. A generation was to pass

before this was conceded to him. But it compelled his recognition by the

leading or rising literary men of the day; and a fuller and more varied

social life now opened before him. The names of Serjeant Talfourd,

Horne, Leigh Hunt, Barry Cornwall (Procter), Monckton Milnes (Lord

Houghton), Eliot Warburton, Dickens, Wordsworth, and Walter Savage

Landor, represent, with that of Forster, some of the acquaintances made,

or the friendships begun, at this period. Prominent among the friends

that were to be, was also Archer Gurney, well known in later life as the

Rev. Archer Gurney, and chaplain to the British embassy in Paris.

His sympathies were at present largely absorbed by politics. He was

contesting the representation of some county, on the Conservative side;

but he took a very vivid interest in Mr. Browning's poems; and this

perhaps fixes the beginning of the intimacy at a somewhat later date;

since a pretty story by which it was illustrated connects itself with

the publication of 'Bells and Pomegranates'. He himself wrote dramas and

poems. Sir John, afterwards Lord, Hanmer was also much attracted by the

young poet, who spent a pleasant week with him at Bettisfield Park. He

was the author of a volume entitled 'Fra Cipollo and other Poems', from

which the motto of 'Colombe's Birthday' was subsequently taken.

The friends, old and new, met in the informal manner of those days, at

afternoon dinners, or later suppers, at the houses of Mr. Fox, Serjeant

Talfourd, and, as we shall see, Mr. Macready; and Mr. Fox's daughter,

then only a little girl, but intelligent and observant for her years,

well remembers the pleasant gatherings at which she was allowed to

assist, when first performances of plays, or first readings of plays and

poems, had brought some of the younger and more ardent spirits together.

Miss Flower, also, takes her place in the literary group. Her sister had

married in 1834, and left her free to live for her own pursuits and her

own friends; and Mr. Browning must have seen more of her then than was

possible in his boyish days.

None, however, of these intimacies were, at the time, so important to

him as that formed with the great actor Macready. They were introduced

to each other by Mr. Fox early in the winter of 1835-6; the meeting is

thus chronicled in Macready's diary, November 27.\*

\* 'Macready's Reminiscences', edited by Sir Frederick Pollock;

1875.

'Went from chambers to dine with Rev. William Fox, Bayswater. . . . Mr.

Robert Browning, the author of 'Paracelsus', came in after dinner; I was

very much pleased to meet him. His face is full of intelligence. . . .

I took Mr. Browning on, and requested to be allowed to improve my

acquaintance with him. He expressed himself warmly, as gratified by the

proposal, wished to send me his book; we exchanged cards and parted.'

On December 7 he writes:

'Read 'Paracelsus', a work of great daring, starred with poetry of

thought, feeling, and diction, but occasionally obscure; the writer can

scarcely fail to be a leading spirit of his time. . . .'

He invited Mr. Browning to his country house, Elm Place, Elstree, for

the last evening of the year; and again refers to him under date of

December 31.

'. . . Our other guests were Miss Henney, Forster, Cattermole, Browning,

and Mr. Munro. Mr. Browning was very popular with the whole party; his

simple and enthusiastic manner engaged attention, and won opinions from

all present; he looks and speaks more like a youthful poet than any man

I ever saw.'

This New-Year's-Eve visit brought Browning and Forster together for the

first time. The journey to Elstree was then performed by coach, and the

two young men met at the 'Blue Posts', where, with one or more of Mr.

Macready's other guests, they waited for the coach to start. They eyed

each other with interest, both being striking in their way, and

neither knowing who the other was. When the introduction took place at

Macready's house, Mr. Forster supplemented it by saying: 'Did you see a

little notice of you I wrote in the 'Examiner'?' The two names will

now be constantly associated in Macready's diary, which, except for

Mr. Browning's own casual utterances, is almost our only record of his

literary and social life during the next two years.

It was at Elm Place that Mr. Browning first met Miss Euphrasia Fanny

Haworth, then a neighbour of Mr. Macready, residing with her mother at

Barham Lodge. Miss Haworth was still a young woman, but her love and

talent for art and literature made her a fitting member of the genial

circle to which Mr. Browning belonged; and she and the poet soon became

fast friends. Her first name appears as 'Eyebright' in 'Sordello'. His

letters to her, returned after her death by her brother, Mr. Frederick

Haworth, supply valuable records of his experiences and of his feelings

at one very interesting, and one deeply sorrowful, period of his

history. She was a thoroughly kindly, as well as gifted woman, and much

appreciated by those of the poet's friends who knew her as a resident in

London during her last years. A portrait which she took of him in 1874

is considered by some persons very good.

At about this time also, and probably through Miss Haworth, he became

acquainted with Miss Martineau.

Soon after his introduction to Macready, if not before, Mr. Browning

became busy with the thought of writing for the stage. The diary has

this entry for February 16, 1836:

'Forster and Browning called, and talked over the plot of a tragedy,

which Browning had begun to think of: the subject, Narses. He said that

I had \_bit\_ him by my performance of Othello, and I told him I hoped I

should make the blood come. It would indeed be some recompense for the

miseries, the humiliations, the heart-sickening disgusts which I have

endured in my profession, if, by its exercise, I had awakened a spirit

of poetry whose influence would elevate, ennoble, and adorn our degraded

drama. May it be!'

But Narses was abandoned, and the more serious inspiration and more

definite motive were to come later. They connect themselves with one

of the pleasant social occurrences which must have lived in the young

poet's memory. On May 26 'Ion' had been performed for the first time and

with great success, Mr. Macready sustaining the principal part; and the

great actor and a number of their common friends had met at supper at

Serjeant Talfourd's house to celebrate the occasion. The party included

Wordsworth and Landor, both of whom Mr. Browning then met for the first

time. Toasts flew right and left. Mr. Browning's health was proposed

by Serjeant Talfourd as that of the youngest poet of England, and

Wordsworth responded to the appeal with very kindly courtesy. The

conversation afterwards turned upon plays, and Macready, who had ignored

a half-joking question of Miss Mitford, whether, if she wrote one, he

would act in it, overtook Browning as they were leaving the house, and

said, 'Write a play, Browning, and keep me from going to America.' The

reply was, 'Shall it be historical and English; what do you say to a

drama on Strafford?'

This ready response on the poet's part showed that Strafford, as a

dramatic subject, had been occupying his thoughts. The subject was in

the air, because Forster was then bringing out a life of that statesman,

with others belonging to the same period. It was more than in the air,

so far as Browning was concerned, because his friend had been disabled,

either through sickness or sorrow, from finishing this volume by the

appointed time, and he, as well he might, had largely helped him in its

completion. It was, however, not till August 3 that Macready wrote in

his diary:

'Forster told me that Browning had fixed on Strafford for the subject of

a tragedy; he could not have hit upon one that I could have more readily

concurred in.'

A previous entry of May 30, the occasion of which is only implied, shows

with how high an estimate of Mr. Browning's intellectual importance

Macready's professional relations to him began.

'Arriving at chambers, I found a note from Browning. What can I say upon

it? It was a tribute which remunerated me for the annoyances and cares

of years: it was one of the very highest, may I not say the highest,

honour I have through life received.'

The estimate maintained itself in reference to the value of Mr.

Browning's work, since he wrote on March 13, 1837:

'Read before dinner a few pages of 'Paracelsus', which raises my wonder

the more I read it. . . . Looked over two plays, which it was not

possible to read, hardly as I tried. . . . Read some scenes in

'Strafford', which restore one to the world of sense and feeling once

again.'

But as the day of the performance drew near, he became at once more

anxious and more critical. An entry of April 28 comments somewhat

sharply on the dramatic faults of 'Strafford', besides declaring the

writer's belief that the only chance for it is in the acting, which, 'by

possibility, might carry it to the end without disapprobation,' though

he dares not hope without opposition. It is quite conceivable that his

first complete study of the play, and first rehearsal of it, brought to

light deficiencies which had previously escaped him; but so complete

a change of sentiment points also to private causes of uneasiness and

irritation; and, perhaps, to the knowledge that its being saved by

collective good acting was out of the question.

'Strafford' was performed at Covent Garden Theatre on May 1. Mr.

Browning wrote to Mr. Fox after one of the last rehearsals:

May Day, Lincoln's Inn Fields.

Dear Sir,--All my endeavours to procure a copy before this morning have

been fruitless. I send the first book of the first bundle. \_Pray\_ look

over it--the alterations to-night will be considerable. The complexion

of the piece is, I grieve to say, 'perfect gallows' just now--our \_King\_,

Mr. Dale, being . . . but you'll see him, and, I fear, not much applaud.

Your unworthy son, in things literary, Robert Browning.

P.S. (in pencil).--A most unnecessary desire, but urged on me by Messrs.

Longman: no notice on Str. in to-night's True Sun,\* lest the other

papers be jealous!!!

\* Mr. Fox reviewed 'Strafford' in the 'True Sun'.

A second letter, undated, but evidently written a day or two later,

refers to the promised notice, which had then appeared.

Tuesday Night.

No words can express my feelings: I happen to be much annoyed and

unwell--but your most generous notice has almost made 'my soul well and

happy now.'

I thank you, my most kind, most constant friend, from my heart for your

goodness--which is brave enough, just now. I am ever and increasingly

yours, Robert Browning.

You will be glad to see me on the earliest occasion, will you not? I

shall certainly come.

A letter from Miss Flower to Miss Sarah Fox (sister to the Rev. William

Fox), at Norwich, contains the following passage, which evidently

continues a chapter of London news:

'Then 'Strafford'; were you not pleased to hear of the success of one

you must, I think, remember a very little boy, years ago. If not, you

have often heard us speak of Robert Browning: and it is a great deal to

have accomplished a successful tragedy, although he seems a good deal

annoyed at the go of things behind the scenes, and declares he will

never write a play again, as long as he lives. You have no idea of

the ignorance and obstinacy of the whole set, with here and there an

exception; think of his having to write out the meaning of the word

'impeachment', as some of them thought it meant 'poaching'.'

On the first night, indeed, the fate of 'Strafford' hung in the balance;

it was saved by Macready and Miss Helen Faucit. After this they must

have been better supported, as it was received on the second night

with enthusiasm by a full house. The catastrophe came after the fifth

performance, with the desertion of the actor who had sustained the

part of Pym. We cannot now judge whether, even under favourable

circumstances, the play would have had as long a run as was intended;

but the casting vote in favour of this view is given by the conduct of

Mr. Osbaldistone, the manager, when it was submitted to him. The diary

says, March 30, that he caught at it with avidity, and agreed to produce

it without delay. The terms he offered to the author must also have been

considered favourable in those days.

The play was published in April by Longman, this time not at the

author's expense; but it brought no return either to him or to his

publisher. It was dedicated 'in all affectionate admiration' to William

C. Macready.

We gain some personal glimpses of the Browning of 1835-6; one especially

through Mrs. Bridell-Fox, who thus describes her first meeting with him:

'I remember . . . when Mr. Browning entered the drawing-room, with a

quick light step; and on hearing from me that my father was out, and

in fact that nobody was at home but myself, he said: "It's my birthday

to-day; I'll wait till they come in," and sitting down to the piano,

he added: "If it won't disturb you, I'll play till they do." And as he

turned to the instrument, the bells of some neighbouring church suddenly

burst out with a frantic merry peal. It seemed, to my childish fancy, as

if in response to the remark that it was his birthday. He was then slim

and dark, and very handsome; and--may I hint it--just a trifle of a

dandy, addicted to lemon-coloured kid-gloves and such things: quite "the

glass of fashion and the mould of form." But full of ambition, eager for

success, eager for fame, and, what's more, determined to conquer fame

and to achieve success.'

I do not think his memory ever taxed him with foppishness, though he may

have had the innocent personal vanity of an attractive young man at his

first period of much seeing and being seen; but all we know of him

at that time bears out the impression Mrs. Fox conveys, of a joyous,

artless confidence in himself and in life, easily depressed, but quickly

reasserting itself; and in which the eagerness for new experiences

had freed itself from the rebellious impatience of boyish days. The

self-confidence had its touches of flippancy and conceit; but on this

side it must have been constantly counteracted by his gratitude for

kindness, and by his enthusiastic appreciation of the merits of other

men. His powers of feeling, indeed, greatly expended themselves in this

way. He was very attractive to women and, as we have seen, warmly loved

by very various types of men; but, except in its poetic sense, his

emotional nature was by no means then in the ascendant: a fact difficult

to realize when we remember the passion of his childhood's love for

mother and home, and the new and deep capabilities of affection to be

developed in future days. The poet's soul in him was feeling its wings;

the realities of life had not yet begun to weight them.

We see him again at the 'Ion' supper, in the grace and modesty with

which he received the honours then adjudged to him. The testimony has

been said to come from Miss Mitford, but may easily have been supplied

by Miss Haworth, who was also present on this occasion.

Mr. Browning's impulse towards play-writing had not, as we have seen,

begun with 'Strafford'. It was still very far from being exhausted. And

though he had struck out for himself another line of dramatic activity,

his love for the higher theatrical life, and the legitimate inducements

of the more lucrative and not necessarily less noble form of

composition, might ultimately in some degree have prevailed with him if

circumstances had been such as to educate his theatrical capabilities,

and to reward them. His first acted drama was, however, an interlude to

the production of the important group of poems which was to be completed

by 'Sordello'; and he alludes to this later work in an also discarded

preface to 'Strafford', as one on which he had for some time been

engaged. He even characterizes the Tragedy as an attempt 'to freshen

a jaded mind by diverting it to the healthy natures of a grand epoch.'

'Sordello' again occupied him during the remainder of 1837 and the

beginning of 1838; and by the spring of this year he must have been

thankful to vary the scene and mode of his labours by means of a first

visit to Italy. He announces his impending journey, with its immediate

plan and purpose, in the following note:

To John Robertson, Esq.

Good Friday, 1838.

Dear Sir,--I was not fortunate enough to find you the day before

yesterday--and must tell you very hurriedly that I sail this morning

for Venice--intending to finish my poem among the scenes it describes.

I shall have your good wishes I know. Believe me, in return, Dear sir,

Yours faithfully and obliged, Robert Browning.

Mr. John Robertson had influence with the 'Westminster Review', either

as editor, or member of its staff. He had been introduced to Mr.

Browning by Miss Martineau; and, being a great admirer of 'Paracelsus',

had promised careful attention for 'Sordello'; but, when the time

approached, he made conditions of early reading, &c., which Mr. Browning

thought so unfair towards other magazines that he refused to fulfil

them. He lost his review, and the goodwill of its intending writer; and

even Miss Martineau was ever afterwards cooler towards him, though his

attitude in the matter had been in some degree prompted by a chivalrous

partisanship for her.

Chapter 7

1838-1841

First Italian Journey--Letters to Miss Haworth--Mr. John

Kenyon--'Sordello'--Letter to Miss Flower--'Pippa Passes'--'Bells and

Pomegranates'.

Mr. Browning sailed from London with Captain Davidson of the 'Norham

Castle', a merchant vessel bound for Trieste, on which he found himself

the only passenger. A striking experience of the voyage, and some

characteristic personal details, are given in the following letter to

Miss Haworth. It is dated 1838, and was probably written before that

year's summer had closed.

Tuesday Evening.

Dear Miss Haworth,--Do look at a fuchsia in full bloom and notice the

clear little honey-drop depending from every flower. I have just found

it out to my no small satisfaction,--a bee's breakfast. I only answer

for the long-blossomed sort, though,--indeed, for this plant in my room.

Taste and be Titania; you can, that is. All this while I forget that you

will perhaps never guess the good of the discovery: I have, you are to

know, such a love for flowers and leaves--some leaves--that I every

now and then, in an impatience at being able to possess myself of them

thoroughly, to see them quite, satiate myself with their scent,--bite

them to bits--so there will be some sense in that. How I remember the

flowers--even grasses--of places I have seen! Some one flower or weed, I

should say, that gets some strangehow connected with them.

Snowdrops and Tilsit in Prussia go together; cowslips and Windsor Park,

for instance; flowering palm and some place or other in Holland.

Now to answer what can be answered in the letter I was happy to receive

last week. I am quite well. I did not expect you would write,--for none

of your written reasons, however. You will see 'Sordello' in a trice, if

the fagging fit holds. I did not write six lines while absent (except

a scene in a play, jotted down as we sailed thro' the Straits of

Gibraltar)--but I did hammer out some four, two of which are addressed

to you, two to the Queen\*--the whole to go in Book III--perhaps. I

called you 'Eyebright'--meaning a simple and sad sort of translation

of "Euphrasia" into my own language: folks would know who Euphrasia, or

Fanny, was--and I should not know Ianthe or Clemanthe. Not that there is

anything in them to care for, good or bad. Shall I say 'Eyebright'?

\* I know no lines directly addressed to the Queen.

I was disappointed in one thing, Canova.

What companions should I have?

The story of the ship must have reached you 'with a difference' as

Ophelia says; my sister told it to a Mr. Dow, who delivered it to

Forster, I suppose, who furnished Macready with it, who made it over

&c., &c., &c.--As short as I can tell, this way it happened: the captain

woke me one bright Sunday morning to say there was a ship floating keel

uppermost half a mile off; they lowered a boat, made ropes fast to some

floating canvas, and towed her towards our vessel. Both met halfway, and

the little air that had risen an hour or two before, sank at once. Our

men made the wreck fast in high glee at having 'new trousers out of the

sails,' and quite sure she was a French boat, broken from her moorings

at Algiers, close by. Ropes were next hove (hang this sea-talk!) round

her stanchions, and after a quarter of an hour's pushing at the capstan,

the vessel righted suddenly, one dead body floating out; five more were

in the forecastle, and had probably been there a month under a blazing

African sun--don't imagine the wretched state of things. They were,

these six, the 'watch below'--(I give you the result of the day's

observation)--the rest, some eight or ten, had been washed overboard at

first. One or two were Algerines, the rest Spaniards. The vessel was a

smuggler bound for Gibraltar; there were two stupidly disproportionate

guns, taking up the whole deck, which was convex and--nay, look you!

(a rough pen-and-ink sketch of the different parts of the wreck is here

introduced) these are the gun-rings, and the black square the place

where the bodies lay. (All the 'bulwarks' or sides of the top, carried

away by the waves.) Well, the sailors covered up the hatchway, broke up

the aft-deck, hauled up tobacco and cigars, such heaps of them, and

then bale after bale of prints and chintz, don't you call it, till the

captain was half-frightened--he would get at the ship's papers, he said;

so these poor fellows were pulled up, piecemeal, and pitched into the

sea, the very sailors calling to each other to 'cover the faces',--no

papers of importance were found, however, but fifteen swords, powder

and ball enough for a dozen such boats, and bundles of cotton, &c., that

would have taken a day to get out, but the captain vowed that after five

o'clock she should be cut adrift: accordingly she was cast loose, not a

third of her cargo having been touched; and you hardly can conceive the

strange sight when the battered hulk turned round, actually, and

looked at us, and then reeled off, like a mutilated creature from some

scoundrel French surgeon's lecture-table, into the most gorgeous and

lavish sunset in the world: there; only thank me for not taking you at

your word, and giving you the whole 'story'.--'What I did?' I went to

Trieste, then Venice--then through Treviso and Bassano to the mountains,

delicious Asolo, all my places and castles, you will see. Then to

Vicenza, Padua, and Venice again. Then to Verona, Trent, Innspruck (the

Tyrol), Munich, Salzburg in Franconia, Frankfort and Mayence; down the

Rhine to Cologne, then to Aix-la-Chapelle, Liege and Antwerp--then home.

Shall you come to town, anywhere near town, soon? I shall be off again

as soon as my book is out, whenever that will be.

I never read that book of Miss Martineau's, so can't understand what

you mean. Macready is looking well; I just saw him the other day for a

minute after the play; his Kitely was Kitely--superb from his flat cap

down to his shining shoes. I saw very few Italians, 'to know', that is.

Those I did see I liked. Your friend Pepoli has been lecturing here, has

he not?

I shall be vexed if you don't write soon, a long Elstree letter. What

are you doing, writing--drawing? Ever yours truly R. B. To Miss Haworth,

Barham Lodge, Elstree.

Miss Browning's account of this experience, supplied from memory of her

brother's letters and conversations, contains some vivid supplementary

details. The drifting away of the wreck put probably no effective

distance between it and the ship; hence the necessity of 'sailing away'

from it.

'Of the dead pirates, one had his hands clasped as if praying; another,

a severe gash in his head. The captain burnt disinfectants and blew

gunpowder, before venturing on board, but even then, he, a powerful man,

turned very sick with the smell and sight. They stayed one whole day

by the side, but the sailors, in spite of orders, began to plunder the

cigars, &c. The captain said privately to Robert, "I cannot restrain my

men, and they will bring the plague into our ship, so I mean quietly in

the night to sail away." Robert took two cutlasses and a dagger; they

were of the coarsest workmanship, intended for use. At the end of one of

the sheaths was a heavy bullet, so that it could be used as a sling.

The day after, to their great relief, a heavy rain fell and cleansed the

ship. Captain Davidson reported the sight of the wreck and its condition

as soon as he arrived at Trieste.'

Miss Browning also relates that the weather was stormy in the Bay of

Biscay, and for the first fortnight her brother suffered terribly. The

captain supported him on to the deck as they passed through the Straits

of Gibraltar, that he might not lose the sight. He recovered, as we

know, sufficiently to write 'How they brought the Good News from Ghent

to Aix'; but we can imagine in what revulsion of feeling towards firm

land and healthy motion this dream of a headlong gallop was born in

him. The poem was pencilled on the cover of Bartoli's "De' Simboli

trasportati al Morale", a favourite book and constant companion of his;

and, in spite of perfect effacement as far as the sense goes, the pencil

dints are still visible. The little poem 'Home Thoughts from the Sea'

was written at the same time, and in the same manner.

By the time they reached Trieste, the captain, a rough north-countryman,

had become so attached to Mr. Browning that he offered him a free

passage to Constantinople; and after they had parted, carefully

preserved, by way of remembrance, a pair of very old gloves worn by him

on deck. Mr. Browning might, on such an occasion, have dispensed with

gloves altogether; but it was one of his peculiarities that he could

never endure to be out of doors with uncovered hands. The captain also

showed his friendly feeling on his return to England by bringing to Miss

Browning, whom he had heard of through her brother, a present of six

bottles of attar of roses.

The inspirations of Asolo and Venice appear in 'Pippa Passes' and 'In

a Gondola'; but the latter poem showed, to Mr. Browning's subsequent

vexation, that Venice had been imperfectly seen; and the magnetism which

Asolo was to exercise upon him, only fully asserted itself at a much

later time.

A second letter to Miss Haworth is undated, but may have been written at

any period of this or the ensuing year.

I have received, a couple of weeks since, a present--an album large and

gaping, and as Cibber's Richard says of the 'fair Elizabeth': 'My

heart is empty--she shall fill it'--so say I (impudently?) of my grand

trouble-table, which holds a sketch or two by my fine fellow Monclar,

one lithograph--his own face of faces,--'all the rest was amethyst.' F.

H. everywhere! not a soul beside 'in the chrystal silence there,' and

it locks, this album; now, don't shower drawings on M., who has so many

advantages over me as it is: or at least don't bid \_me\_ of all others say

what he is to have.

The 'Master' is somebody you don't know, W. J. Fox, a magnificent and

poetical nature, who used to write in reviews when I was a boy, and

to whom my verses, a bookful, written at the ripe age of twelve and

thirteen, were shown: which verses he praised not a little; which praise

comforted me not a little. Then I lost sight of him for years and

years; then I published \_anonymously\_ a little poem--which he, to my

inexpressible delight, praised and expounded in a gallant article in a

magazine of which he was the editor; then I found him out again; he got

a publisher for 'Paracelsus' (I read it to him in manuscript) and is in

short 'my literary father'. Pretty nearly the same thing did he for

Miss Martineau, as she has said somewhere. God knows I forget what the

'talk', table-talk was about--I think she must have told you the results

of the whole day we spent tete-a-tete at Ascot, and that day's, the

dinner-day's morning at Elstree and St. Albans. She is to give me advice

about my worldly concerns, and not before I need it!

I cannot say or sing the pleasure your way of writing gives me--do go

on, and tell me all sorts of things, 'the story' for a beginning; but

your moralisings on 'your age' and the rest, are--now what \_are\_ they?

not to be reasoned on, disputed, laughed at, grieved about: they are

'Fanny's crotchets'. I thank thee, Jew (lia), for teaching me that word.

I don't know that I shall leave town for a month: my friend Monclar

looks piteous when I talk of such an event. I can't bear to leave him;

he is to take my portrait to-day (a famous one he \_has\_ taken!) and very

like he engages it shall be. I am going to town for the purpose. . . .

Now, then, do something for me, and see if I'll ask Miss M----to help

you! I am going to begin the finishing 'Sordello'--and to begin thinking

a Tragedy (an Historical one, so I shall want heaps of criticisms on

'Strafford') and I want to have \_another\_ tragedy in prospect, I write

best so provided: I had chosen a splendid subject for it, when I learned

that a magazine for next, this, month, will have a scene founded on my

story; vulgarizing or doing no good to it: and I accordingly throw it

up. I want a subject of the most wild and passionate love, to contrast

with the one I mean to have ready in a short time. I have many

half-conceptions, floating fancies: give me your notion of a thorough

self-devotement, self-forgetting; should it be a woman who loves thus,

or a man? What circumstances will best draw out, set forth this feeling?

. . .

The tragedies in question were to be 'King Victor and King Charles', and

'The Return of the Druses'.

This letter affords a curious insight into Mr. Browning's mode of work;

it is also very significant of the small place which love had hitherto

occupied in his life. It was evident, from his appeal to Miss Haworth's

'notion' on the subject, that he had as yet no experience, even

imaginary, of a genuine passion, whether in woman or man. The experience

was still distant from him in point of time. In circumstance he was

nearer to it than he knew; for it was in 1839 that he became acquainted

with Mr. Kenyon.

When dining one day at Serjeant Talfourd's, he was accosted by a

pleasant elderly man, who, having, we conclude, heard who he was, asked

leave to address to him a few questions: 'Was his father's name Robert?

had he gone to school at the Rev. Mr. Bell's at Cheshunt, and was he

still alive?' On receiving affirmative answers, he went on to say that

Mr. Browning and he had been great chums at school, and though they had

lost sight of each other in after-life, he had never forgotten his

old playmate, but even alluded to him in a little book which he had

published a few years before.\*

\* The volume is entitled 'Rhymed Plea for Tolerance' (1833),

and contains a reference to Mr. Kenyon's schooldays,

and to the classic fights which Mr. Browning had instituted.

The next morning the poet asked his father if he remembered a

schoolfellow named John Kenyon. He replied, 'Certainly! This is his

face,' and sketched a boy's head, in which his son at once recognized

that of the grown man. The acquaintance was renewed, and Mr. Kenyon

proved ever afterwards a warm friend. Mr. Browning wrote of him, in a

letter to Professor Knight of St. Andrews, Jan. 10, 1884: 'He was one

of the best of human beings, with a general sympathy for excellence

of every kind. He enjoyed the friendship of Wordsworth, of Southey, of

Landor, and, in later days, was intimate with most of my contemporaries

of eminence.' It was at Mr. Kenyon's house that the poet saw most of

Wordsworth, who always stayed there when he came to town.

In 1840 'Sordello' appeared. It was, relatively to its length, by far

the slowest in preparation of Mr. Browning's poems. This seemed, indeed,

a condition of its peculiar character. It had lain much deeper in the

author's mind than the various slighter works which were thrown off in

the course of its inception. We know from the preface to 'Strafford'

that it must have been begun soon after 'Paracelsus'. Its plan may have

belonged to a still earlier date; for it connects itself with 'Pauline'

as the history of a poetic soul; with both the earlier poems, as the

manifestation of the self-conscious spiritual ambitions which were

involved in that history. This first imaginative mood was also

outgrowing itself in the very act of self-expression; for the tragedies

written before the conclusion of 'Sordello' impress us as the product of

a different mental state--as the work of a more balanced imagination and

a more mature mind.

It would be interesting to learn how Mr. Browning's typical poet became

embodied in this mediaeval form: whether the half-mythical character

of the real Sordello presented him as a fitting subject for imaginative

psychological treatment, or whether the circumstances among which he

moved seemed the best adapted to the development of the intended type.

The inspiration may have come through the study of Dante, and his

testimony to the creative influence of Sordello on their mother-tongue.

That period of Italian history must also have assumed, if it did not

already possess, a great charm for Mr. Browning's fancy, since he

studied no less than thirty works upon it, which were to contribute

little more to his dramatic picture than what he calls 'decoration', or

'background'. But the one guide which he has given us to the reading of

the poem is his assertion that its historical circumstance is only to

be regarded as background; and the extent to which he identified himself

with the figure of Sordello has been proved by his continued belief that

its prominence was throughout maintained. He could still declare,

so late as 1863, in his preface to the reprint of the work, that his

'stress' in writing it had lain 'on the incidents in the development of

a soul, little else' being to his mind 'worth study'. I cannot therefore

help thinking that recent investigations of the life and character of

the actual poet, however in themselves praiseworthy and interesting,

have been often in some degree a mistake; because, directly or

indirectly, they referred Mr. Browning's Sordello to an historical

reality, which his author had grasped, as far as was then possible, but

to which he was never intended to conform.

Sordello's story does exhibit the development of a soul; or rather,

the sudden awakening of a self-regarding nature to the claims of other

men--the sudden, though slowly prepared, expansion of the narrower into

the larger self, the selfish into the sympathetic existence; and this

takes place in accordance with Mr. Browning's here expressed belief that

poetry is the appointed vehicle for all lasting truths; that the true

poet must be their exponent. The work is thus obviously, in point of

moral utterance, an advance on 'Pauline'. Its metaphysics are,

also, more distinctly formulated than those of either 'Pauline' or

'Paracelsus'; and the frequent use of the term Will in its metaphysical

sense so strongly points to German associations that it is difficult to

realize their absence, then and always, from Mr. Browning's mind. But

he was emphatic in his assurance that he knew neither the German

philosophers nor their reflection in Coleridge, who would have seemed a

likely medium between them and him. Miss Martineau once said to him

that he had no need to study German thought, since his mind was German

enough--by which she possibly meant too German--already.

The poem also impresses us by a Gothic richness of detail,\* the

picturesque counterpart of its intricacy of thought, and, perhaps for

this very reason, never so fully displayed in any subsequent work. Mr.

Browning's genuinely modest attitude towards it could not preclude

the consciousness of the many imaginative beauties which its unpopular

character had served to conceal; and he was glad to find, some years

ago, that 'Sordello' was represented in a collection of descriptive

passages which a friend of his was proposing to make. 'There is a great

deal of that in it,' he said, 'and it has always been overlooked.'

\* The term Gothic has been applied to Mr. Browning's work, I

believe, by Mr. James Thomson, in writing of 'The Ring and

the Book', and I do not like to use it without saying so.

But it is one of those which must have spontaneously

suggested themselves to many other of Mr. Browning's

readers.

It was unfortunate that new difficulties of style should have added

themselves on this occasion to those of subject and treatment; and the

reason of it is not generally known. Mr. John Sterling had made some

comments on the wording of 'Paracelsus'; and Miss Caroline Fox, then

quite a young woman, repeated them, with additions, to Miss Haworth,

who, in her turn, communicated them to Mr. Browning, but without making

quite clear to him the source from which they sprang. He took the

criticism much more seriously than it deserved, and condensed the

language of this his next important publication into what was nearly its

present form.

In leaving 'Sordello' we emerge from the self-conscious stage of Mr.

Browning's imagination, and his work ceases to be autobiographic in the

sense in which, perhaps erroneously, we have hitherto felt it to be.

'Festus' and 'Salinguerra' have already given promise of the world of

'Men and Women' into which he will now conduct us. They will be inspired

by every variety of conscious motive, but never again by the old (real

or imagined) self-centred, self-directing Will. We have, indeed, already

lost the sense of disparity between the man and the poet; for the

Browning of 'Sordello' was growing older, while the defects of the poem

were in many respects those of youth. In 'Pippa Passes', published one

year later, the poet and the man show themselves full-grown. Each has

entered on the inheritance of the other.

Neither the imagination nor the passion of what Mr. Gosse so fitly calls

this 'lyrical masque'\* gives much scope for tenderness; but the quality

of humour is displayed in it for the first time; as also a strongly

marked philosophy of life--or more properly, of association--from

which its idea and development are derived. In spite, however, of these

evidences of general maturity, Mr. Browning was still sometimes boyish

in personal intercourse, if we may judge from a letter to Miss Flower

written at about the same time.

\* These words, and a subsequent paragraph, are quoted from

Mr. Gosse's 'Personalia'.

Monday night, March 9 (? 1841).

My dear Miss Flower,--I have this moment received your very kind

note--of course, I understand your objections. How else? But they are

somewhat lightened already (confess--nay 'confess' is vile--you will

be rejoiced to holla from the house-top)--will go on, or rather go

off, lightening, and will be--oh, where \_will\_ they be half a dozen years

hence?

Meantime praise what you can praise, do me all the good you can, you and

Mr. Fox (as if you will not!) for I have a head full of projects--mean

to song-write, play-write forthwith,--and, believe me, dear Miss Flower,

Yours ever faithfully, Robert Browning.

By the way, you speak of 'Pippa'--could we not make some arrangement

about it? The lyrics \_want\_ your music--five or six in all--how say you?

When these three plays are out I hope to build a huge Ode--but 'all

goeth by God's Will.'

The loyal Alfred Domett now appears on the scene with a satirical poem,

inspired by an impertinent criticism on his friend. I give its first two

verses:

On a Certain Critique on 'Pippa Passes'.

(Query--Passes what?--the critic's comprehension.)

Ho! everyone that by the nose is led,

Automatons of which the world is full,

Ye myriad bodies, each without a head,

That dangle from a critic's brainless skull,

Come, hearken to a deep discovery made,

A mighty truth now wondrously displayed.

A black squat beetle, vigorous for his size,

Pushing tail-first by every road that's wrong

The dung-ball of his dirty thoughts along

His tiny sphere of grovelling sympathies--

Has knocked himself full-butt, with blundering trouble,

Against a mountain he can neither double

Nor ever hope to scale. So like a free,

Pert, self-conceited scarabaeus, he

Takes it into his horny head to swear

There's no such thing as any mountain there.

The writer lived to do better things from a literary point of view; but

these lines have a fine ring of youthful indignation which must have

made them a welcome tribute to friendship.

There seems to have been little respectful criticism of 'Pippa Passes';

it is less surprising that there should have been very little of

'Sordello'. Mr. Browning, it is true, retained a limited number of

earnest appreciators, foremost of whom was the writer of an admirable

notice of these two works, quoted from an 'Eclectic Review' of 1847, in

Dr. Furnivall's 'Bibliography'. I am also told that the series of poems

which was next to appear was enthusiastically greeted by some poets

and painters of the pre-Raphaelite school; but he was now entering on

a period of general neglect, which covered nearly twenty years of his

life, and much that has since become most deservedly popular in his

work.

'Pippa Passes' had appeared as the first instalment of 'Bells and

Pomegranates', the history of which I give in Mr. Gosse's words. This

poem, and the two tragedies, 'King Victor and King Charles' and 'The

Return of the Druses'--first christened 'Mansoor, the Hierophant'--were

lying idle in Mr. Browning's desk. He had not found, perhaps not very

vigorously sought, a publisher for them.

'One day, as the poet was discussing the matter with Mr. Edward Moxon,

the publisher, the latter remarked that at that time he was bringing out

some editions of the old Elizabethan dramatists in a comparatively

cheap form, and that if Mr. Browning would consent to print his poems

as pamphlets, using this cheap type, the expense would be very

inconsiderable. The poet jumped at the idea, and it was agreed that each

poem should form a separate brochure of just one sheet--sixteen pages

in double columns--the entire cost of which should not exceed twelve or

fifteen pounds. In this fashion began the celebrated series of 'Bells

and Pomegranates', eight numbers of which, a perfect treasury of fine

poetry, came out successively between 1841 and 1846. 'Pippa Passes'

led the way, and was priced first at sixpence; then, the sale being

inconsiderable, at a shilling, which greatly encouraged the sale;

and so, slowly, up to half-a-crown, at which the price of each number

finally rested.'

Mr. Browning's hopes and intentions with respect to this series are

announced in the following preface to 'Pippa Passes', of which, in later

editions, only the dedicatory words appear:

'Two or three years ago I wrote a Play, about which the chief matter I

care to recollect at present is, that a Pit-full of good-natured people

applauded it:--ever since, I have been desirous of doing something in

the same way that should better reward their attention. What follows

I mean for the first of a series of Dramatical Pieces, to come out at

intervals, and I amuse myself by fancying that the cheap mode in which

they appear will for once help me to a sort of Pit-audience again.

Of course, such a work must go on no longer than it is liked; and to

provide against a certain and but too possible contingency, let me

hasten to say now--what, if I were sure of success, I would try to say

circumstantially enough at the close--that I dedicate my best intentions

most admiringly to the author of "Ion"--most affectionately to Serjeant

Talfourd.'

A necessary explanation of the general title was reserved for the last

number: and does something towards justifying the popular impression

that Mr. Browning exacted a large measure of literary insight from his

readers.

'Here ends my first series of "Bells and Pomegranates": and I take the

opportunity of explaining, in reply to inquiries, that I only meant

by that title to indicate an endeavour towards something like an

alternation, or mixture, of music with discoursing, sound with sense,

poetry with thought; which looks too ambitious, thus expressed, so the

symbol was preferred. It is little to the purpose, that such is

actually one of the most familiar of the many Rabbinical (and Patristic)

acceptations of the phrase; because I confess that, letting authority

alone, I supposed the bare words, in such juxtaposition, would

sufficiently convey the desired meaning. "Faith and good works" is

another fancy, for instance, and perhaps no easier to arrive at: yet

Giotto placed a pomegranate fruit in the hand of Dante, and Raffaelle

crowned his Theology (in the 'Camera della Segnatura') with blossoms of

the same; as if the Bellari and Vasari would be sure to come after,

and explain that it was merely "simbolo delle buone opere--il qual

Pomogranato fu pero usato nelle vesti del Pontefice appresso gli

Ebrei."'

The Dramas and Poems contained in the eight numbers of 'Bells and

Pomegranates' were:

I. Pippa Passes. 1841.

II. King Victor and King Charles. 1842.

III. Dramatic Lyrics. 1842.

Cavalier Tunes; I. Marching Along; II. Give a Rouse;

III. My Wife Gertrude. ['Boot and Saddle'.]

Italy and France; I. Italy; II. France.

Camp and Cloister; I. Camp (French); II. Cloister (Spanish).

In a Gondola.

Artemis Prologuizes.

Waring; I.; II.

Queen Worship; I. Rudel and The Lady of Tripoli; II. Cristina.

Madhouse Cells; I. [Johannes Agricola.]; II. [Porphyria.]

Through the Metidja to Abd-el-Kadr. 1842.

The Pied Piper of Hamelin; a Child's Story.

IV. The Return of the Druses. A Tragedy, in Five Acts. 1843.

V. A Blot in the 'Scutcheon. A Tragedy, in Three Acts. 1843.

[Second Edition, same year.]

VI. Colombe's Birthday. A Play, in Five Acts. 1844.

VII. Dramatic Romances and Lyrics. 1845.

'How they brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix. (16--.)'

Pictor Ignotus. (Florence, 15--.)

Italy in England.

England in Italy. (Piano di Sorrento.)

The Lost Leader.

The Lost Mistress.

Home Thoughts, from Abroad.

The Tomb at St. Praxed's: (Rome, 15--.)

Garden Fancies; I. The Flower's Name;

II. Sibrandus Schafnaburgensis.

France and Spain; I. The Laboratory (Ancien Regime);

II. Spain--The Confessional.

The Flight of the Duchess.

Earth's Immortalities.

Song. ('Nay but you, who do not love her.')

The Boy and the Angel.

Night and Morning; I. Night; II. Morning.

Claret and Tokay.

Saul. (Part I.)

Time's Revenges.

The Glove. (Peter Ronsard loquitur.)

VIII. and last. Luria; and A Soul's Tragedy. 1846.

This publication has seemed entitled to a detailed notice, because it is

practically extinct, and because its nature and circumstance confer on

it a biographical interest not possessed by any subsequent issue of Mr.

Browning's works. The dramas and poems of which it is composed belong to

that more mature period of the author's life, in which the analysis of

his work ceases to form a necessary part of his history. Some few of

them, however, are significant to it; and this is notably the case with

'A Blot in the 'Scutcheon'.

Chapter 8

1841-1844

'A Blot in the 'Scutcheon'--Letters to Mr. Frank Hill; Lady

Martin--Charles Dickens--Other Dramas and Minor Poems--Letters to Miss

Lee; Miss Haworth; Miss Flower--Second Italian Journey; Naples--E. J.

Trelawney--Stendhal.

'A Blot in the 'Scutcheon' was written for Macready, who meant to

perform the principal part; and we may conclude that the appeal for it

was urgent, since it was composed in the space of four or five days.

Macready's journals must have contained a fuller reference to both the

play and its performance (at Drury Lane, February 1843) than appears in

published form; but considerable irritation had arisen between him and

Mr. Browning, and he possibly wrote something which his editor, Sir

Frederick Pollock, as the friend of both, thought it best to omit. What

occurred on this occasion has been told in some detail by Mr. Gosse, and

would not need repeating if the question were only of re-telling it on

the same authority, in another person's words; but, through the kindness

of Mr. and Mrs. Frank Hill, I am able to give Mr. Browning's direct

statement of the case, as also his expressed judgment upon it. The

statement was made more than forty years later than the events to

which it refers, but will, nevertheless, be best given in its direct

connection with them.

The merits, or demerits, of 'A Blot in the 'Scutcheon' had been freshly

brought under discussion by its performance in London through the action

of the Browning Society, and in Washington by Mr. Laurence Barrett; and

it became the subject of a paragraph in one of the theatrical articles

prepared for the 'Daily News'. Mr. Hill was then editor of the paper,

and when the article came to him for revision, he thought it right

to submit to Mr. Browning the passages devoted to his tragedy, which

embodied some then prevailing, but, he strongly suspected, erroneous

impressions concerning it. The results of this kind and courteous

proceeding appear in the following letter.

19, Warwick Crescent: December 15, 1884.

My dear Mr. Hill,--It was kind and considerate of you to suppress the

paragraph which you send me,--and of which the publication would

have been unpleasant for reasons quite other than as regarding my own

work,--which exists to defend or accuse itself. You will judge of the

true reasons when I tell you the facts--so much of them as contradicts

the statements of your critic--who, I suppose, has received a stimulus

from the notice, in an American paper which arrived last week, of

Mr. Laurence Barrett's intention 'shortly to produce the play' in New

York--and subsequently in London: so that 'the failure' of forty-one

years ago might be duly influential at present--or two years hence

perhaps. The 'mere amateurs' are no high game.

Macready received and accepted the play, while he was engaged at the

Haymarket, and retained it for Drury Lane, of which I was ignorant that

he was about to become the manager: he accepted it 'at the instigation'

of nobody,--and Charles Dickens was not in England when he did so: it

was read to him after his return, by Forster--and the glowing letter

which contains his opinion of it, although directed by him to be shown

to myself, was never heard of nor seen by me till printed in Forster's

book some thirty years after. When the Drury Lane season began, Macready

informed me that he should act the play when he had brought out two

others--'The Patrician's Daughter', and 'Plighted Troth': having

done so, he wrote to me that the former had been unsuccessful in

money-drawing, and the latter had 'smashed his arrangements altogether':

but he would still produce my play. I had--in my ignorance of certain

symptoms better understood by Macready's professional acquaintances--I

had no notion that it was a proper thing, in such a case, to 'release

him from his promise'; on the contrary, I should have fancied that such

a proposal was offensive. Soon after, Macready begged that I would call

on him: he said the play had been read to the actors the day before,

'and laughed at from beginning to end': on my speaking my mind about

this, he explained that the reading had been done by the Prompter, a

grotesque person with a red nose and wooden leg, ill at ease in the love

scenes, and that he would himself make amends by reading the play next

morning--which he did, and very adequately--but apprised me that, in

consequence of the state of his mind, harassed by business and various

trouble, the principal character must be taken by Mr. Phelps; and again

I failed to understand,--what Forster subsequently assured me was plain

as the sun at noonday,--that to allow at Macready's Theatre any

other than Macready to play the principal part in a new piece was

suicidal,--and really believed I was meeting his exigencies by accepting

the substitution. At the rehearsal, Macready announced that Mr.

Phelps was ill, and that he himself would read the part: on the third

rehearsal, Mr. Phelps appeared for the first time, and sat in a chair

while Macready more than read, rehearsed the part. The next morning Mr.

Phelps waylaid me at the stage-door to say, with much emotion, that it

never was intended that \_he\_ should be instrumental in the success of a

new tragedy, and that Macready would play Tresham on the ground that

himself, Phelps, was unable to do so. He added that he could not expect

me to waive such an advantage,--but that, if I were prepared to waive

it, 'he would take ether, sit up all night, and have the words in his

memory by next day.' I bade him follow me to the green-room, and hear

what I decided upon--which was that as Macready had given him the part,

he should keep it: this was on a Thursday; he rehearsed on Friday and

Saturday,--the play being acted the same evening,--\_of the fifth day

after the 'reading' by MacReady\_. Macready at once wished to reduce the

importance of the 'play',--as he styled it in the bills,--tried to leave

out so much of the text, that I baffled him by getting it printed in

four-and-twenty hours, by Moxon's assistance. He wanted me to call it

'The Sister'!--and I have before me, while I write, the stage-acting

copy, with two lines of his own insertion to avoid the tragical

ending--Tresham was to announce his intention of going into a monastery!

all this, to keep up the belief that Macready, and Macready alone, could

produce a veritable 'tragedy', unproduced before. Not a shilling was

spent on scenery or dresses--and a striking scene which had been used

for the 'Patrician's Daughter', did duty a second time. If your critic

considers this treatment of the play an instance of 'the failure of

powerful and experienced actors' to ensure its success,--I can only say

that my own opinion was shown by at once breaking off a friendship of

many years--a friendship which had a right to be plainly and simply told

that the play I had contributed as a proof of it, would through a change

of circumstances, no longer be to my friend's advantage,--all I could

possibly care for. Only recently, when by the publication of Macready's

journals the extent of his pecuniary embarrassments at that time

was made known, could I in a measure understand his motives for such

conduct--and less than ever understand why he so strangely disguised and

disfigured them. If 'applause' means success, the play thus maimed

and maltreated was successful enough: it 'made way' for Macready's own

Benefit, and the Theatre closed a fortnight after.

Having kept silence for all these years, in spite of repeated

explanations, in the style of your critic's, that the play 'failed in

spite of the best endeavours' &c. I hardly wish to revive a very painful

matter: on the other hand,--as I have said; my play subsists, and is as

open to praise or blame as it was forty-one years ago: is it necessary

to search out what somebody or other,--not improbably a jealous adherent

of Macready, 'the only organizer of theatrical victories', chose to say

on the subject? If the characters are 'abhorrent' and 'inscrutable'--and

the language conformable,--they were so when Dickens pronounced

upon them, and will be so whenever the critic pleases to re-consider

them--which, if he ever has an opportunity of doing, apart from the

printed copy, I can assure you is through no motion of mine. This

particular experience was sufficient: but the Play is out of my power

now; though amateurs and actors may do what they please.

Of course, this being the true story, I should desire that it were told

\_thus\_ and no otherwise, if it must be told at all: but \_not\_ as a statement

of mine,--the substance of it has been partly stated already by more

than one qualified person, and if I have been willing to let the poor

matter drop, surely there is no need that it should be gone into now

when Macready and his Athenaeum upholder are no longer able to speak

for themselves: this is just a word to you, dear Mr. Hill, and may be

brought under the notice of your critic if you think proper--but only

for the facts--not as a communication for the public.

Yes, thank you, I am in full health, as you wish--and I wish you and

Mrs. Hill, I assure you, all the good appropriate to the season. My

sister has completely recovered from her illness, and is grateful for

your enquiries.

With best regards to Mrs. Hill, and an apology for this long letter,

which however,--when once induced to write it,--I could not well

shorten,--believe me, Yours truly ever Robert Browning.

I well remember Mr. Browning's telling me how, when he returned to the

green-room, on that critical day, he drove his hat more firmly on to his

head, and said to Macready, 'I beg pardon, sir, but you have given the

part to Mr. Phelps, and I am satisfied that he should act it;' and how

Macready, on hearing this, crushed up the MS., and flung it on to the

ground. He also admitted that his own manner had been provocative; but

he was indignant at what he deemed the unjust treatment which Mr. Phelps

had received. The occasion of the next letter speaks for itself.

December 21, 1884.

My dear Mr. Hill,--Your goodness must extend to letting me have the last

word--one of sincere thanks. You cannot suppose I doubted for a moment

of a good-will which I have had abundant proof of. I only took the

occasion your considerate letter gave me, to tell the simple truth which

my forty years' silence is a sign I would only tell on compulsion. I

never thought your critic had any less generous motive for alluding to

the performance as he did than that which he professes: he doubtless

heard the account of the matter which Macready and his intimates gave

currency to at the time; and which, being confined for a while to their

limited number, I never chose to notice. But of late years I have got to

\_read\_,--not merely \_hear\_,--of the play's failure 'which all the efforts

of my friend the great actor could not avert;' and the nonsense of this

untruth gets hard to bear. I told you the principal facts in the letter

I very hastily wrote: I could, had it been worth while, corroborate them

by others in plenty, and refer to the living witnesses--Lady Martin,

Mrs. Stirling, and (I believe) Mr. Anderson: it was solely through the

admirable loyalty of the two former that . . . a play . . . deprived

of every advantage, in the way of scenery, dresses, and

rehearsing--proved--what Macready himself declared it to be--'a complete

success'. \_So\_ he sent a servant to tell me, 'in case there was a call for

the author at the end of the act'--to which I replied that the author

had been too sick and sorry at the whole treatment of his play to do any

such thing. Such a call there truly \_was\_, and Mr. Anderson had to come

forward and 'beg the author to come forward if he were in the house--a

circumstance of which he was not aware:' whereat the author laughed at

him from a box just opposite. . . . I would submit to anybody drawing a

conclusion from one or two facts past contradiction, whether that play

could have thoroughly failed which was not only not withdrawn at

once but acted three nights in the same week, and years afterwards,

reproduced at his own theatre, during my absence in Italy, by Mr.

Phelps--the person most completely aware of the untoward circumstances

which stood originally in the way of success. Why not enquire how it

happens that, this second time, there was no doubt of the play's doing

as well as plays ordinarily do? for those were not the days of a 'run'.

. . . . .

. . . This 'last word' has indeed been an Aristophanic one of fifty

syllables: but I have spoken it, relieved myself, and commend all that

concerns me to the approved and valued friend of whom I am proud to

account myself in corresponding friendship, His truly ever Robert

Browning.

Mr. Browning also alludes to Mr. Phelps's acting as not only not having

been detrimental to the play, but having helped to save it, in the

conspiracy of circumstances which seemed to invoke its failure. This was

a mistake, since Macready had been anxious to resume the part, and would

have saved it, to say the least, more thoroughly. It must, however, be

remembered that the irritation which these letters express was due much

less to the nature of the facts recorded in them than to the manner in

which they had been brought before Mr. Browning's mind. Writing on the

subject to Lady Martin in February 1881, he had spoken very temperately

of Macready's treatment of his play, while deprecating the injustice

towards his own friendship which its want of frankness involved: and

many years before this, the touch of a common sorrow had caused the old

feeling, at least momentarily, to well up again. The two met for the

first time after these occurrences when Mr. Browning had returned, a

widower, from Italy. Mr. Macready, too, had recently lost his wife; and

Mr. Browning could only start forward, grasp the hand of his old friend,

and in a voice choked with emotion say, 'O Macready!'

Lady Martin has spoken to me of the poet's attitude on the occasion of

this performance as being full of generous sympathy for those who were

working with him, as well as of the natural anxiety of a young author

for his own success. She also remains convinced that this sympathy led

him rather to over-than to under-rate the support he received. She wrote

concerning it in 'Blackwood's Magazine', March 1881:

'It seems but yesterday that I sat by his [Mr. Elton's] side in the

green-room at the reading of Robert Browning's beautiful drama, 'A Blot

in the 'Scutcheon'. As a rule Mr. Macready always read the new plays.

But owing, I suppose, to some press of business, the task was entrusted

on this occasion to the head prompter,--a clever man in his way, but

wholly unfitted to bring out, or even to understand, Mr. Browning's

meaning. Consequently, the delicate, subtle lines were twisted,

perverted, and sometimes even made ridiculous in his hands. My "cruel

father" [Mr. Elton] was a warm admirer of the poet. He sat writhing and

indignant, and tried by gentle asides to make me see the real meaning of

the verse. But somehow the mischief proved irreparable, for a few of

the actors during the rehearsals chose to continue to misunderstand the

text, and never took the interest in the play which they would have done

had Mr. Macready read it.'

Looking back on the first appearance of his tragedy through the widening

perspectives of nearly forty years, Mr. Browning might well declare as

he did in the letter to Lady Martin to which I have just referred, that

her '\_perfect\_ behaviour as a woman' and her 'admirable playing as an

actress' had been (or at all events were) to him 'the one gratifying

circumstance connected with it.'

He also felt it a just cause of bitterness that the letter from Charles

Dickens,\* which conveyed his almost passionate admiration of 'A Blot in

the 'Scutcheon', and was clearly written to Mr. Forster in order that

it might be seen, was withheld for thirty years from his knowledge, and

that of the public whose judgment it might so largely have influenced.

Nor was this the only time in the poet's life that fairly earned honours

escaped him.

\* See Forster's 'Life of Dickens'.

'Colombe's Birthday' was produced in 1853 at the Haymarket;\* and

afterwards in the provinces, under the direction of Miss Helen Faucit,

who created the principal part. It was again performed for the Browning

Society in 1885,\*\* and although Miss Alma Murray, as Colombe, was almost

entirely supported by amateurs, the result fully justified Miss

Mary Robinson (now Madame James Darmesteter) in writing immediately

afterwards in the Boston 'Literary World':\*\*\*

\* Also in 1853 or 1854 at Boston.

\*\* It had been played by amateurs, members of the Browning

Society, and their friends, at the house of Mr. Joseph King,

in January 1882.

\*\*\* December 12, 1885; quoted in Mr. Arthur Symons'

'Introduction to the Study of Browning'.

'"Colombe's Birthday" is charming on the boards, clearer, more direct in

action, more full of delicate surprises than one imagines it in print.

With a very little cutting it could be made an excellent acting play.'

Mr. Gosse has seen a first edition copy of it marked for acting, and

alludes in his 'Personalia' to the greatly increased knowledge of the

stage which its minute directions displayed. They told also of sad

experience in the sacrifice of the poet which the play-writer so often

exacts: since they included the proviso that unless a very good Valence

could be found, a certain speech of his should be left out. That speech

is very important to the poetic, and not less to the moral, purpose

of the play: the triumph of unworldly affections. It is that in which

Valence defies the platitudes so often launched against rank and power,

and shows that these may be very beautiful things--in which he pleads

for his rival, and against his own heart. He is the better man of

the two, and Colombe has fallen genuinely in love with him. But the

instincts of sovereignty are not outgrown in one day however eventful,

and the young duchess has shown herself amply endowed with them. The

Prince's offer promised much, and it held still more. The time may come

when she will need that crowning memory of her husband's unselfishness

and truth, not to regret what she has done.

'King Victor and King Charles' and 'The Return of the Druses' are both

admitted by competent judges to have good qualifications for the stage;

and Mr. Browning would have preferred seeing one of these acted to

witnessing the revival of 'Strafford' or 'A Blot in the 'Scutcheon',

from neither of which the best amateur performance could remove the

stigma of past, real or reputed, failure; and when once a friend

belonging to the Browning Society told him she had been seriously

occupied with the possibility of producing the Eastern play, he assented

to the idea with a simplicity that was almost touching, 'It \_was\_ written

for the stage,' he said, 'and has only one scene.' He knew, however,

that the single scene was far from obviating all the difficulties of

the case, and that the Society, with its limited means, did the best it

could.

I seldom hear any allusion to a passage in 'King Victor and King

Charles' which I think more than rivals the famous utterance of Valence,

revealing as it does the same grasp of non-conventional truth, while its

occasion lends itself to a far deeper recognition of the mystery,

the frequent hopeless dilemma of our moral life. It is that in which

Polixena, the wife of Charles, entreats him for \_duty's\_ sake to retain

the crown, though he will earn, by so doing, neither the credit of a

virtuous deed nor the sure, persistent consciousness of having performed

one.

Four poems of the 'Dramatic Lyrics' had appeared, as I have said, in the

'Monthly Repository'. Six of those included in the 'Dramatic Lyrics and

Romances' were first published in 'Hood's Magazine' from June 1844

to April 1845, a month before Hood's death. These poems were, 'The

Laboratory', 'Claret and Tokay', 'Garden Fancies', 'The Boy and the

Angel', 'The Tomb at St. Praxed's', and 'The Flight of the Duchess'. Mr.

Hood's health had given way under stress of work, and Mr. Browning

with other friends thus came forward to help him. The fact deserves

remembering in connection with his subsequent unbroken rule never to

write for magazines. He might always have made exceptions for friendly

or philanthropic objects; the appearance of 'Herve Riel' in the

'Cornhill Magazine', 1870, indeed proves that it was so. But the offer

of a blank cheque would not have tempted him, for his own sake, to this

concession, as he would have deemed it, of his integrity of literary

purpose.

'In a Gondola' grew out of a single verse extemporized for a picture by

Maclise, in what circumstances we shall hear in the poet's own words.

The first proof of 'Artemis Prologuizes' had the following note:

'I had better say perhaps that the above is nearly all retained of a

tragedy I composed, much against my endeavour, while in bed with a fever

two years ago--it went farther into the story of Hippolytus and Aricia;

but when I got well, putting only thus much down at once, I soon forgot

the remainder.'\*

\* When Mr. Browning gave me these supplementary details for

the 'Handbook', he spoke as if his illness had interrupted

the work, not preceded its conception. The real fact is, I

think, the more striking.

Mr. Browning would have been very angry with himself if he had known he

ever wrote 'I \_had\_ better'; and the punctuation of this note, as well as

of every other unrevised specimen which we possess of his early writing,

helps to show by what careful study of the literary art he must have

acquired his subsequent mastery of it.

'Cristina' was addressed in fancy to the Spanish queen. It is to be

regretted that the poem did not remain under its original heading of

'Queen Worship': as this gave a practical clue to the nature of the love

described, and the special remoteness of its object.

'The Pied Piper of Hamelin' and another poem were written in May 1842

for Mr. Macready's little eldest son, Willy, who was confined to the

house by illness, and who was to amuse himself by illustrating the poems

as well as reading them;\* and the first of these, though not intended

for publication, was added to the 'Dramatic Lyrics', because some

columns of that number of 'Bells and Pomegranates' still required

filling. It is perhaps not known that the second was 'Crescentius, the

Pope's Legate': now included in 'Asolando'.

\* Miss Browning has lately found some of the illustrations,

and the touching childish letter together with which

her brother received them.

Mr. Browning's father had himself begun a rhymed story on the subject of

'The Pied Piper'; but left it unfinished when he discovered that his son

was writing one. The fragment survives as part of a letter addressed to

Mr. Thomas Powell, and which I have referred to as in the possession of

Mr. Dykes Campbell.

'The Lost Leader' has given rise to periodical questionings continued

until the present day, as to the person indicated in its title. Mr.

Browning answered or anticipated them fifteen years ago in a letter to

Miss Lee, of West Peckham, Maidstone. It was his reply to an application

in verse made to him in their very young days by herself and two other

members of her family, the manner of which seems to have unusually

pleased him.

Villers-sur-mer, Calvados, France: September 7, '75.

Dear Friends,--Your letter has made a round to reach me--hence the delay

in replying to it--which you will therefore pardon. I have been asked

the question you put to me--tho' never asked so poetically and so

pleasantly--I suppose a score of times: and I can only answer, with

something of shame and contrition, that I undoubtedly had Wordsworth in

my mind--but simply as 'a model'; you know, an artist takes one or two

striking traits in the features of his 'model', and uses them to start

his fancy on a flight which may end far enough from the good man or

woman who happens to be 'sitting' for nose and eye.

I thought of the great Poet's abandonment of liberalism, at an unlucky

juncture, and no repaying consequence that I could ever see. But--once

call my fancy-portrait 'Wordsworth'--and how much more ought one to

say,--how much more would not I have attempted to say!

There is my apology, dear friends, and your acceptance of it will

confirm me Truly yours, Robert Browning.

Some fragments of correspondence, not all very interesting, and his

own allusion to an attack of illness, are our only record of the poet's

general life during the interval which separated the publication of

'Pippa Passes' from his second Italian journey.

An undated letter to Miss Haworth probably refers to the close of 1841.

'. . . I am getting to love painting as I did once. Do you know I was

a young wonder (as are eleven out of the dozen of us) at drawing? My

father had faith in me, and over yonder in a drawer of mine lies, I

well know, a certain cottage and rocks in lead pencil and black currant

jam-juice (paint being rank poison, as they said when I sucked my

brushes) with his (my father's) note in one corner, "R. B., aetat. two

years three months." "How fast, alas, our days we spend--How vain

they be, how soon they end!" I am going to print "Victor", however, by

February, and there is one thing not so badly painted in there--oh, let

me tell you. I chanced to call on Forster the other day, and he pressed

me into committing verse on the instant, not the minute, in Maclise's

behalf, who has wrought a divine Venetian work, it seems, for the

British Institution. Forster described it well--but I could do nothing

better, than this wooden ware--(all the "properties", as we say, were

given, and the problem was how to catalogue them in rhyme and unreason).

I send my heart up to thee, all my heart

In this my singing!

For the stars help me, and the sea bears part;

The very night is clinging

Closer to Venice' streets to leave me space

Above me, whence thy face

May light my joyous heart to thee its dwelling-place.

Singing and stars and night and Venice streets and joyous heart, are

properties, do you please to see. And now tell me, is this below the

average of catalogue original poetry? Tell me--for to that end of being

told, I write. . . . I dined with dear Carlyle and his wife (catch

me calling people "dear" in a hurry, except in letter-beginnings!)

yesterday. I don't know any people like them. There was a son of Burns

there, Major Burns whom Macready knows--he sung "Of all the airts",

"John Anderson", and another song of his father's. . . .'

In the course of 1842 he wrote the following note to Miss Flower,

evidently relating to the publication of her 'Hymns and Anthems'.

New Cross, Hatcham, Surrey: Tuesday morning.

Dear Miss Flower,--I am sorry for what must grieve Mr. Fox; for myself,

I beg him earnestly not to see me till his entire convenience, however

pleased I shall be to receive the letter you promise on his part.

And how can I thank you enough for this good news--all this music I

shall be so thoroughly gratified to hear? Ever yours faithfully, Robert

Browning.

His last letter to her was written in 1845; the subject being a concert

of her own sacred music which she was about to give; and again, although

more slightly, I anticipate the course of events, in order to give it

in its natural connection with the present one. Mr. Browning was

now engaged to be married, and the last ring of youthful levity had

disappeared from his tone; but neither the new happiness nor the new

responsibility had weakened his interest in his boyhood's friend. Miss

Flower must then have been slowly dying, and the closing words of the

letter have the solemnity of a last farewell.

Sunday.

Dear Miss Flower,--I was very foolishly surprized at the sorrowful

finical notice you mention: foolishly; for, God help us, how else is

it with all critics of everything--don't I hear them talk and see them

write? I dare-say he admires you as he said.

For me, I never had another feeling than entire admiration for your

music--entire admiration--I put it apart from all other English music I

know, and fully believe in it as \_the\_ music we all waited for.

Of your health I shall not trust myself to speak: you must know what

is unspoken. I should have been most happy to see you if but for a

minute--and if next Wednesday, I might take your hand for a moment.--

But you would concede that, if it were right, remembering what is now

very old friendship. May God bless you for ever (The signature has been

cut off.)

In the autumn of 1844 Mr. Browning set forth for Italy, taking ship, it

is believed, direct to Naples. Here he made the acquaintance of a young

Neapolitan gentleman who had spent most of his life in Paris; and they

became such good friends that they proceeded to Rome together. Mr.

Scotti was an invaluable travelling companion, for he engaged their

conveyance, and did all such bargaining in their joint interest as the

habits of his country required. 'As I write,' Mr. Browning said in a

letter to his sister, 'I hear him disputing our bill in the next room.

He does not see why we should pay for six wax candles when we have

used only two.' At Rome they spent most of their evenings with an

old acquaintance of Mr. Browning's, then Countess Carducci, and she

pronounced Mr. Scotti the handsomest man she had ever seen. He certainly

bore no appearance of being the least prosperous. But he blew out his

brains soon after he and his new friend had parted; and I do not think

the act was ever fully accounted for.

It must have been on his return journey that Mr. Browning went to

Leghorn to see Edward John Trelawney, to whom he carried a letter of

introduction. He described the interview long afterwards to Mr. Val

Prinsep, but chiefly in his impressions of the cool courage which Mr.

Trelawney had displayed during its course. A surgeon was occupied all

the time in probing his leg for a bullet which had been lodged there

some years before, and had lately made itself felt; and he showed

himself absolutely indifferent to the pain of the operation. Mr.

Browning's main object in paying the visit had been, naturally, to speak

with one who had known Byron and been the last to see Shelley alive; but

we only hear of the two poets that they formed in part the subject

of their conversation. He reached England, again, we suppose, through

Germany--since he avoided Paris as before.

It has been asserted by persons otherwise well informed, that on this,

if not on his previous Italian journey, Mr. Browning became acquainted

with Stendhal, then French Consul at Civita Vecchia, and that he imbibed

from the great novelist a taste for curiosities of Italian family

history, which ultimately led him in the direction of the Franceschini

case. It is certain that he profoundly admired this writer, and if he

was not, at some time or other, introduced to him it was because the

opportunity did not occur. But there is abundant evidence that no

introduction took place, and quite sufficient proof that none was

possible. Stendhal died in Paris in March 1842; and granting that he was

at Civita Vecchia when the poet made his earlier voyage--no certainty

even while he held the appointment--the ship cannot have touched there

on its way to Trieste. It is also a mistake to suppose that Mr. Browning

was specially interested in ancient chronicles, as such. This was one of

the points on which he distinctly differed from his father. He took his

dramatic subjects wherever he found them, and any historical research

which they ultimately involved was undertaken for purposes of

verification. 'Sordello' alone may have been conceived on a rather

different plan, and I have no authority whatever for admitting that it

was so. The discovery of the record of the Franceschini case was, as its

author has everywhere declared, an accident.

A single relic exists for us of this visit to the South--a shell picked

up, according to its inscription, on one of the Syren Isles, October

4, 1844; but many of its reminiscences are embodied in that vivid and

charming picture 'The Englishman in Italy', which appeared in the 'Bells

and Pomegranates' number for the following year. Naples always remained

a bright spot in the poet's memory; and if it had been, like Asolo, his

first experience of Italy, it must have drawn him in later years the

more powerfully of the two. At one period, indeed, he dreamed of it as a

home for his declining days.

Chapter 9

1844-1849

Introduction to Miss Barrett--Engagement--Motives for

Secrecy--Marriage--Journey to Italy--Extract of Letter from

Mr. Fox--Mrs. Browning's Letters to Miss Mitford--Life at

Pisa--Vallombrosa--Florence; Mr. Powers; Miss Boyle--Proposed British

Mission to the Vatican--Father Prout--Palazzo Guidi--Fano; Ancona--'A

Blot in the 'Scutcheon' at Sadler's Wells.

During his recent intercourse with the Browning family Mr. Kenyon had

often spoken of his invalid cousin, Elizabeth Barrett,\* and had given

them copies of her works; and when the poet returned to England, late in

1844, he saw the volume containing 'Lady Geraldine's Courtship', which

had appeared during his absence. On hearing him express his admiration

of it, Mr. Kenyon begged him to write to Miss Barrett, and himself tell

her how the poems had impressed him; 'for,' he added, 'my cousin is a

great invalid, and sees no one, but great souls jump at sympathy.'

Mr. Browning did write, and, a few months, probably, after the

correspondence had been established, begged to be allowed to visit

her. She at first refused this, on the score of her delicate health and

habitual seclusion, emphasizing the refusal by words of such touching

humility and resignation that I cannot refrain from quoting them. 'There

is nothing to see in me, nothing to hear in me. I am a weed fit for the

ground and darkness.' But her objections were overcome, and their first

interview sealed Mr. Browning's fate.

\* Properly E. Barrett Moulton-Barrett. The first of these

surnames was that originally borne by the family, but

dropped on the annexation of the second. It has now for

some years been resumed.

There is no cause for surprize in the passionate admiration with

which Miss Barrett so instantly inspired him. To begin with, he was

heart-whole. It would be too much to affirm that, in the course of his

thirty-two years, he had never met with a woman whom he could entirely

love; but if he had, it was not under circumstances which favoured the

growth of such a feeling. She whom he now saw for the first time had

long been to him one of the greatest of living poets; she was learned as

women seldom were in those days. It must have been apparent, in the most

fugitive contact, that her moral nature was as exquisite as her mind

was exceptional. She looked much younger than her age, which he only

recently knew to have been six years beyond his own; and her face was

filled with beauty by the large, expressive eyes. The imprisoned love

within her must unconsciously have leapt to meet his own. It would have

been only natural that he should grow into the determination to devote

his life to hers, or be swept into an offer of marriage by a sudden

impulse which his after-judgment would condemn. Neither of these things

occurred. The offer was indeed made under a sudden and overmastering

impulse. But it was persistently repeated, till it had obtained a

conditional assent. No sane man in Mr. Browning's position could have

been ignorant of the responsibilities he was incurring. He had, it

is true, no experience of illness. Of its nature, its treatment, its

symptoms direct and indirect, he remained pathetically ignorant to his

dying day. He did not know what disqualifications for active existence

might reside in the fragile, recumbent form, nor in the long years

lived without change of air or scene beyond the passage, not always even

allowed, from bed-room to sitting-room, from sofa to bed again. But he

did know that Miss Barrett received him lying down, and that his very

ignorance of her condition left him without security for her ever being

able to stand. A strong sense of sympathy and pity could alone entirely

justify or explain his act--a strong desire to bring sunshine into that

darkened life. We might be sure that these motives had been present with

him if we had no direct authority for believing it; and we have this

authority in his own comparatively recent words: 'She had so much need

of care and protection. There was so much pity in what I felt for her!'

The pity was, it need hardly be said, at no time a substitute for love,

though the love in its full force only developed itself later; but it

supplied an additional incentive.

Miss Barrett had made her acceptance of Mr. Browning's proposal

contingent on her improving in health. The outlook was therefore vague.

But under the influence of this great new happiness she did gain

some degree of strength. They saw each other three times a week; they

exchanged letters constantly, and a very deep and perfect understanding

established itself between them. Mr. Browning never mentioned his visits

except to his own family, because it was naturally feared that if

Miss Barrett were known to receive one person, other friends, or even

acquaintances, would claim admittance to her; and Mr. Kenyon, who was

greatly pleased by the result of his introduction, kept silence for the

same reason.

In this way the months slipped by till the summer of 1846 was drawing to

its close, and Miss Barrett's doctor then announced that her only chance

of even comparative recovery lay in spending the coming winter in the

South. There was no rational obstacle to her acting on this advice,

since more than one of her brothers was willing to escort her; but Mr.

Barrett, while surrounding his daughter with every possible comfort,

had resigned himself to her invalid condition and expected her also to

acquiesce in it. He probably did not believe that she would benefit by

the proposed change. At any rate he refused his consent to it. There

remained to her only one alternative--to break with the old home and

travel southwards as Mr. Browning's wife.

When she had finally assented to this course, she took a preparatory

step which, in so far as it was known, must itself have been

sufficiently startling to those about her: she drove to Regent's Park,

and when there, stepped out of the carriage and on to the grass. I do

not know how long she stood--probably only for a moment; but I well

remember hearing that when, after so long an interval, she felt earth

under her feet and air about her, the sensation was almost bewilderingly

strange.

They were married, with strict privacy, on September 12, 1846, at St.

Pancras Church.

The engaged pair had not only not obtained Mr. Barrett's sanction to

their marriage; they had not even invoked it; and the doubly clandestine

character thus forced upon the union could not be otherwise than

repugnant to Mr. Browning's pride; but it was dictated by the deepest

filial affection on the part of his intended wife. There could be no

question in so enlightened a mind of sacrificing her own happiness with

that of the man she loved; she was determined to give herself to him.

But she knew that her father would never consent to her doing so; and

she preferred marrying without his knowledge to acting in defiance of a

prohibition which, once issued, he would never have revoked, and which

would have weighed like a portent of evil upon her. She even kept the

secret of her engagement from her intimate friend Miss Mitford, and

her second father, Mr. Kenyon, that they might not be involved in its

responsibility. And Mr. Kenyon, who, probably of all her circle, best

understood the case, was grateful to her for this consideration.

Mr. Barrett was one of those men who will not part with their children;

who will do anything for them except allow them to leave the parental

home. We have all known fathers of this type. He had nothing to urge

against Robert Browning. When Mr. Kenyon, later, said to him that he

could not understand his hostility to the marriage, since there was no

man in the world to whom he would more gladly have given his daughter

if he had been so fortunate as to possess one,\* he replied: 'I have no

objection to the young man, but my daughter should have been thinking of

another world;' and, given his conviction that Miss Barrett's state was

hopeless, some allowance must be made for the angered sense of fitness

which her elopement was calculated to arouse in him. But his attitude

was the same, under the varying circumstances, with all his daughters

and sons alike. There was no possible husband or wife whom he would

cordially have accepted for one of them.

\* Mr. Kenyon had been twice married, but he had no children.

Mr. Browning had been willing, even at that somewhat late age, to study

for the Bar, or accept, if he could obtain it, any other employment

which might render him less ineligible from a pecuniary point of view.

But Miss Barrett refused to hear of such a course; and the subsequent

necessity for her leaving England would have rendered it useless.

For some days after their marriage Mr. and Mrs. Browning returned to

their old life. He justly thought that the agitation of the ceremony

had been, for the moment, as much as she could endure, and had therefore

fixed for it a day prior by one week to that of their intended departure

from England. The only difference in their habits was that he did not

see her; he recoiled from the hypocrisy of asking for her under her

maiden name; and during this passive interval, fortunately short, he

carried a weight of anxiety and of depression which placed it among the

most painful periods of his existence.

In the late afternoon or evening of September 19, Mrs. Browning,

attended by her maid and her dog, stole away from her father's house.

The family were at dinner, at which meal she was not in the habit of

joining them; her sisters Henrietta and Arabel had been throughout in

the secret of her attachment and in full sympathy with it; in the case

of the servants, she was also sure of friendly connivance. There was no

difficulty in her escape, but that created by the dog, which might be

expected to bark its consciousness of the unusual situation. She took

him into her confidence. She said: 'O Flush, if you make a sound, I

am lost.' And Flush understood, as what good dog would not?--and crept

after his mistress in silence. I do not remember where her husband

joined her; we may be sure it was as near her home as possible. That

night they took the boat to Havre, on their way to Paris.

Only a short time elapsed before Mr. Barrett became aware of what had

happened. It is not necessary to dwell on his indignation, which at that

moment, I believe, was shared by all his sons. Nor were they the only

persons to be agitated by the occurrence. If there was wrath in the

Barrett family, there was consternation in that of Mr. Browning. He

had committed a crime in the eyes of his wife's father; but he had been

guilty, in the judgment of his own parents, of one of those errors which

are worse. A hundred times the possible advantages of marrying a Miss

Barrett could never have balanced for them the risks and dangers he

had incurred in wresting to himself the guardianship of that frail life

which might perish in his hands, leaving him to be accused of having

destroyed it; and they must have awaited the event with feelings never

to be forgotten.

It was soon to be apparent that in breaking the chains which bound her

to a sick room, Mr. Browning had not killed his wife, but was giving her

a new lease of existence. His parents and sister soon loved her dearly,

for her own sake as well as her husband's; and those who, if in a

mistaken manner, had hitherto cherished her, gradually learned, with one

exception, to value him for hers. It would, however, be useless to

deny that the marriage was a hazardous experiment, involving risks of

suffering quite other than those connected with Mrs. Browning's safety:

the latent practical disparities of an essentially vigorous and an

essentially fragile existence; and the time came when these were to make

themselves felt. Mrs. Browning had been a delicate infant. She had also

outgrown this delicacy and developed into a merry, and, in the harmless

sense, mischief-loving child. The accident which subsequently undermined

her life could only have befallen a very active and healthy girl.\*

Her condition justified hope and, to a great extent, fulfilled it. She

rallied surprisingly and almost suddenly in the sunshine of her new

life, and remained for several years at the higher physical level: her

natural and now revived spirits sometimes, I imagine, lifting her beyond

it. But her ailments were too radical for permanent cure, as the weak

voice and shrunken form never ceased to attest. They renewed themselves,

though in slightly different conditions; and she gradually relapsed,

during the winters at least, into something like the home-bound

condition of her earlier days. It became impossible that she should

share the more active side of her husband's existence. It had to be

alternately suppressed and carried on without her. The deep heart-love,

the many-sided intellectual sympathy, preserved their union in rare

beauty to the end. But to say that it thus maintained itself as if by

magic, without effort of self-sacrifice on his part or of resignation on

hers, would be as unjust to the noble qualities of both, as it would be

false to assert that its compensating happiness had ever failed them.

\* Her family at that time lived in the country. She was a

constant rider, and fond of saddling her pony; and one day,

when she was about fourteen, she overbalanced herself in

lifting the saddle, and fell backward, inflicting injuries

on her head, or rather spine, which caused her great

suffering, but of which the nature remained for some time

undiscovered.

Mr. Browning's troubles did not, even for the present, exhaust

themselves in that week of apprehension. They assumed a deeper reality

when his delicate wife first gave herself into his keeping, and the long

hours on steamboat and in diligence were before them. What she suffered

in body, and he in mind, during the first days of that wedding-journey

is better imagined than told. In Paris they either met, or were joined

by, a friend, Mrs. Anna Jameson (then also en route for Italy), and Mrs.

Browning was doubly cared for till she and her husband could once more

put themselves on their way. At Genoa came the long-needed rest in

southern land. From thence, in a few days, they went on to Pisa, and

settled there for the winter.

Even so great a friend as John Forster was not in the secret of Mr.

Browning's marriage; we learn this through an amusing paragraph in a

letter from Mr. Fox, written soon after it had taken place:

'Forster never heard of the Browning marriage till the proof of the

newspaper ('Examiner') notice was sent; when he went into one of his

great passions at the supposed hoax, ordered up the compositor to have a

swear at him, and demanded to see the MS. from which it was taken: so it

was brought, and he instantly recognised the hand of Browning's sister.

Next day came a letter from R. B., saying he had often meant to tell him

or write of it, but hesitated between the two, and neglected both.

'She was better, and a winter in Italy had been recommended some months

ago.

'It seems as if made up by their poetry rather than themselves.'

Many interesting external details of Mr. Browning's married life must

have been lost to us through the wholesale destruction of his letters to

his family, of which mention has been already made, and which he carried

out before leaving Warwick Crescent about four years ago; and Mrs.

Browning's part in the correspondence, though still preserved, cannot

fill the gap, since for a long time it chiefly consisted of

little personal outpourings, inclosed in her husband's letters and

supplementary to them. But she also wrote constantly to Miss Mitford;

and, from the letters addressed to her, now fortunately in Mr. Barrett

Browning's hands, it has been possible to extract many passages of a

sufficiently great, and not too private, interest for our purpose.

These extracts--in some cases almost entire letters--indeed constitute

a fairly complete record of Mr. and Mrs. Browning's joint life till

the summer of 1854, when Miss Mitford's death was drawing near, and the

correspondence ceased. Their chronological order is not always certain,

because Mrs. Browning never gave the year in which her letters were

written, and in some cases the postmark is obliterated; but the missing

date can almost always be gathered from their contents. The first letter

is probably written from Paris.

Oct. 2 ('46).

'. . . and he, as you say, had done everything for me--he loved me for

reasons which had helped to weary me of myself--loved me heart to heart

persistently--in spite of my own will . . . drawn me back to life and

hope again when I had done with both. My life seemed to belong to him

and to none other, at last, and I had no power to speak a word. Have

faith in me, my dearest friend, till you know him. The intellect is so

little in comparison to all the rest--to the womanly tenderness, the

inexhaustible goodness, the high and noble aspiration of every hour.

Temper, spirits, manners--there is not a flaw anywhere. I shut my eyes

sometimes and fancy it all a dream of my guardian angel. Only, if it had

been a dream, the pain of some parts of it would have wakened me before

now--it is not a dream. . . .'

The three next speak for themselves.

Pisa: ('46).

'. . . For Pisa, we both like it extremely. The city is full of beauty

and repose,--and the purple mountains gloriously seem to beckon us on

deeper into the vine land. We have rooms close to the Duomo, and leaning

down on the great Collegio built by Facini. Three excellent bed-rooms

and a sitting-room matted and carpeted, looking comfortable even for

England. For the last fortnight, except the last few sunny days, we have

had rain; but the climate is as mild as possible, no cold with all the

damp. Delightful weather we had for the travelling. Mrs. Jameson says

she won't call me improved but transformed rather. . . . I mean to know

something about pictures some day. Robert does, and I shall get him to

open my eyes for me with a little instruction--in this place are to be

seen the first steps of Art. . . .'

Pisa: Dec. 19 ('46).

'. . . Within these three or four days we have had frost--yes, and a

little snow--for the first time, say the Pisans, within five years.

Robert says the mountains are powdered towards Lucca. . . .'

Feb. 3 ('47).

'. . . Robert is a warm admirer of Balzac and has read most of his

books, but certainly he does not in a general way appreciate our French

people quite with my warmth. He takes too high a standard, I tell him,

and won't listen to a story for a story's sake--I can bear, you know, to

be amused without a strong pull on my admiration. So we have great wars

sometimes--I put up Dumas' flag or Soulie's or Eugene Sue's (yet he was

properly impressed by the 'Mysteres de Paris'), and carry it till my

arms ache. The plays and vaudevilles he knows far more of than I do,

and always maintains they are the happiest growth of the French school.

Setting aside the 'masters', observe; for Balzac and George Sand hold

all their honours. Then we read together the other day 'Rouge et Noir',

that powerful work of Stendhal's, and he observed that it was exactly

like Balzac 'in the raw'--in the material and undeveloped conception . . .

We leave Pisa in April, and pass through Florence towards the north of

Italy . . .'

(She writes out a long list of the 'Comedie Humaine' for Miss Mitford.)

Mr. and Mrs. Browning must have remained in Florence, instead of merely

passing through it; this is proved by the contents of the two following

letters:

Aug. 20 ('47).

'. . . We have spent one of the most delightful of summers

notwithstanding the heat, and I begin to comprehend the possibility of

St. Lawrence's ecstasies on the gridiron. Very hot certainly it has been

and is, yet there have been cool intermissions, and as we have spacious

and airy rooms, as Robert lets me sit all day in my white dressing-gown

without a single masculine criticism, and as we can step out of the

window on a sort of balcony terrace which is quite private, and swims

over with moonlight in the evenings, and as we live upon water-melons

and iced water and figs and all manner of fruit, we bear the heat with

an angelic patience.

We tried to make the monks of Vallombrosa let us stay with them for two

months, but the new abbot said or implied that Wilson and I stank in his

nostrils, being women. So we were sent away at the end of five days. So

provoking! Such scenery, such hills, such a sea of hills looking alive

among the clouds--which rolled, it was difficult to discern. Such fine

woods, supernaturally silent, with the ground black as ink. There were

eagles there too, and there was no road. Robert went on horseback,

and Wilson and I were drawn on a sledge--(i.e. an old hamper, a basket

wine-hamper--without a wheel) by two white bullocks, up the precipitous

mountains. Think of my travelling in those wild places at four o'clock

in the morning! a little frightened, dreadfully tired, but in an ecstasy

of admiration. It was a sight to see before one died and went away into

another world. But being expelled ignominiously at the end of five days,

we had to come back to Florence to find a new apartment cooler than the

old, and wait for dear Mr. Kenyon, and dear Mr. Kenyon does not come

after all. And on the 20th of September we take up our knapsacks and

turn our faces towards Rome, creeping slowly along, with a pause at

Arezzo, and a longer pause at Perugia, and another perhaps at Terni.

Then we plan to take an apartment we have heard of, over the Tarpeian

rock, and enjoy Rome as we have enjoyed Florence. More can scarcely be.

This Florence is unspeakably beautiful . . .'

Oct. ('47).

'. . . Very few acquaintances have we made in Florence, and very quietly

lived out our days. Mr. Powers, the sculptor, is our chief friend and

favourite. A most charming, simple, straightforward, genial American--as

simple as the man of genius he has proved himself to be. He sometimes

comes to talk and take coffee with us, and we like him much. The

sculptor has eyes like a wild Indian's, so black and full of light--you

would scarcely marvel if they clove the marble without the help of his

hands. We have seen, besides, the Hoppners, Lord Byron's friends at

Venice; and Miss Boyle, a niece of the Earl of Cork, an authoress and

poetess on her own account, having been introduced to Robert in London

at Lady Morgan's, has hunted us out, and paid us a visit. A very

vivacious little person, with sparkling talk enough . . .'

In this year, 1847, the question arose of a British mission to the

Vatican; and Mr. Browning wrote to Mr. Monckton Milnes begging him to

signify to the Foreign Office his more than willingness to take part

in it. He would be glad and proud, he said, to be secretary to such an

embassy, and to work like a horse in his vocation. The letter is given

in the lately published biography of Lord Houghton, and I am obliged to

confess that it has been my first intimation of the fact recorded there.

When once his 'Paracelsus' had appeared, and Mr. Browning had taken rank

as a poet, he renounced all idea of more active work; and the tone and

habits of his early married life would have seemed scarcely consistent

with a renewed impulse towards it. But the fact was in some sense due

to the very circumstances of that life: among them, his wife's probable

incitement to, and certain sympathy with, the proceeding.

The projected winter in Rome had been given up, I believe against the

doctor's advice, on the strength of the greater attractions of Florence.

Our next extract is dated from thence, Dec. 8, 1847.

'. . . Think what we have done since I last wrote to you. Taken two

houses, that is, two apartments, each for six months, presigning the

contract. You will set it down to excellent poet's work in the way

of domestic economy, but the fault was altogether mine, as usual. My

husband, to please me, took rooms which I could not be pleased with

three days through the absence of sunshine and warmth. The consequence

was that we had to pay heaps of guineas away, for leave to go away

ourselves--any alternative being preferable to a return of illness--and

I am sure I should have been ill if we had persisted in staying there.

You can scarcely fancy the wonderful difference which the sun makes

in Italy. So away we came into the blaze of him in the Piazza Pitti;

precisely opposite the Grand Duke's palace; I with my remorse, and poor

Robert without a single reproach. Any other man, a little lower than the

angels, would have stamped and sworn a little for the mere relief of the

thing--but as to \_his\_ being angry with \_me\_ for any cause except not

eating enough dinner, the said sun would turn the wrong way first. So

here we are in the Pitti till April, in small rooms yellow with sunshine

from morning till evening, and most days I am able to get out into the

piazza and walk up and down for twenty minutes without feeling a breath

of the actual winter . . . and Miss Boyle, ever and anon, comes at

night, at nine o'clock, to catch us at hot chestnuts and mulled wine,

and warm her feet at our fire--and a kinder, more cordial little

creature, full of talent and accomplishment never had the world's polish

on it. Very amusing she is too, and original; and a good deal of

laughing she and Robert make between them. And this is nearly all we see

of the Face Divine--I can't make Robert go out a single evening. . . .'

We have five extracts for 1848. One of these, not otherwise dated,

describes an attack of sore-throat which was fortunately Mr. Browning's

last; and the letter containing it must have been written in the course

of the summer.

'. . . My husband was laid up for nearly a month with fever and relaxed

sore-throat. Quite unhappy I have been over those burning hands and

languid eyes--the only unhappiness I ever had by him. And then he

wouldn't see a physician, and if it had not been that just at the right

moment Mr. Mahoney, the celebrated Jesuit, and "Father Prout" of Fraser,

knowing everything as those Jesuits are apt to do, came in to us on

his way to Rome, pointed out to us that the fever got ahead through

weakness, and mixed up with his own kind hand a potion of eggs and port

wine; to the horror of our Italian servant, who lifted up his eyes at

such a prescription for fever, crying, "O Inglesi! Inglesi!" the case

would have been far worse, I have no kind of doubt, for the eccentric

prescription gave the power of sleeping, and the pulse grew quieter

directly. I shall always be grateful to Father Prout--always.'\*

\* It had not been merely a case of relaxed sore-throat.

There was an abscess, which burst during this first night of

sleep.

May 28.

'. . . And now I must tell you what we have done since I wrote last,

little thinking of doing so. You see our problem was, to get to England

as much in summer as possible, the expense of the intermediate journeys

making it difficult of solution. On examination of the whole case, it

appeared manifest that we were throwing money into the Arno, by our way

of taking furnished rooms, while to take an apartment and furnish it

would leave us a clear return of the furniture at the end of the

first year in exchange for our outlay, and all but a free residence

afterwards, the cheapness of furniture being quite fabulous at the

present crisis. . . . In fact we have really done it magnificently, and

planted ourselves in the Guidi Palace in the favourite suite of the last

Count (his arms are in scagliola on the floor of my bedroom). Though we

have six beautiful rooms and a kitchen, three of them quite palace rooms

and opening on a terrace, and though such furniture as comes by slow

degrees into them is antique and worthy of the place, we yet shall have

saved money by the end of this year. . . . Now I tell you all this lest

you should hear dreadful rumours of our having forsaken our native land,

venerable institutions and all, whereas we remember it so well (it's a

dear land in many senses), that we have done this thing chiefly in order

to make sure of getting back comfortably, . . . a stone's throw, too, it

is from the Pitti, and really in my present mind I would hardly exchange

with the Grand Duke himself. By the bye, as to street, we have no

spectators in windows in just the grey wall of a church called San

Felice for good omen.

'Now, have you heard enough of us? What I claimed first, in way of

privilege, was a spring-sofa to loll upon, and a supply of rain water to

wash in, and you shall see what a picturesque oil-jar they have given

us for the latter purpose; it would just hold the Captain of the

Forty Thieves. As for the chairs and tables, I yield the more especial

interest in them to Robert; only you would laugh to hear us correct

one another sometimes. "Dear, you get too many drawers, and not enough

washing-stands. Pray don't let us have any more drawers when we've

nothing more to put in them." There was no division on the necessity of

having six spoons--some questions passed themselves. . . .'

July.

'. . . I am quite well again and strong. Robert and I go out often after

tea in a wandering walk to sit in the Loggia and look at the Perseus,

or, better still, at the divine sunsets on the Arno, turning it to pure

gold under the bridges. After more than twenty months of marriage, we

are happier than ever. . . .'

Aug.

'. . . As for ourselves we have hardly done so well--yet well--having

enjoyed a great deal in spite of drawbacks. Murray, the traitor, sent us

to Fano as "a delightful summer residence for an English family," and we

found it uninhabitable from the heat, vegetation scorched into

paleness, the very air swooning in the sun, and the gloomy looks of the

inhabitants sufficiently corroborative of their words that no drop of

rain or dew ever falls there during the summer. A "circulating library"

which "does not give out books," and "a refined and intellectual Italian

society" (I quote Murray for that phrase) which "never reads a book

through" (I quote Mrs. Wiseman, Dr. Wiseman's mother, who has lived in

Fano seven years) complete the advantages of the place. Yet the churches

are very beautiful, and a divine picture of Guercino's is worth going

all that way to see. . . . We fled from Fano after three days, and

finding ourselves cheated out of our dream of summer coolness, resolved

on substituting for it what the Italians call "un bel giro". So we went

to Ancona--a striking sea city, holding up against the brown rocks, and

elbowing out the purple tides--beautiful to look upon. An exfoliation

of the rock itself you would call the houses that seem to grow there--so

identical is the colour and character. I should like to visit Ancona

again when there is a little air and shadow. We stayed a week, as it

was, living upon fish and cold water. . . .'

The one dated Florence, December 16, is interesting with reference to

Mr. Browning's attitude when he wrote the letters to Mr. Frank Hill

which I have recently quoted.

'We have been, at least I have been, a little anxious lately about the

fate of the 'Blot in the 'Scutcheon' which Mr. Phelps applied for

my husband's permission to revive at Sadler's. Of course putting the

request was mere form, as he had every right to act the play--only it

made ME anxious till we heard the result--and we both of us are very

grateful to dear Mr. Chorley, who not only made it his business to be at

the theatre the first night, but, before he slept, sat down like a true

friend to give us the story of the result, and never, he says, was a

more legitimate success. The play went straight to the hearts of the

audience, it seems, and we hear of its continuance on the stage, from

the papers. You may remember, or may not have heard, how Macready

brought it out and put his foot on it, in the flush of a quarrel between

manager and author; and Phelps, knowing the whole secret and feeling

the power of the play, determined on making a revival of it in his own

theatre. Mr. Chorley called his acting "fine". . . .'

Chapter 10

1849-1852

Death of Mr. Browning's Mother--Birth of his Son--Mrs. Browning's

Letters continued--Baths of Lucca--Florence again--Venice--Margaret

Fuller Ossoli--Visit to England--Winter in Paris--Carlyle--George

Sand--Alfred de Musset.

On March 9, 1849, Mr. Browning's son was born. With the joy of his

wife's deliverance from the dangers of such an event came also his

first great sorrow. His mother did not live to receive the news of

her grandchild's birth. The letter which conveyed it found her still

breathing, but in the unconsciousness of approaching death. There had

been no time for warning. The sister could only break the suddenness of

the shock. A letter of Mrs. Browning's tells what was to be told.

Florence: April 30 ('49).

'. . . This is the first packet of letters, except one to Wimpole

Street, which I have written since my confinement. You will have

heard how our joy turned suddenly into deep sorrow by the death of my

husband's mother. An unsuspected disease (ossification of the heart)

terminated in a fatal way--and she lay in the insensibility precursive

of the grave's when the letter written with such gladness by my poor

husband and announcing the birth of his child, reached her address. "It

would have made her heart bound," said her daughter to us. Poor tender

heart--the last throb was too near. The medical men would not allow

the news to be communicated. The next joy she felt was to be in heaven

itself. My husband has been in the deepest anguish, and indeed, except

for the courageous consideration of his sister who wrote two letters of

preparation, saying "She was not well" and she "was very ill" when in

fact all was over, I am frightened to think what the result would have

been to him. He has loved his mother as such passionate natures only

can love, and I never saw a man so bowed down in an extremity of

sorrow--never. Even now, the depression is great--and sometimes when I

leave him alone a little and return to the room, I find him in tears. I

do earnestly wish to change the scene and air--but where to go? England

looks terrible now. He says it would break his heart to see his mother's

roses over the wall and the place where she used to lay her scissors and

gloves--which I understand so thoroughly that I can't say "Let us go to

England." We must wait and see what his father and sister will choose to

do, or choose us to do--for of course a duty plainly seen would draw us

anywhere. My own dearest sisters will be painfully disappointed by any

change of plan--only they are too good and kind not to understand the

difficulty--not to see the motive. So do you, I am certain. It has been

very, very painful altogether, this drawing together of life and death.

Robert was too enraptured at my safety and with his little son, and the

sudden reaction was terrible. . . .'

Bagni di Lucca.

'. . . We have been wandering in search of cool air and a cool bough

among all the olive trees to build our summer nest on. My husband has

been suffering beyond what one could shut one's eyes to, in consequence

of the great mental shock of last March--loss of appetite, loss of

sleep--looks quite worn and altered. His spirits never rallied except

with an effort, and every letter from New Cross threw him back into deep

depression. I was very anxious, and feared much that the end of it

all would be (the intense heat of Florence assisting) nervous fever or

something similar; and I had the greatest difficulty in persuading

him to leave Florence for a month or two. He who generally delights in

travelling, had no mind for change or movement. I had to say and swear

that Baby and I couldn't bear the heat, and that we must and would go

away. "Ce que femme veut, \_homme\_ veut," if the latter is at all amiable,

or the former persevering. At last I gained the victory. It was agreed

that we two should go on an exploring journey, to find out where we

could have most shadow at least expense; and we left our child with

his nurse and Wilson, while we were absent. We went along the coast to

Spezzia, saw Carrara with the white marble mountains, passed through

the olive-forests and the vineyards, avenues of acacia trees, chestnut

woods, glorious surprises of the most exquisite scenery. I say

olive-forests advisedly--the olive grows like a forest-tree in those

regions, shading the ground with tints of silvery network. The olive

near Florence is but a shrub in comparison, and I have learnt to despise

a little too the Florentine vine, which does not swing such portcullises

of massive dewy green from one tree to another as along the whole road

where we travelled. Beautiful indeed it was. Spezzia wheels the blue sea

into the arms of the wooded mountains; and we had a glance at Shelley's

house at Lerici. It was melancholy to me, of course. I was not sorry

that the lodgings we inquired about were far above our means. We

returned on our steps (after two days in the dirtiest of possible inns),

saw Seravezza, a village in the mountains, where rock river and

wood enticed us to stay, and the inhabitants drove us off by their

unreasonable prices. It is curious--but just in proportion to the

want of civilization the prices rise in Italy. If you haven't cups and

saucers, you are made to pay for plate. Well--so finding no rest for the

soles of our feet, I persuaded Robert to go to the Baths of Lucca, only

to see them. We were to proceed afterwards to San Marcello, or some

safer wilderness. We had both of us, but he chiefly, the strongest

prejudice against the Baths of Lucca; taking them for a sort of wasp's

nest of scandal and gaming, and expecting to find everything trodden

flat by the continental English--yet, I wanted to see the place, because

it is a place to see, after all. So we came, and were so charmed by the

exquisite beauty of the scenery, by the coolness of the climate, and

the absence of our countrymen--political troubles serving admirably our

private requirements, that we made an offer for rooms on the spot, and

returned to Florence for Baby and the rest of our establishment

without further delay. Here we are then. We have been here more than

a fortnight. We have taken an apartment for the season--four months,

paying twelve pounds for the whole term, and hoping to be able to stay

till the end of October. The living is cheaper than even in Florence, so

that there has been no extravagance in coming here. In fact Florence is

scarcely tenable during the summer from the excessive heat by day and

night, even if there were no particular motive for leaving it. We have

taken a sort of eagle's nest in this place--the highest house of the

highest of the three villages which are called the Bagni di Lucca, and

which lie at the heart of a hundred mountains sung to continually by a

rushing mountain stream. The sound of the river and of the cicale is all

the noise we hear. Austrian drums and carriage-wheels cannot vex us, God

be thanked for it! The silence is full of joy and consolation. I think

my husband's spirits are better already, and his appetite improved.

Certainly little Babe's great cheeks are growing rosier and rosier. He

is out all day when the sun is not too strong, and Wilson will have it

that he is prettier than the whole population of babies here. . . . Then

my whole strength has wonderfully improved--just as my medical friends

prophesied,--and it seems like a dream when I find myself able to climb

the hills with Robert, and help him to lose himself in the forests.

Ever since my confinement I have been growing stronger and stronger, and

where it is to stop I can't tell really. I can do as much or more than

at any point of my life since I arrived at woman's estate. The air of

the place seems to penetrate the heart, and not the lungs only: it

draws you, raises you, excites you. Mountain air without its

keenness--sheathed in Italian sunshine--think what that must be! And

the beauty and the solitude--for with a few paces we get free of

the habitations of men--all is delightful to me. What is peculiarly

beautiful and wonderful, is the variety of the shapes of the mountains.

They are a multitude--and yet there is no likeness. None, except where

the golden mist comes and transfigures them into one glory. For the

rest, the mountain there wrapt in the chestnut forest is not like that

bare peak which tilts against the sky--nor like the serpent-twine of

another which seems to move and coil in the moving coiling shadow. . . .'

She writes again:

Bagni di Lucca: Oct. 2 ('49).

'. . . I have performed a great exploit--ridden on a donkey five miles

deep into the mountain, to an almost inaccessible volcanic ground not

far from the stars. Robert on horseback, and Wilson and the nurse (with

Baby) on other donkies,--guides of course. We set off at eight in the

morning, and returned at six P.M. after dining on the mountain pinnacle,

I dreadfully tired, but the child laughing as usual, burnt brick colour

for all bad effect. No horse or ass untrained for the mountains could

have kept foot a moment where we penetrated, and even as it was, one

could not help the natural thrill. No road except the bed of exhausted

torrents--above and through the chestnut forests precipitous beyond

what you would think possible for ascent or descent. Ravines tearing the

ground to pieces under your feet. The scenery, sublime and wonderful,

satisfied us wholly, as we looked round on the world of innumerable

mountains, bound faintly with the grey sea--and not a human habitation.

. . .'

The following fragment, which I have received quite without date, might

refer to this or to a somewhat later period.

'If he is vain about anything in the world it is about my improved

health, and I say to him, "But you needn't talk so much to people, of

how your wife walked here with you, and there with you, as if a wife

with a pair of feet was a miracle of nature."'

Florence: Feb. 18 ('50).

'. . . You can scarcely imagine to yourself the retired life we live,

and how we have retreated from the kind advances of the English society

here. Now people seem to understand that we are to be left alone. . . .'

Florence: April 1 ('50).

'. . . We drive day by day through the lovely Cascine, just sweeping

through the city. Just such a window where Bianca Capello looked out

to see the Duke go by--and just such a door where Tasso stood and where

Dante drew his chair out to sit. Strange to have all that old world life

about us, and the blue sky so bright. . . .'

Venice: June 4 (probably '50).

'. . . I have been between Heaven and Earth since our arrival at Venice.

The Heaven of it is ineffable--never had I touched the skirts of so

celestial a place. The beauty of the architecture, the silver trails of

water up between all that gorgeous colour and carving, the enchanting

silence, the music, the gondolas--I mix it all up together and maintain

that nothing is like it, nothing equal to it, not a second Venice in the

world.

'Do you know when I came first I felt as if I never could go away. But

now comes the earth-side.

'Robert, after sharing the ecstasy, grows uncomfortable and nervous,

unable to eat or sleep, and poor Wilson still worse, in a miserable

condition of sickness and headache. Alas for these mortal Venices, so

exquisite and so bilious. Therefore I am constrained away from my joys

by sympathy, and am forced to be glad that we are going away on Friday.

For myself, it did not affect me at all. Take the mild, soft, relaxing

climate--even the scirocco does not touch me. And the baby grows

gloriously fatter in spite of everything. . . . As for Venice, you can't

get even a "Times", much less an "Athenaeum". We comfort ourselves by

taking a box at the opera (a whole box on the grand tier, mind) for

two shillings and eightpence, English. Also, every evening at half-past

eight, Robert and I are sitting under the moon in the great piazza of

St. Mark, taking excellent coffee and reading the French papers.'

If it were possible to draw more largely on Mrs. Browning's

correspondence for this year, it would certainly supply the record of

her intimacy, and that of her husband, with Margaret Fuller Ossoli. A

warm attachment sprang up between them during that lady's residence in

Florence. Its last evenings were all spent at their house; and, soon

after she had bidden them farewell, she availed herself of a two days'

delay in the departure of the ship to return from Leghorn and be with

them one evening more. She had what seemed a prophetic dread of the

voyage to America, though she attached no superstitious importance to

the prediction once made to her husband that he would be drowned; and

learned when it was too late to change her plans that her presence there

was, after all, unnecessary. Mr. Browning was deeply affected by the

news of her death by shipwreck, which took place on July 16, 1850; and

wrote an account of his acquaintance with her, for publication by her

friends. This also, unfortunately, was lost. Her son was of the same

age as his, little more than a year old; but she left a token of the

friendship which might some day have united them, in a small Bible

inscribed to the baby Robert, 'In memory of Angelo Ossoli.'

The intended journey to England was delayed for Mr. Browning by the

painful associations connected with his mother's death; but in the

summer of 1851 he found courage to go there: and then, as on each

succeeding visit paid to London with his wife, he commemorated his

marriage in a manner all his own. He went to the church in which it had

been solemnized, and kissed the paving-stones in front of the door. It

needed all this love to comfort Mrs. Browning in the estrangement from

her father which was henceforth to be accepted as final. He had held no

communication with her since her marriage, and she knew that it was

not forgiven; but she had cherished a hope that he would so far relent

towards her as to kiss her child, even if he would not see her. Her

prayer to this effect remained, however, unanswered.

In the autumn they proceeded to Paris; whence Mrs. Browning wrote,

October 22 and November 12.

138, Avenue des Champs Elysees.

'. . . It was a long time before we could settle ourselves in a private

apartment. . . . At last we came off to these Champs Elysees, to a very

pleasant apartment, the window looking over a large terrace (almost

large enough to serve the purpose of a garden) to the great drive and

promenade of the Parisians when they come out of the streets to sun

and shade and show themselves off among the trees. A pretty little

dining-room, a writing and dressing-room for Robert beside it, a

drawing-room beyond that, with two excellent bedrooms, and third

bedroom for a "femme de menage", kitchen, &c. . . . So this answers all

requirements, and the sun suns us loyally as in duty bound considering

the southern aspect, and we are glad to find ourselves settled for six

months. We have had lovely weather, and have seen a fire only yesterday

for the first time since we left England. . . . We have seen nothing in

Paris, except the shell of it. Yet, two evenings ago we hazarded going

to a reception at Lady Elgin's, in the Faubourg St. Germain, and saw

some French, but nobody of distinction.

'It is a good house, I believe, and she has an earnest face which must

mean something. We were invited to go every Monday between eight and

twelve. We go on Friday to Madame Mohl's, where we are to have some of

the "celebrites". . . . Carlyle, for instance, I liked infinitely more

in his personality than I expected to like him, and I saw a great deal

of him, for he travelled with us to Paris, and spent several evenings

with us, we three together. He is one of the most interesting men I

could imagine, even deeply interesting to me; and you come to understand

perfectly when you know him, that his bitterness is only melancholy, and

his scorn, sensibility. Highly picturesque, too, he is in conversation;

the talk of writing men is very seldom so good.

'And, do you know, I was much taken, in London, with a young authoress,

Geraldine Jewsbury. You have read her books. . . . She herself is quiet

and simple, and drew my heart out of me a good deal. I felt inclined to

love her in our half-hour's intercourse. . . .'

138, Avenue des Champs Elysees: (Nov. 12).

'. . . Robert's father and sister have been paying us a visit during the

last three weeks. They are very affectionate to me, and I love them for

his sake and their own, and am very sorry at the thought of losing them,

as we are on the point of doing. We hope, however, to establish them in

Paris, if we can stay, and if no other obstacle should arise before the

spring, when they must leave Hatcham. Little Wiedemann 'draws', as you

may suppose . . . he is adored by his grandfather, and then, Robert!

They are an affectionate family, and not easy when removed one from

another. . . .'

On their journey from London to Paris, Mr. and Mrs. Browning had been

joined by Carlyle; and it afterwards struck Mr. Browning as strange

that, in the 'Life' of Carlyle, their companionship on this occasion

should be spoken of as the result of a chance meeting. Carlyle not only

went to Paris with the Brownings, but had begged permission to do so;

and Mrs. Browning had hesitated to grant this because she was afraid her

little boy would be tiresome to him. Her fear, however, proved mistaken.

The child's prattle amused the philosopher, and led him on one occasion

to say: 'Why, sir, you have as many aspirations as Napoleon!' At

Paris he would have been miserable without Mr. Browning's help, in his

ignorance of the language, and impatience of the discomforts which this

created for him. He couldn't ask for anything, he complained, but they

brought him the opposite.

On one occasion Mr. Carlyle made a singular remark. He was walking with

Mr. Browning, either in Paris or the neighbouring country, when they

passed an image of the Crucifixion; and glancing towards the figure of

Christ, he said, with his deliberate Scotch utterance, 'Ah, poor fellow,

\_your\_ part is played out!'

Two especially interesting letters are dated from the same address,

February 15 and April 7, 1852.

'. . . Beranger lives close to us, and Robert has seen him in his white

hat, wandering along the asphalte. I had a notion, somehow, that he was

very old, but he is only elderly--not much above sixty (which is the

prime of life, nowadays) and he lives quietly and keeps out of scrapes

poetical and political, and if Robert and I had a little less modesty we

are assured that we should find access to him easy. But we can't make

up our minds to go to his door and introduce ourselves as vagrant

minstrels, when he may probably not know our names. We could never

follow the fashion of certain authors, who send their books about with

intimations of their being likely to be acceptable or not--of which

practice poor Tennyson knows too much for his peace. If, indeed, a

letter of introduction to Beranger were vouchsafed to us from any benign

quarter, we should both be delighted, but we must wait patiently for

the influence of the stars. Meanwhile, we have at last sent our letter

[Mazzini's] to George Sand, accompanied with a little note signed by

both of us, though written by me, as seemed right, being the woman. We

half-despaired in doing this--for it is most difficult, it appears,

to get at her, she having taken vows against seeing strangers, in

consequence of various annoyances and persecutions, in and out of print,

which it's the mere instinct of a woman to avoid--I can understand it

perfectly. Also, she is in Paris for only a few days, and under a new

name, to escape from the plague of her notoriety. People said, "She will

never see you--you have no chance, I am afraid." But we determined

to try. At least I pricked Robert up to the leap--for he was really

inclined to sit in his chair and be proud a little. "No," said I, "you

\_sha'n't\_ be proud, and I \_won't\_ be proud, and we \_will\_ see her--I won't

die, if I can help it, without seeing George Sand." So we gave our

letter to a friend, who was to give it to a friend who was to place it

in her hands--her abode being a mystery, and the name she used unknown.

The next day came by the post this answer:

'"Madame, j'aurai l'honneur de vous recevoir Dimanche prochain, rue

Racine, 3. C'est le seul jour que je puisse passer chez moi; et encore

je n'en suis pas absolument certaine--mais je ferai tellement mon

possible, que ma bonne etoile m'y aidera peut-etre un peu. Agreez

mille remerciments de coeur ainsi que Monsieur Browning, que j'espere

voir avec vous, pour la sympathie que vous m'accordez. George Sand.

Paris: 12 fevrier '52."

'This is graceful and kind, is it not?--and we are going to-morrow--I,

rather at the risk of my life, but I shall roll myself up head and all

in a thick shawl, and we shall go in a close carriage, and I hope I

shall be able to tell you the result before shutting up this letter.

'Monday.--I have seen G. S. She received us in a room with a bed in it,

the only room she has to occupy, I suppose, during her short stay in

Paris. She received us very cordially with her hand held out, which

I, in the emotion of the moment, stooped and kissed--upon which she

exclaimed, "Mais non! je ne veux pas," and kissed me. I don't think

she is a great deal taller than I am,--yes, taller, but not a great

deal--and a little over-stout for that height. The upper part of the

face is fine, the forehead, eyebrows and eyes--dark glowing eyes as they

should be; the lower part not so good. The beautiful teeth project a

little, flashing out the smile of the large characteristic mouth, and

the chin recedes. It never could have been a beautiful face Robert and

I agree, but noble and expressive it has been and is. The complexion is

olive, quite without colour; the hair, black and glossy, divided with

evident care and twisted back into a knot behind the head, and she wore

no covering to it. Some of the portraits represent her in ringlets, and

ringlets would be much more becoming to the style of face, I fancy, for

the cheeks are rather over-full. She was dressed in a sort of woollen

grey gown, with a jacket of the same material (according to the ruling

fashion), the gown fastened up to the throat, with a small linen

collarette, and plain white muslin sleeves buttoned round the wrists.

The hands offered to me were small and well-shaped. Her manners were

quite as simple as her costume. I never saw a simpler woman. Not a shade

of affectation or consciousness, even--not a suffusion of coquetry, not

a cigarette to be seen! Two or three young men were sitting with her,

and I observed the profound respect with which they listened to every

word she said. She spoke rapidly, with a low, unemphatic voice. Repose

of manner is much more her characteristic than animation is--only,

under all the quietness, and perhaps by means of it, you are aware of an

intense burning soul. She kissed me again when we went away. . . .'

'April 7.--George Sand we came to know a great deal more of. I think

Robert saw her six times. Once he met her near the Tuileries, offered

her his arm and walked with her the whole length of the gardens. She was

not on that occasion looking as well as usual, being a little too much

"endimanchee" in terrestrial lavenders and super-celestial blues--not,

in fact, dressed with the remarkable taste which he has seen in her

at other times. Her usual costume is both pretty and quiet, and the

fashionable waistcoat and jacket (which are respectable in all the

"Ladies' Companions" of the day) make the only approach to masculine

wearings to be observed in her.

'She has great nicety and refinement in her personal ways, I think--and

the cigarette is really a feminine weapon if properly understood.

'Ah! but I didn't see her smoke. I was unfortunate. I could only go with

Robert three times to her house, and once she was out. He was really

very good and kind to let me go at all after he found the sort of

society rampant around her. He didn't like it extremely, but being the

prince of husbands, he was lenient to my desires, and yielded the point.

She seems to live in the abomination of desolation, as far as regards

society--crowds of ill-bred men who adore her, 'a genoux bas', betwixt

a puff of smoke and an ejection of saliva--society of the ragged red,

diluted with the low theatrical. She herself so different, so apart, so

alone in her melancholy disdain. I was deeply interested in that poor

woman. I felt a profound compassion for her. I did not mind much

even the Greek, in Greek costume, who 'tutoyed' her, and kissed her I

believe, so Robert said--or the other vulgar man of the theatre, who

went down on his knees and called her "sublime". "Caprice d'amitie,"

said she with her quiet, gentle scorn. A noble woman under the mud, be

certain. \_I\_ would kneel down to her, too, if she would leave it all,

throw it off, and be herself as God made her. But she would not care for

my kneeling--she does not care for me. Perhaps she doesn't care much

for anybody by this time, who knows? She wrote one or two or three kind

notes to me, and promised to 'venir m'embrasser' before she left Paris,

but she did not come. We both tried hard to please her, and she told a

friend of ours that she "liked us". Only we always felt that we couldn't

penetrate--couldn't really \_touch\_ her--it was all vain.

'Alfred de Musset was to have been at M. Buloz' where Robert was a

week ago, on purpose to meet him, but he was prevented in some way. His

brother, Paul de Musset, a very different person, was there instead, but

we hope to have Alfred on another occasion. Do you know his poems? He is

not capable of large grasps, but he has poet's life and blood in him,

I assure you. . . . We are expecting a visit from Lamartine, who does a

great deal of honour to both of us in the way of appreciation, and was

kind enough to propose to come. I will tell you all about it.'

Mr. Browning fully shared his wife's impression of a want of frank

cordiality on George Sand's part; and was especially struck by it in

reference to himself, with whom it seemed more natural that she should

feel at ease. He could only imagine that his studied courtesy towards

her was felt by her as a rebuke to the latitude which she granted to

other men.

Another eminent French writer whom he much wished to know was Victor

Hugo, and I am told that for years he carried about him a letter of

introduction from Lord Houghton, always hoping for an opportunity of

presenting it. The hope was not fulfilled, though, in 1866, Mr. Browning

crossed to Saint Malo by the Channel Islands and spent three days in

Jersey.

Chapter 11

1852-1855

M. Joseph Milsand--His close Friendship with Mr. Browning; Mrs.

Browning's Impression of him--New Edition of Mr. Browning's

Poems--'Christmas Eve and Easter Day'--'Essay' on Shelley--Summer in

London--Dante Gabriel Rossetti--Florence; secluded Life--Letters from

Mr. and Mrs. Browning--'Colombe's Birthday'--Baths of Lucca--Mrs.

Browning's Letters--Winter in Rome--Mr. and Mrs. Story--Mrs.

Sartoris--Mrs. Fanny Kemble--Summer in London--Tennyson--Ruskin.

It was during this winter in Paris that Mr. Browning became acquainted

with M. Joseph Milsand, the second Frenchman with whom he was to be

united by ties of deep friendship and affection. M. Milsand was at that

time, and for long afterwards, a frequent contributor to the 'Revue

des Deux Mondes'; his range of subjects being enlarged by his, for

a Frenchman, exceptional knowledge of English life, language, and

literature. He wrote an article on Quakerism, which was much approved by

Mr. William Forster, and a little volume on Ruskin called 'L'Esthetique

Anglaise', which was published in the 'Bibliotheque de Philosophie

Contemporaine'.\* Shortly before the arrival of Mr. and Mrs. Browning

in Paris, he had accidentally seen an extract from 'Paracelsus'. This

struck him so much that he procured the two volumes of the works and

'Christmas Eve', and discussed the whole in the 'Revue' as the second

part of an essay entitled 'La Poesie Anglaise depuis Byron'. Mr.

Browning saw the article, and was naturally touched at finding his poems

the object of serious study in a foreign country, while still so little

regarded in his own. It was no less natural that this should lead to

a friendship which, the opening once given, would have grown up

unassisted, at least on Mr. Browning's side; for M. Milsand united the

qualities of a critical intellect with a tenderness, a loyalty, and a

simplicity of nature seldom found in combination with them.

\* He published also an admirable little work on the

requirements of secondary education in France, equally

applicable in many respects to any country and to any time.

The introduction was brought about by the daughter of William Browning,

Mrs. Jebb-Dyke, or more directly by Mr. and Mrs. Fraser Corkran, who

were among the earliest friends of the Browning family in Paris. M.

Milsand was soon an 'habitue' of Mr. Browning's house, as somewhat later

of that of his father and sister; and when, many years afterwards, Miss

Browning had taken up her abode in England, he spent some weeks of the

early summer in Warwick Crescent, whenever his home duties or personal

occupations allowed him to do so. Several times also the poet and his

sister joined him at Saint-Aubin, the seaside village in Normandy which

was his special resort, and where they enjoyed the good offices of

Madame Milsand, a home-staying, genuine French wife and mother, well

acquainted with the resources of its very primitive life. M. Milsand

died, in 1886, of apoplexy, the consequence, I believe, of heart-disease

brought on by excessive cold-bathing. The first reprint of 'Sordello',

in 1863, had been, as is well known, dedicated to him. The 'Parleyings',

published within a year of his death, were inscribed to his memory. Mr.

Browning's affection for him finds utterance in a few strong words which

I shall have occasion to quote. An undated fragment concerning him from

Mrs. Browning to her sister-in-law, points to a later date than the

present, but may as well be inserted here.

'. . . I quite love M. Milsand for being interested in Penini. What a

perfect creature he is, to be sure! He always stands in the top place

among our gods--Give him my cordial regards, always, mind. . . .

He wants, I think--the only want of that noble nature--the sense of

spiritual relation; and also he puts under his feet too much the worth

of impulse and passion, in considering the powers of human nature. For

the rest, I don't know such a man. He has intellectual conscience--or

say--the conscience of the intellect, in a higher degree than I ever

saw in any man of any country--and this is no less Robert's belief than

mine. When we hear the brilliant talkers and noisy thinkers here and

there and everywhere, we go back to Milsand with a real reverence. Also,

I never shall forget his delicacy to me personally, nor his tenderness

of heart about my child. . . .'

The criticism was inevitable from the point of view of Mrs. Browning's

nature and experience; but I think she would have revoked part of it if

she had known M. Milsand in later years. He would never have agreed with

her as to the authority of 'impulse and passion', but I am sure he did

not underrate their importance as factors in human life.

M. Milsand was one of the few readers of Browning with whom I have

talked about him, who had studied his work from the beginning, and had

realized the ambition of his first imaginative flights. He was

more perplexed by the poet's utterance in later years. 'Quel homme

extraordinaire!' he once said to me; 'son centre n'est pas au milieu.'

The usual criticism would have been that, while his own centre was in

the middle, he did not seek it in the middle for the things of which

he wrote; but I remember that, at the moment in which the words were

spoken, they impressed me as full of penetration. Mr. Browning had so

much confidence in M. Milsand's linguistic powers that he invariably

sent him his proof-sheets for final revision, and was exceedingly

pleased with such few corrections as his friend was able to suggest.

With the name of Milsand connects itself in the poet's life that of a

younger, but very genuine friend of both, M. Gustave Dourlans: a man of

fine critical and intellectual powers, unfortunately neutralized by bad

health. M. Dourlans also became a visitor at Warwick Crescent, and a

frequent correspondent of Mr. or rather of Miss Browning. He came from

Paris once more, to witness the last sad scene in Westminster Abbey.

The first three years of Mr. Browning's married life had been

unproductive from a literary point of view. The realization and

enjoyment of the new companionship, the duties as well as interests

of the dual existence, and, lastly, the shock and pain of his mother's

death, had absorbed his mental energies for the time being. But by the

close of 1848 he had prepared for publication in the following year a

new edition of 'Paracelsus' and the 'Bells and Pomegranates' poems. The

reprint was in two volumes, and the publishers were Messrs. Chapman and

Hall; the system, maintained through Mr. Moxon, of publication at the

author's expense, being abandoned by Mr. Browning when he left home.

Mrs. Browning writes of him on this occasion that he is paying 'peculiar

attention to the objections made against certain obscurities.' He

himself prefaced the edition by these words: 'Many of these pieces were

out of print, the rest had been withdrawn from circulation, when the

corrected edition, now submitted to the reader, was prepared. The

various Poems and Dramas have received the author's most careful

revision. December 1848.'

In 1850, in Florence, he wrote 'Christmas Eve and Easter Day'; and

in December 1851, in Paris, the essay on Shelley, to be prefixed to

twenty-five supposed letters of that poet, published by Moxon in 1852.\*

\* They were discovered, not long afterwards, to be spurious,

and the book suppressed.

The reading of this Essay might serve to correct the frequent

misapprehension of Mr. Browning's religious views which has been

based on the literal evidence of 'Christmas Eve', were it not that its

companion poem has failed to do so; though the tendency of 'Easter Day'

is as different from that of its precursor as their common Christianity

admits. The balance of argument in 'Christmas Eve' is in favour of

direct revelation of religious truth and prosaic certainty regarding it;

while the 'Easter Day' vision makes a tentative and unresting attitude

the first condition of the religious life; and if Mr. Browning has meant

to say--as he so often did say--that religious certainties are required

for the undeveloped mind, but that the growing religious intelligence

walks best by a receding light, he denies the positive basis of

Christian belief, and is no more orthodox in the one set of reflections

than in the other. The spirit, however, of both poems is ascetic: for

the first divorces religious worship from every appeal to the poetic

sense; the second refuses to recognize, in poetry or art, or the

attainments of the intellect, or even in the best human love, any

practical correspondence with religion. The dissertation on Shelley is,

what 'Sordello' was, what its author's treatment of poets and poetry

always must be--an indirect vindication of the conceptions of human life

which 'Christmas Eve and Easter Day' condemns. This double poem stands

indeed so much alone in Mr. Browning's work that we are tempted to ask

ourselves to what circumstance or impulse, external or internal, it has

been due; and we can only conjecture that the prolonged communion with

a mind so spiritual as that of his wife, the special sympathies and

differences which were elicited by it, may have quickened his religious

imagination, while directing it towards doctrinal or controversial

issues which it had not previously embraced.

The 'Essay' is a tribute to the genius of Shelley; it is also a

justification of his life and character, as the balance of evidence then

presented them to Mr. Browning's mind. It rests on a definition of the

respective qualities of the objective and the subjective poet. . . .

While both, he says, are gifted with the fuller perception of nature and

man, the one endeavours to

'reproduce things external (whether the phenomena of the scenic

universe, or the manifested action of the human heart and brain) with an

immediate reference, in every case, to the common eye and apprehension

of his fellow-men, assumed capable of receiving and profiting by this

reproduction'--the other 'is impelled to embody the thing he perceives,

not so much with reference to the many below, as to the One above him,

the supreme Intelligence which apprehends all things in their absolute

truth,--an ultimate view ever aspired to, if but partially attained, by

the poet's own soul. Not what man sees, but what God sees--the 'Ideas'

of Plato, seeds of creation lying burningly on the Divine Hand--it is

toward these that he struggles. Not with the combination of humanity in

action, but with the primal elements of humanity he has to do; and he

digs where he stands,--preferring to seek them in his own soul as the

nearest reflex of that absolute Mind, according to the intuitions of

which he desires to perceive and speak.'

The objective poet is therefore a fashioner, the subjective is best

described as a seer. The distinction repeats itself in the interest with

which we study their respective lives. We are glad of the biography of

the objective poet because it reveals to us the power by which he works;

we desire still more that of the subjective poet, because it presents us

with another aspect of the work itself. The poetry of such a one is an

effluence much more than a production; it is

'the very radiance and aroma of his personality, projected from it but

not separated. Therefore, in our approach to the poetry, we necessarily

approach the personality of the poet; in apprehending it we apprehend

him, and certainly we cannot love it without loving him.'

The reason of Mr. Browning's prolonged and instinctive reverence

for Shelley is thus set forth in the opening pages of the Essay: he

recognized in his writings the quality of a 'subjective' poet; hence, as

he understands the word, the evidence of a divinely inspired man.

Mr. Browning goes on to say that we need the recorded life in order

quite to determine to which class of inspiration a given work belongs;

and though he regards the work of Shelley as carrying its warrant within

itself, his position leaves ample room for a withdrawal of faith, a

reversal of judgment, if the ascertained facts of the poet's life should

at any future time bear decided witness against him. He is also careful

to avoid drawing too hard and fast a line between the two opposite kinds

of poet. He admits that a pure instance of either is seldom to be found;

he sees no reason why

'these two modes of poetic faculty may not issue hereafter from the same

poet in successive perfect works. . . . A mere running-in of the one

faculty upon the other' being, meanwhile, 'the ordinary circumstance.'

I venture, however, to think, that in his various and necessary

concessions, he lets slip the main point; and for the simple reason that

it is untenable. The terms 'subjective' and 'objective' denote a real

and very important difference on the ground of judgment, but one

which tends more and more to efface itself in the sphere of the higher

creative imagination. Mr. Browning might as briefly, and I think more

fully, have expressed the salient quality of his poet, even while he

could describe it in these emphatic words:

'I pass at once, therefore, from Shelley's minor excellencies to his

noblest and predominating characteristic.

'This I call his simultaneous perception of Power and Love in the

absolute, and of Beauty and Good in the concrete, while he throws, from

his poet's station between both, swifter, subtler, and more numerous

films for the connexion of each with each, than have been thrown by any

modern artificer of whom I have knowledge . . . I would rather consider

Shelley's poetry as a sublime fragmentary essay towards a presentment

of the correspondency of the universe to Deity, of the natural to the

spiritual, and of the actual to the ideal than . . .'

This essay has, in common with the poems of the preceding years, the

one quality of a largely religious and, in a certain sense, Christian

spirit, and in this respect it falls naturally into the general series

of its author's works. The assertion of Platonic ideas suggests,

however, a mood of spiritual thought for which the reference in

'Pauline' has been our only, and a scarcely sufficient preparation; nor

could the most definite theism to be extracted from Platonic beliefs

ever satisfy the human aspirations which, in a nature like that of

Robert Browning, culminate in the idea of God. The metaphysical aspect

of the poet's genius here distinctly reappears for the first time since

'Sordello', and also for the last. It becomes merged in the simpler

forms of the religious imagination.

The justification of the man Shelley, to which great part of the Essay

is devoted, contains little that would seem new to his more recent

apologists; little also which to the writer's later judgments continued

to recommend itself as true. It was as a great poetic artist, not as a

great poet, that the author of 'Prometheus' and 'The Cenci', of 'Julian

and Maddalo', and 'Epipsychidion' was finally to rank in Mr. Browning's

mind. The whole remains nevertheless a memorial of a very touching

affection; and whatever intrinsic value the Essay may possess, its main

interest must always be biographical. Its motive and inspiration are set

forth in the closing lines:

'It is because I have long held these opinions in assurance and

gratitude, that I catch at the opportunity offered to me of expressing

them here; knowing that the alacrity to fulfil an humble office conveys

more love than the acceptance of the honour of a higher one, and that

better, therefore, than the signal service it was the dream of my

boyhood to render to his fame and memory, may be the saying of a few,

inadequate words upon these scarcely more important supplementary

letters of \_Shelley\_.'

If Mr. Browning had seen reason to doubt the genuineness of the letters

in question, his Introduction could not have been written. That, while

receiving them as genuine, he thought them unimportant, gave it, as he

justly discerned, its full significance.

Mr. and Mrs. Browning returned to London for the summer of 1852, and we

have a glimpse of them there in a letter from Mr. Fox to his daughter.

July 16, '52.

'. . . I had a charming hour with the Brownings yesterday; more

fascinated with her than ever. She talked lots of George Sand, and so

beautifully. Moreover she silver-electroplated Louis Napoleon!! They are

lodging at 58 Welbeck Street; the house has a queer name on the door,

and belongs to some Belgian family.

'They came in late one night, and R. B. says that in the morning

twilight he saw three portraits on the bedroom wall, and speculated who

they might be. Light gradually showed the first, Beatrice Cenci, "Good!"

said he; "in a poetic region." More light: the second, Lord Byron! Who

can the third be? And what think you it was, but your sketch (engraved

chalk portrait) of me? He made quite a poem and picture of the affair.

'She seems much better; did not put her hand before her mouth, which I

took as a compliment: and the young Florentine was gracious . . .'

It need hardly be said that this valued friend was one of the first whom

Mr. Browning introduced to his wife, and that she responded with ready

warmth to his claims on her gratitude and regard. More than one joint

letter from herself and her husband commemorates this new phase of the

intimacy; one especially interesting was written from Florence in 1858,

in answer to the announcement by Mr. Fox of his election for Oldham; and

Mr. Browning's contribution, which is very characteristic, will appear

in due course.

Either this or the preceding summer brought Mr. Browning for the first

time into personal contact with an early lover of his works: Mr. D.

G. Rossetti. They had exchanged letters a year or two before, on the

subject of 'Pauline', which Rossetti (as I have already mentioned) had

read in ignorance of its origin, but with the conviction that only the

author of 'Paracelsus' could have produced it. He wrote to Mr. Browning

to ascertain the fact, and to tell him he had admired the poem so much

as to transcribe it whole from the British Museum copy. He now called

on him with Mr. William Allingham; and doubly recommended himself to the

poet's interest by telling him that he was a painter. When Mr. Browning

was again in London, in 1855, Rossetti began painting his portrait,

which he finished in Paris in the ensuing winter.

The winter of 1852-3 saw the family once more in Florence, and at Casa

Guidi, where the routine of quiet days was resumed. Mrs. Browning

has spoken in more than one of her letters of the comparative social

seclusion in which she and her husband had elected to live. This

seclusion was much modified in later years, and many well-known English

and American names become associated with their daily life. It referred

indeed almost entirely to their residence in Florence, where they found

less inducement to enter into society than in London, Paris, and Rome.

But it is on record that during the fifteen years of his married life,

Mr. Browning never dined away from home, except on one occasion--an

exception proving the rule; and we cannot therefore be surprised that

he should subsequently have carried into the experience of an unshackled

and very interesting social intercourse, a kind of freshness which a man

of fifty has not generally preserved.

The one excitement which presented itself in the early months of 1853

was the production of 'Colombe's Birthday'. The first allusion to this

comes to us in a letter from the poet to Lady, then Mrs. Theodore,

Martin, from which I quote a few passages.

Florence: Jan. 31, '53.

'My dear Mrs. Martin,--. . . be assured that I, for my part, have

been in no danger of forgetting my promises any more than your

performances--which were admirable of all kinds. I shall be delighted if

you can do anything for "Colombe"--do what you think best with it, and

for me--it will be pleasant to be in such hands--only, pray follow

the corrections in the last edition--(Chapman and Hall will give you a

copy)--as they are important to the sense. As for the condensation into

three acts--I shall leave that, and all cuttings and the like, to your

own judgment--and, come what will, I shall have to be grateful to you,

as before. For the rest, you will play the part to heart's content, I

\_know\_. . . . And how good it will be to see you again, and make my wife

see you too--she who "never saw a great actress" she says--unless it was

Dejazet! . . .'

Mrs. Browning writes about the performance, April 12:

'. . . I am beginning to be anxious about 'Colombe's Birthday'. I care

much more about it than Robert does. He says that no one will mistake it

for his speculation; it's Mr. Buckstone's affair altogether. True--but I

should like it to succeed, being Robert's play, notwithstanding. But the

play is subtle and refined for pits and galleries. I am nervous about

it. On the other hand, those theatrical people ought to know,--and what

in the world made them select it, if it is not likely to answer their

purpose? By the way, a dreadful rumour reaches us of its having been

"prepared for the stage by the author." Don't believe a word of it.

Robert just said "yes" when they wrote to ask him, and not a line

of communication has passed since. He has prepared nothing at all,

suggested nothing, modified nothing. He referred them to his new

edition, and that was the whole. . . .'

She communicates the result in May:

'. . . Yes, Robert's play succeeded, but there could be no "run" for a

play of that kind. It was a "succes d'estime" and something more, which

is surprising perhaps, considering the miserable acting of the men. Miss

Faucit was alone in doing us justice. . . .'

Mrs. Browning did see 'Miss Faucit' on her next visit to England. She

agreeably surprised that lady by presenting herself alone, one morning,

at her house, and remaining with her for an hour and a half. The only

person who had 'done justice' to 'Colombe' besides contributing to

whatever success her husband's earlier plays had obtained, was much more

than 'a great actress' to Mrs. Browning's mind; and we may imagine

it would have gone hard with her before she renounced the pleasure of

making her acquaintance.

Two letters, dated from the Baths of Lucca, July 15 and August 20, '53,

tell how and where the ensuing summer was passed, besides introducing

us, for the first time, to Mr. and Mrs. William Story, between whose

family and that of Mr. Browning so friendly an intimacy was ever

afterwards to subsist.

July 15.

'. . . We have taken a villa at the Baths of Lucca after a little

holy fear of the company there--but the scenery, and the coolness, and

convenience altogether prevail, and we have taken our villa for three

months or rather more, and go to it next week with a stiff resolve of

not calling nor being called upon. You remember perhaps that we were

there four years ago just after the birth of our child. The mountains

are wonderful in beauty, and we mean to buy our holiday by doing some

work.

'Oh yes! I confess to loving Florence, and to having associated with it

the idea of home. . . .'

Casa Tolomei, Alta Villa, Bagni di Lucca: Aug. 20.

'. . . We are enjoying the mountains here--riding the donkeys in the

footsteps of the sheep, and eating strawberries and milk by basinsful.

The strawberries succeed one another throughout the summer, through

growing on different aspects of the hills. If a tree is felled in

the forests, strawberries spring up, just as mushrooms might, and the

peasants sell them for just nothing. . . . Then our friends Mr. and

Mrs. Story help the mountains to please us a good deal. He is the son of

Judge Story, the biographer of his father, and for himself, sculptor and

poet--and she a sympathetic graceful woman, fresh and innocent in

face and thought. We go backwards and forwards to tea and talk at one

another's houses.

'. . . Since I began this letter we have had a grand donkey excursion to

a village called Benabbia, and the cross above it on the mountain-peak.

We returned in the dark, and were in some danger of tumbling down

various precipices--but the scenery was exquisite--past speaking of for

beauty. Oh, those jagged mountains, rolled together like pre-Adamite

beasts and setting their teeth against the sky--it was wonderful. . . .'

Mr. Browning's share of the work referred to was 'In a Balcony'; also,

probably, some of the 'Men and Women'; the scene of the declaration in

'By the Fireside' was laid in a little adjacent mountain-gorge to which

he walked or rode. A fortnight's visit from Mr., now Lord, Lytton, was

also an incident of this summer.

The next three letters from which I am able to quote, describe the

impressions of Mrs. Browning's first winter in Rome.

Rome: 43 Via Bocca di Leone, 30 piano. Jan. 18, 54.

'. . . Well, we are all well to begin with--and have been well--our

troubles came to us through sympathy entirely. A most exquisite journey

of eight days we had from Florence to Rome, seeing the great monastery

and triple church of Assisi and the wonderful Terni by the way--that

passion of the waters which makes the human heart seem so still. In the

highest spirits we entered Rome, Robert and Penini singing actually--for

the child was radiant and flushed with the continual change of air and

scene. . . . You remember my telling you of our friends the Storys--how

they and their two children helped to make the summer go pleasantly at

the Baths of Lucca. They had taken an apartment for us in Rome, so that

we arrived in comfort to lighted fires and lamps as if coming home,--and

we had a glimpse of their smiling faces that evening. In the morning

before breakfast, little Edith was brought over to us by the manservant

with a message, "the boy was in convulsions--there was danger." We

hurried to the house, of course, leaving Edith with Wilson. Too true!

All that first day we spent beside a death-bed; for the child never

rallied--never opened his eyes in consciousness--and by eight in the

evening he was gone. In the meanwhile, Edith was taken ill at our

house--could not be moved, said the physicians . . . gastric fever,

with a tendency to the brain--and within two days her life was almost

despaired of--exactly the same malady as her brother's. . . . Also the

English nurse was apparently dying at the Story's house, and Emma Page,

the artist's youngest daughter, sickened with the same disease.

'. . . To pass over the dreary time, I will tell you at once that the

three patients recovered--only in poor little Edith's case Roman

fever followed the gastric, and has persisted ever since in periodical

recurrence. She is very pale and thin. Roman fever is not dangerous to

life, but it is exhausting. . . . Now you will understand what ghostly

flakes of death have changed the sense of Rome to me. The first day by

a death-bed, the first drive-out, to the cemetery, where poor little Joe

is laid close to Shelley's heart ("Cor cordium" says the epitaph)

and where the mother insisted on going when she and I went out in the

carriage together--I am horribly weak about such things--I can't look

on the earth-side of death--I flinch from corpses and graves, and never

meet a common funeral without a sort of horror. When I look deathwards

I look \_over\_ death, and upwards, or I can't look that way at all. So that

it was a struggle with me to sit upright in that carriage in which the

poor stricken mother sat so calmly--not to drop from the seat. Well--all

this has blackened Rome to me. I can't think about the Caesars in the

old strain of thought--the antique words get muddled and blurred with

warm dashes of modern, everyday tears and fresh grave-clay. Rome

is spoilt to me--there's the truth. Still, one lives through one's

associations when not too strong, and I have arrived at almost enjoying

some things--the climate, for instance, which, though pernicious to the

general health, agrees particularly with me, and the sight of the blue

sky floating like a sea-tide through the great gaps and rifts of ruins.

. . . We are very comfortably settled in rooms turned to the sun, and do

work and play by turns, having almost too many visitors, hear excellent

music at Mrs. Sartoris's (A. K.) once or twice a week, and have Fanny

Kemble to come and talk to us with the doors shut, we three together.

This is pleasant. I like her decidedly.

'If anybody wants small talk by handfuls, of glittering dust swept out

of salons, here's Mr. Thackeray besides! . . .'

Rome: March 29.

'. . . We see a good deal of the Kembles here, and like them both,

especially Fanny, who is looking magnificent still, with her black hair

and radiant smile. A very noble creature indeed. Somewhat unelastic,

unpliant to the age, attached to the old modes of thought and

convention--but noble in qualities and defects. I like her much. She

thinks me credulous and full of dreams--but does not despise me for

that reason--which is good and tolerant of her, and pleasant too, for I

should not be quite easy under her contempt. Mrs. Sartoris is genial and

generous--her milk has had time to stand to cream in her happy family

relations, which poor Fanny Kemble's has not had. Mrs. Sartoris' house

has the best society in Rome--and exquisite music of course. We met

Lockhart there, and my husband sees a good deal of him--more than I

do--because of the access of cold weather lately which has kept me at

home chiefly. Robert went down to the seaside, on a day's excursion with

him and the Sartorises--and I hear found favour in his sight. Said the

critic, "I like Browning--he isn't at all like a damned literary man."

That's a compliment, I believe, according to your dictionary. It made me

laugh and think of you directly. . . . Robert has been sitting for his

picture to Mr. Fisher, the English artist who painted Mr. Kenyon and

Landor. You remember those pictures in Mr. Kenyon's house in London.

Well, he has painted Robert's, and it is an admirable likeness. The

expression is an exceptional expression, but highly characteristic. . . .'

May 19.

'. . . To leave Rome will fill me with barbarian complacency. I don't

pretend to have a ray of sentiment about Rome. It's a palimpsest Rome, a

watering-place written over the antique, and I haven't taken to it as a

poet should I suppose. And let us speak the truth above all things. I

am strongly a creature of association, and the associations of the place

have not been personally favourable to me. Among the rest, my child, the

light of my eyes, has been more unwell than I ever saw him. . . .

The pleasantest days in Rome we have spent with the Kembles, the two

sisters, who are charming and excellent both of them, in different ways,

and certainly they have given us some excellent hours in the Campagna,

upon picnic excursions--they, and certain of their friends; for

instance, M. Ampere, the member of the French Institute, who is witty

and agreeable, M. Goltz, the Austrian minister, who is an agreeable

man, and Mr. Lyons, the son of Sir Edmund, &c. The talk was almost too

brilliant for the sentiment of the scenery, but it harmonized entirely

with the mayonnaise and champagne. . . .'

It must have been on one of the excursions here described that an

incident took place, which Mr. Browning relates with characteristic

comments in a letter to Mrs. Fitz-Gerald, of July 15, 1882. The picnic

party had strolled away to some distant spot. Mrs. Browning was not

strong enough to join them, and her husband, as a matter of course,

stayed with her; which act of consideration prompted Mrs. Kemble to

exclaim that he was the only man she had ever known who behaved like a

Christian to his wife. She was, when he wrote this letter, reading his

works for the first time, and had expressed admiration for them; but, he

continued, none of the kind things she said to him on that subject could

move him as did those words in the Campagna. Mrs. Kemble would have

modified her statement in later years, for the sake of one English and

one American husband now closely related to her. Even then, perhaps, she

did not make it without inward reserve. But she will forgive me, I am

sure, for having repeated it.

Mr. Browning also refers to her Memoirs, which he had just read, and

says: 'I saw her in those [I conclude earlier] days much oftener than

is set down, but she scarcely noticed me; though I always liked her

extremely.'

Another of Mrs. Browning's letters is written from Florence, June 6

('54):

'. . . We mean to stay at Florence a week or two longer and then go

northward. I love Florence--the place looks exquisitely beautiful in

its garden ground of vineyards and olive trees, sung round by the

nightingales day and night. . . . If you take one thing with another,

there is no place in the world like Florence, I am persuaded, for a

place to live in--cheap, tranquil, cheerful, beautiful, within the

limits of civilization yet out of the crush of it. . . . We have spent

two delicious evenings at villas outside the gates, one with young

Lytton, Sir Edward's son, of whom I have told you, I think. I like him

. . . we both do . . . from the bottom of our hearts. Then, our friend,

Frederick Tennyson, the new poet, we are delighted to see again.

. . . . .

'. . . Mrs. Sartoris has been here on her way to Rome, spending most of

her time with us . . . singing passionately and talking eloquently. She

is really charming. . . .'

I have no record of that northward journey or of the experiences of the

winter of 1854-5. In all probability Mr. and Mrs. Browning remained in,

or as near as possible to, Florence, since their income was still too

limited for continuous travelling. They possibly talked of going to

England, but postponed it till the following year; we know that they

went there in 1855, taking his sister with them as they passed through

Paris. They did not this time take lodgings for the summer months,

but hired a house at 13 Dorset Street, Portman Square; and there, on

September 27, Tennyson read his new poem, 'Maud', to Mrs. Browning,

while Rossetti, the only other person present besides the family,

privately drew his likeness in pen and ink. The likeness has become well

known; the unconscious sitter must also, by this time, be acquainted

with it; but Miss Browning thinks no one except herself, who was near

Rossetti at the table, was at the moment aware of its being made. All

eyes must have been turned towards Tennyson, seated by his hostess on

the sofa. Miss Arabel Barrett was also of the party.

Some interesting words of Mrs. Browning's carry their date in the

allusion to Mr. Ruskin; but I cannot ascertain it more precisely:

'We went to Denmark Hill yesterday to have luncheon with them, and see

the Turners, which, by the way, are divine. I like Mr. Ruskin much, and

so does Robert. Very gentle, yet earnest,--refined and truthful. I like

him very much. We count him one among the valuable acquaintances made

this year in England.'

Chapter 12

1855-1858

'Men and Women'--'Karshook'--'Two in the Campagna'--Winter in

Paris; Lady Elgin--'Aurora Leigh'--Death of Mr. Kenyon and Mr.

Barrett--Penini--Mrs. Browning's Letters to Miss Browning--The

Florentine Carnival--Baths of Lucca--Spiritualism--Mr. Kirkup; Count

Ginnasi--Letter from Mr. Browning to Mr. Fox--Havre.

The beautiful 'One Word More' was dated from London in September; and

the fifty poems gathered together under the title of 'Men and Women'

were published before the close of the year, in two volumes, by Messrs.

Chapman and Hall.\* They are all familiar friends to Mr. Browning's

readers, in their first arrangement and appearance, as in later

redistributions and reprints; but one curious little fact concerning

them is perhaps not generally known. In the eighth line of the

fourteenth section of 'One Word More' they were made to include

'Karshook (Ben Karshook's Wisdom)', which never was placed amongst them.

It was written in April 1854; and the dedication of the volume must have

been, as it so easily might be, in existence, before the author decided

to omit it. The wrong name, once given, was retained, I have no doubt,

from preference for its terminal sound; and 'Karshook' only became

'Karshish' in the Tauchnitz copy of 1872, and in the English edition of

1889.

\* The date is given in the edition of 1868 as London 185-;

in the Tauchnitz selection of 1872, London and Florence 184-

and 185-; in the new English edition 184-and 185-.

'Karshook' appeared in 1856 in 'The Keepsake', edited by Miss Power;

but, as we are told on good authority, has been printed in no edition or

selection of the Poet's works. I am therefore justified in inserting it

here.

I

'Would a man 'scape the rod?'

Rabbi Ben Karshook saith,

'See that he turn to God

The day before his death.'

'Ay, could a man inquire

When it shall come!' I say.

The Rabbi's eye shoots fire--

'Then let him turn to-day!'

II

Quoth a young Sadducee:

'Reader of many rolls,

Is it so certain we

Have, as they tell us, souls?'

'Son, there is no reply!'

The Rabbi bit his beard:

'Certain, a soul have \_I\_--

\_We\_ may have none,' he sneer'd.

Thus Karshook, the Hiram's-Hammer,

The Right-hand Temple-column,

Taught babes in grace their grammar,

And struck the simple, solemn.

Among this first collection of 'Men and Women' was the poem called

'Two in the Campagna'. It is a vivid, yet enigmatical little study of a

restless spirit tantalized by glimpses of repose in love, saddened and

perplexed by the manner in which this eludes it. Nothing that should

impress one as more purely dramatic ever fell from Mr. Browning's

pen. We are told, nevertheless, in Mr. Sharp's 'Life', that a personal

character no less actual than that of the 'Guardian Angel' has been

claimed for it. The writer, with characteristic delicacy, evades all

discussion of the question; but he concedes a great deal in his manner

of doing so. The poem, he says, conveys a sense of that necessary

isolation of the individual soul which resists the fusing power of

the deepest love; and its meaning cannot be personally--because it is

universally--true. I do not think Mr. Browning meant to emphasize this

aspect of the mystery of individual life, though the poem, in a certain

sense, expresses it. We have no reason to believe that he ever accepted

it as constant; and in no case could he have intended to refer its

conditions to himself. He was often isolated by the processes of his

mind; but there was in him no barrier to that larger emotional sympathy

which we think of as sympathy of the soul. If this poem were true, 'One

Word More' would be false, quite otherwise than in that approach to

exaggeration which is incidental to the poetic form. The true keynote

of 'Two in the Campagna' is the pain of perpetual change, and of the

conscious, though unexplained, predestination to it. Mr. Browning could

have still less in common with such a state, since one of the qualities

for which he was most conspicuous was the enormous power of anchorage

which his affections possessed. Only length of time and variety of

experience could fully test this power or fully display it; but the

signs of it had not been absent from even his earliest life. He loved

fewer people in youth than in advancing age: nature and circumstance

combined to widen the range, and vary the character of his human

interests; but where once love or friendship had struck a root, only a

moral convulsion could avail to dislodge it. I make no deduction from

this statement when I admit that the last and most emphatic words of the

poem in question,

Only I discern--

Infinite passion, and the pain

Of finite hearts that yearn,

did probably come from the poet's heart, as they also found a deep echo

in that of his wife, who much loved them.

From London they returned to Paris for the winter of 1855-6. The younger

of the Kemble sisters, Mrs. Sartoris, was also there with her family;

and the pleasant meetings of the Campagna renewed themselves for Mr.

Browning, though in a different form. He was also, with his sister,

a constant visitor at Lady Elgin's. Both they and Mrs. Browning were

greatly attached to her, and she warmly reciprocated the feeling. As Mr.

Locker's letter has told us, Mr. Browning was in the habit of reading

poetry to her, and when his sister had to announce his arrival from

Italy or England, she would say: 'Robert is coming to nurse you, and

read to you.' Lady Elgin was by this time almost completely paralyzed.

She had lost the power of speech, and could only acknowledge the little

attentions which were paid to her by some graceful pathetic gesture of

the left hand; but she retained her sensibilities to the last; and Miss

Browning received on one occasion a serious lesson in the risk of ever

assuming that the appearance of unconsciousness guarantees its reality.

Lady Augusta Bruce had asked her, in her mother's presence, how Mrs.

Browning was; and, imagining that Lady Elgin was unable to hear or

understand, she had answered with incautious distinctness, 'I am afraid

she is very ill,' when a little sob from the invalid warned her of her

mistake. Lady Augusta quickly repaired it by rejoining, 'but she is

better than she was, is she not?' Miss Browning of course assented.

There were other friends, old and new, whom Mr. Browning occasionally

saw, including, I need hardly say, the celebrated Madame Mohl. In the

main, however, he led a quiet life, putting aside many inducements to

leave his home.

Mrs. Browning was then writing 'Aurora Leigh', and her husband must have

been more than ever impressed by her power of work, as displayed by her

manner of working. To him, as to most creative writers, perfect quiet

was indispensable to literary production. She wrote in pencil, on

scraps of paper, as she lay on the sofa in her sitting-room, open to

interruption from chance visitors, or from her little omnipresent son;

simply hiding the paper beside her if anyone came in, and taking it

up again when she was free. And if this process was conceivable in the

large, comparatively silent spaces of their Italian home, and amidst

habits of life which reserved social intercourse for the close of the

working day, it baffles belief when one thinks of it as carried on

in the conditions of a Parisian winter, and the little 'salon' of the

apartment in the Rue du Colisee in which those months were spent. The

poem was completed in the ensuing summer, in Mr. Kenyon's London house,

and dedicated, October 17, in deeply pathetic words to that faithful

friend, whom the writer was never to see again.

The news of his death, which took place in December 1856, reached Mr.

and Mrs. Browning in Florence, to be followed in the spring by that of

Mrs. Browning's father. Husband and wife had both determined to forego

any pecuniary benefit which might accrue to them from this event; but

they were not called upon to exercise their powers of renunciation. By

Mr. Kenyon's will they were the richer, as is now, I think, generally

known, the one by six thousand, the other by four thousand guineas.\* Of

that cousin's long kindness Mrs. Browning could scarcely in after-days

trust herself to speak. It was difficult to her, she said, even to write

his name without tears.

\* Mr. Kenyon had considerable wealth, derived, like Mr.

Barrett's, from West Indian estates.

I have alluded, perhaps tardily, to Mr. Browning's son, a sociable

little being who must for some time have been playing a prominent part

in his parents' lives. I saw him for the first time in this winter of

1855-6, and remember the grave expression of the little round face,

the outline of which was common, at all events in childhood, to all the

members of his mother's family, and was conspicuous in her, if we may

trust an early portrait which has recently come to light. He wore the

curling hair to which she refers in a later letter, and pretty frocks

and frills, in which she delighted to clothe him. It is on record that,

on one of the journeys of this year, a trunk was temporarily lost which

contained Peni's embroidered trousers, and the MS., whole or in part, of

'Aurora Leigh'; and that Mrs. Browning had scarcely a thought to spare

for her poem, in face of the damage to her little boy's appearance which

the accident involved.

How he came by his familiar name of Penini--hence Peni, and Pen--neither

signifies in itself, nor has much bearing on his father's family

history; but I cannot refrain from a word of comment on Mr. Hawthorne's

fantastic conjecture, which has been asserted and reasserted in

opposition to Mr. Browning's own statement of the case. According to Mr.

Hawthorne, the name was derived from Apennino, and bestowed on the child

in babyhood, because Apennino was a colossal statue, and he was so very

small. It would be strange indeed that any joke connecting 'Baby' with a

given colossal statue should have found its way into the family without

father, mother, or nurse being aware of it; or that any joke should have

been accepted there which implied that the little boy was not of normal

size. But the fact is still more unanswerable that Apennino could by no

process congenial to the Italian language be converted into Penini.

Its inevitable abbreviation would be Pennino with a distinct separate

sounding of the central n's, or Nino. The accentuation of Penini is also

distinctly German.

During this winter in Paris, little Wiedemann, as his parents tried to

call him--his full name was Robert Wiedemann Barrett--had developed a

decided turn for blank verse. He would extemporize short poems, singing

them to his mother, who wrote them down as he sang. There is no less

proof of his having possessed a talent for music, though it first

naturally showed itself in the love of a cheerful noise. His father had

once sat down to the piano, for a serious study of some piece, when

the little boy appeared, with the evident intention of joining in the

performance. Mr. Browning rose precipitately, and was about to leave the

room. 'Oh!' exclaimed the hurt mother, 'you are going away, and he

has brought his three drums to accompany you upon.' She herself would

undoubtedly have endured the mixed melody for a little time, though her

husband did not think she seriously wished him to do so. But if he did

not play the piano to the accompaniment of Pen's drums, he played piano

duets with him as soon as the boy was old enough to take part in them;

and devoted himself to his instruction in this, as in other and more

important branches of knowledge.

Peni had also his dumb companions, as his father had had before him.

Tortoises lived at one end of the famous balcony at Casa Guidi; and

when the family were at the Baths of Lucca, Mr. Browning would stow away

little snakes in his bosom, and produce them for the child's amusement.

As the child grew into a man, the love of animals which he had inherited

became conspicuous in him; and it gave rise to many amusing and some

pathetic little episodes of his artist life. The creatures which he

gathered about him were generally, I think, more highly organized than

those which elicited his father's peculiar tenderness; it was natural

that he should exact more pictorial or more companionable qualities from

them. But father and son concurred in the fondness for snakes, and in a

singular predilection for owls; and they had not been long established

in Warwick Crescent, when a bird of that family was domesticated there.

We shall hear of it in a letter from Mr. Browning.

Of his son's moral quality as quite a little child his father has told

me pretty and very distinctive stories, but they would be out of place

here.\*

\* I am induced, on second thoughts, to subjoin one of these,

for its testimony to the moral atmosphere into which the

child had been born. He was sometimes allowed to play with a

little boy not of his own class--perhaps the son of a

'contadino'. The child was unobjectionable, or neither

Penini nor his parents would have endured the association;

but the servants once thought themselves justified in

treating him cavalierly, and Pen flew indignant to his

mother, to complain of their behaviour. Mrs. Browning at

once sought little Alessandro, with kind words and a large

piece of cake; but this, in Pen's eyes, only aggravated the

offence; it was a direct reflection on his visitor's

quality. 'He doesn't tome for take,' he burst forth; 'he

tomes because he is my friend.' How often, since I heard

this first, have we repeated the words, 'he doesn't tome for

take,' in half-serious definition of a disinterested person

or act! They became a standing joke.

Mrs. Browning seems now to have adopted the plan of writing independent

letters to her sister-in-law; and those available for our purpose are

especially interesting. The buoyancy of tone which has habitually

marked her communications, but which failed during the winter in Rome,

reasserts itself in the following extract. Her maternal comments on Peni

and his perfections have hitherto been so carefully excluded, that a

brief allusion to him may be allowed on the present occasion.

1857.

'My dearest Sarianna, . . . Here is Penini's letter, which takes up

so much room that I must be sparing of mine--and, by the way, if you

consider him improved in his writing, give the praise to Robert, who

has been taking most patient pains with him indeed. You will see how

the little curly head is turned with carnival doings. So gay a carnival

never was in our experience, for until last year (when we were absent)

all masks had been prohibited, and now everybody has eaten of the tree

of good and evil till not an apple is left. Peni persecuted me to let

him have a domino--with tears and embraces--he "\_almost never\_ in all his

life had had a domino," and he would like it so. Not a black domino!

no--he hated black--but a blue domino, trimmed with pink! that was his

taste. The pink trimming I coaxed him out of, but for the rest, I let

him have his way. . . . For my part, the universal madness reached me

sitting by the fire (whence I had not stirred for three months), and you

will open your eyes when I tell you that I went (in domino and masked)

to the great opera-ball. Yes! I did, really. Robert, who had been

invited two or three times to other people's boxes, had proposed to

return their kindness by taking a box himself at the opera this night,

and entertaining two or three friends with galantine and champagne. Just

as he and I were lamenting the impossibility of my going, on that very

morning the wind changed, the air grew soft and mild, and he maintained

that I might and should go. There was no time to get a domino of my

own (Robert himself had a beautiful one made, and I am having it

metamorphosed into a black silk gown for myself!) so I sent out and

hired one, buying the mask. And very much amused I was. I like to see

these characteristic things. (I shall never rest, Sarianna, till I risk

my reputation at the 'bal de l'opera' at Paris). Do you think I was

satisfied with staying in the box? No, indeed. Down I went, and Robert

and I elbowed our way through the crowd to the remotest corner of

the ball below. Somebody smote me on the shoulder and cried "Bella

Mascherina!" and I answered as impudently as one feels under a mask.

At two o'clock in the morning, however, I had to give up and come away

(being overcome by the heavy air) and ingloriously left Robert and

our friends to follow at half-past four. Think of the refinement and

gentleness--yes, I must call it \_superiority\_ of this people--when no

excess, no quarrelling, no rudeness nor coarseness can be observed in

the course of such wild masked liberty; not a touch of licence anywhere,

and perfect social equality! Our servant Ferdinando side by side in the

same ball-room with the Grand Duke, and no class's delicacy offended

against! For the Grand Duke went down into the ball-room for a short

time. . . .'

The summer of 1857 saw the family once more at the Baths of Lucca, and

again in company with Mr. Lytton. He had fallen ill at the house

of their common friend, Miss Blagden, also a visitor there; and Mr.

Browning shared in the nursing, of which she refused to entrust any part

to less friendly hands. He sat up with the invalid for four nights; and

would doubtless have done so for as many more as seemed necessary, but

that Mrs. Browning protested against this trifling with his own health.

The only serious difference which ever arose between Mr. Browning and

his wife referred to the subject of spiritualism. Mrs. Browning held

doctrines which prepared her to accept any real or imagined phenomena

betokening intercourse with the spirits of the dead; nor could she

be repelled by anything grotesque or trivial in the manner of this

intercourse, because it was no part of her belief that a spirit still

inhabiting the atmosphere of our earth, should exhibit any dignity or

solemnity not belonging to him while he lived upon it. The question must

have been discussed by them on its general grounds at a very early stage

of their intimacy; but it only assumed practical importance when Mr.

Home came to Florence in 1857 or 1858. Mr. Browning found himself

compelled to witness some of the 'manifestations'. He was keenly

alive to their generally prosaic and irreverent character, and to the

appearance of jugglery which was then involved in them. He absolutely

denied the good faith of all the persons concerned. Mrs. Browning as

absolutely believed it; and no compromise between them was attainable,

because, strangely enough, neither of them admitted as possible that

mediums or witnesses should deceive themselves. The personal aspect

which the question thus received brought it into closer and more painful

contact with their daily life. They might agree to differ as to the

abstract merits of spiritualism; but Mr. Browning could not resign

himself to his wife's trustful attitude towards some of the individuals

who at that moment represented it. He may have had no substantial fear

of her doing anything that could place her in their power, though a

vague dread of this seems to have haunted him; but he chafed against the

public association of her name with theirs. Both his love for and his

pride in her resented it.

He had subsided into a more judicial frame of mind when he wrote 'Sludge

the Medium', in which he says everything which can excuse the liar and,

what is still more remarkable, modify the lie. So far back as the autumn

of 1860 I heard him discuss the trickery which he believed himself to

have witnessed, as dispassionately as any other non-credulous person

might have done so. The experience must even before that have passed

out of the foreground of his conjugal life. He remained, nevertheless,

subject, for many years, to gusts of uncontrollable emotion which would

sweep over him whenever the question of 'spirits' or 'spiritualism' was

revived; and we can only understand this in connection with the peculiar

circumstances of the case. With all his faith in the future, with all

his constancy to the past, the memory of pain was stronger in him than

any other. A single discordant note in the harmony of that married love,

though merged in its actual existence, would send intolerable vibrations

through his remembrance of it. And the pain had not been, in this

instance, that of simple disagreement. It was complicated by Mrs.

Browning's refusal to admit that disagreement was possible. She never

believed in her husband's disbelief; and he had been not unreasonably

annoyed by her always assuming it to be feigned. But his doubt of

spiritualistic sincerity was not feigned. She cannot have thought,

and scarcely can have meant to say so. She may have meant to say, 'You

believe that these are tricks, but you know that there is something real

behind them;' and so far, if no farther, she may have been in the

right. Mr. Browning never denied the abstract possibility of spiritual

communication with either living or dead; he only denied that such

communication had ever been proved, or that any useful end could

be subserved by it. The tremendous potentialities of hypnotism and

thought-reading, now passing into the region of science, were not then

so remote but that an imagination like his must have foreshadowed them.

The natural basis of the seemingly supernatural had not yet entered into

discussion. He may, from the first, have suspected the existence of some

mysterious force, dangerous because not understood, and for this reason

doubly liable to fall into dangerous hands. And if this was so, he

would necessarily regard the whole system of manifestations with

an apprehensive hostility, which was not entire negation, but which

rebelled against any effort on the part of others, above all of those

he loved, to interpret it into assent. The pain and anger which could be

aroused in him by an indication on the part of a valued friend of even

an impartial interest in the subject points especially to the latter

conclusion.

He often gave an instance of the tricks played in the name of

spiritualism on credulous persons, which may amuse those who have not

yet heard it. I give the story as it survives in the fresher memory of

Mr. Val Prinsep, who also received it from Mr. Browning.

'At Florence lived a curious old savant who in his day was well known

to all who cared for art or history. I fear now few live who recollect

Kirkup. He was quite a mine of information on all kinds of forgotten

lore. It was he who discovered Giotto's portrait of Dante in the

Bargello. Speaking of some friend, he said, "He is a most ignorant

fellow! Why, he does not know how to cast a horoscope!" Of him Browning

told me the following story. Kirkup was much taken up with spiritualism,

in which he firmly believed. One day Browning called on him to borrow a

book. He rang loudly at the storey, for he knew Kirkup, like Landor,

was quite deaf. To his astonishment the door opened at once and Kirkup

appeared.

'"Come in," he cried; "the spirits told me there was some one at the

door. Ah! I know you do not believe! Come and see. Mariana is in a

trance!"

'Browning entered. In the middle room, full of all kinds of curious

objects of "vertu", stood a handsome peasant girl, with her eyes fixed

as though she were in a trance.

'"You see, Browning," said Kirkup, "she is quite insensible, and has no

will of her own. Mariana, hold up your arm."

'The woman slowly did as she was bid.

'"She cannot take it down till I tell her," cried Kirkup.

'"Very curious," observed Browning. "Meanwhile I have come to ask you to

lend me a book."

'Kirkup, as soon as he was made to hear what book was wanted, said he

should be delighted.

'"Wait a bit. It is in the next room."

'The old man shuffled out at the door. No sooner had he disappeared than

the woman turned to Browning, winked, and putting down her arm leaned it

on his shoulder. When Kirkup returned she resumed her position and rigid

look.

'"Here is the book," said Kirkup. "Isn't it wonderful?" he added,

pointing to the woman.

'"Wonderful," agreed Browning as he left the room.

'The woman and her family made a good thing of poor Kirkup's

spiritualism.'

Something much more remarkable in reference to this subject happened to

the poet himself during his residence in Florence. It is related in a

letter to the 'Spectator', dated January 30, 1869, and signed J. S. K.

'Mr. Robert Browning tells me that when he was in Florence some years

since, an Italian nobleman (a Count Ginnasi of Ravenna), visiting at

Florence, was brought to his house without previous introduction, by

an intimate friend. The Count professed to have great mesmeric and

clairvoyant faculties, and declared, in reply to Mr. Browning's avowed

scepticism, that he would undertake to convince him somehow or other of

his powers. He then asked Mr. Browning whether he had anything about him

then and there, which he could hand to him, and which was in any way

a relic or memento. This Mr. Browning thought was perhaps because he

habitually wore no sort of trinket or ornament, not even a watchguard,

and might therefore turn out to be a safe challenge. But it so happened

that, by a curious accident, he was then wearing under his coat-sleeves

some gold wrist-studs which he had quite recently taken into wear, in

the absence (by mistake of a sempstress) of his ordinary wrist-buttons.

He had never before worn them in Florence or elsewhere, and had found

them in some old drawer where they had lain forgotten for years. One of

these studs he took out and handed to the Count, who held it in his hand

a while, looking earnestly in Mr. Browning's face, and then he said,

as if much impressed, "C'equalche cosa che mi grida nell' orecchio

'Uccisione! uccisione!'" ("There is something here which cries out in my

ear, 'Murder! murder!'")

'"And truly," says Mr. Browning, "those very studs were taken from

the dead body of a great uncle of mine who was violently killed on his

estate in St. Kitt's, nearly eighty years ago. . . . The occurrence of

my great uncle's murder was known only to myself of all men in Florence,

as certainly was also my possession of the studs."'

A letter from the poet, of July 21, 1883, affirms that the account is

correct in every particular, adding, 'My own explanation of the matter

has been that the shrewd Italian felt his way by the involuntary help

of my own eyes and face.' The story has been reprinted in the Reports of

the Psychical Society.

A pleasant piece of news came to brighten the January of 1858. Mr. Fox

was returned for Oldham, and at once wrote to announce the fact. He

was answered in a joint letter from Mr. and Mrs. Browning, interesting

throughout, but of which only the second part is quite suited for

present insertion.

Mrs. Browning, who writes first and at most length, ends by saying

she must leave a space for Robert, that Mr. Fox may be compensated for

reading all she has had to say. The husband continues as follows:

. . . 'A space for Robert' who has taken a breathing space--hardly more

than enough--to recover from his delight; he won't say surprise, at your

letter, dear Mr. Fox. But it is all right and, like you, I wish from my

heart we could get close together again, as in those old days, and what

times we would have here in Italy! The realization of the children's

prayer of angels at the corner of your bed (i.e. sofa), one to read

and one (my wife) to write,\* and both to guard you through the night of

lodging-keeper's extortions, abominable charges for firing, and so on.

(Observe, to call oneself 'an angel' in this land is rather humble,

where they are apt to be painted as plumed cutthroats or celestial

police--you say of Gabriel at his best and blithesomest, 'Shouldn't

admire meeting \_him\_ in a narrow lane!')

\* Mr. Fox much liked to be read to, and was in the habit

of writing his articles by dictation.

I say this foolishly just because I can't trust myself to be earnest

about it. I would, you know, I would, always would, choose you out of

the whole English world to judge and correct what I write myself; my

wife shall read this and let it stand if I have told her so these twelve

years--and certainly I have not grown intellectually an inch over the

good and kind hand you extended over my head how many years ago! Now it

goes over my wife's too.

How was it Tottie never came here as she promised? Is it to be some

other time? Do think of Florence, if ever you feel chilly, and hear

quantities about the Princess Royal's marriage, and want a change. I

hate the thought of leaving Italy for one day more than I can help--and

satisfy my English predilections by newspapers and a book or two.

One gets nothing of that kind here, but the stuff out of which books

grow,--it lies about one's feet indeed. Yet for me, there would be one

book better than any now to be got here or elsewhere, and all out of a

great English head and heart,--those 'Memoirs' you engaged to give us.

Will you give us them?

Goodbye now--if ever the whim strikes you to 'make beggars happy'

remember us.

Love to Tottie, and love and gratitude to you, dear Mr. Fox, From yours

ever affectionately, Robert Browning.

In the summer of this year, the poet with his wife and child joined his

father and sister at Havre. It was the last time they were all to be

together.

Chapter 13

1858-1861

Mrs. Browning's Illness--Siena--Letter from Mr. Browning to Mr. Leighton

--Mrs. Browning's Letters continued--Walter Savage Landor--Winter

in Rome--Mr. Val Prinsep--Friends in Rome: Mr. and Mrs.

Cartwright--Multiplying Social Relations--Massimo d'Azeglio--Siena

again--Illness and Death of Mrs. Browning's Sister--Mr. Browning's

Occupations--Madame du Quaire--Mrs. Browning's last Illness and Death.

I cannot quite ascertain, though it might seem easy to do so, whether

Mr. and Mrs. Browning remained in Florence again till the summer of

1859, or whether the intervening months were divided between Florence

and Rome; but some words in their letters favour the latter supposition.

We hear of them in September from Mr. Val Prinsep, in Siena or its

neighbourhood; with Mr. and Mrs. Story in an adjacent villa, and Walter

Savage Landor in a 'cottage' close by. How Mr. Landor found himself

of the party belongs to a little chapter in Mr. Browning's history for

which I quote Mr. Colvin's words.\* He was then living at Fiesole with

his family, very unhappily, as we all know; and Mr. Colvin relates

how he had thrice left his villa there, determined to live in Florence

alone; and each time been brought back to the nominal home where so

little kindness awaited him.

\* 'Life of Landor', p. 209.

'. . . The fourth time he presented himself in the house of Mr. Browning

with only a few pauls in his pocket, declaring that nothing should ever

induce him to return.

'Mr. Browning, an interview with the family at the villa having

satisfied him that reconciliation or return was indeed past question,

put himself at once in communication with Mr. Forster and with Landor's

brothers in England. The latter instantly undertook to supply the needs

of their eldest brother during the remainder of his life. Thenceforth an

income sufficient for his frugal wants was forwarded regularly for his

use through the friend who had thus come forward at his need. To Mr.

Browning's respectful and judicious guidance Landor showed himself

docile from the first. Removed from the inflictions, real and imaginary,

of his life at Fiesole, he became another man, and at times still seemed

to those about him like the old Landor at his best. It was in July,

1859, that the new arrangements for his life were made. The remainder

of that summer he spent at Siena, first as the guest of Mr. Story, the

American sculptor and poet, next in a cottage rented for him by Mr.

Browning near his own. In the autumn of the same year Landor removed to

a set of apartments in the Via Nunziatina in Florence, close to the

Casa Guidi, in a house kept by a former servant of Mrs. Browning's, an

Englishwoman married to an Italian.\* Here he continued to live during

the five years that yet remained to him.'

\* Wilson, Mrs. Browning's devoted maid, and another most

faithful servant

of hers and her husband's, Ferdinando Romagnoli.

Mr. Landor's presence is also referred to, with the more important

circumstance of a recent illness of Mrs. Browning's, in two

characteristic and interesting letters of this period, one written

by Mr. Browning to Frederic Leighton, the other by his wife to her

sister-in-law. Mr.-- now Sir F.-- Leighton had been studying art during

the previous winter in Italy.

Kingdom of Piedmont, Siena: Oct. 9, '59.

'My dear Leighton--I hope--and think--you know what delight it gave

me to hear from you two months ago. I was in great trouble at the time

about my wife who was seriously ill. As soon as she could bear removal

we brought her to a villa here. She slowly recovered and is at last \_well\_

--I believe--but weak still and requiring more attention than usual. We

shall be obliged to return to Rome for the winter--not choosing to risk

losing what we have regained with some difficulty. Now you know why I

did not write at once--and may imagine why, having waited so long, I put

off telling you for a week or two till I could say certainly what we do

with ourselves. If any amount of endeavour could induce you to join us

there--Cartwright, Russell, the Vatican and all--and if such a step were

not inconsistent with your true interests--you should have it: but I

know very well that you love Italy too much not to have had weighty

reasons for renouncing her at present--and I want your own good and

not my own contentment in the matter. Wherever you are, be sure I shall

follow your proceedings with deep and true interest. I heard of your

successes--and am now anxious to know how you get on with the great

picture, the 'Ex voto'--if it does not prove full of beauty and power,

two of us will be shamed, that's all! But \_I\_ don't fear, mind! Do

keep me informed of your progress, from time to time--a few lines will

serve--and then I shall slip some day into your studio, and buffet the

piano, without having grown a stranger. Another thing--do take proper

care of your health, and exercise yourself; give those vile indigestions

no chance against you; keep up your spirits, and be as distinguished and

happy as God meant you should. Can I do anything for you at Rome--not to

say, Florence? We go thither (i.e. to Florence) to-morrow, stay there a

month, probably, and then take the Siena road again.'

The next paragraph refers to some orders for photographs, and is not

specially interesting.

Cartwright arrived here a fortnight ago--very pleasant it was to see

him: he left for Florence, stayed a day or two and returned to Mrs.

Cartwright (who remained at the Inn) and they all departed prosperously

yesterday for Rome. Odo Russell spent two days here on his way

thither--we liked him much. Prinsep and Jones--do you know them?--are in

the town. The Storys have passed the summer in the villa opposite,--and

no less a lion than dear old Landor is in a house a few steps off. I

take care of him--his amiable family having clawed him a little

too sharply: so strangely do things come about! I mean his Fiesole

'family'--a trifle of wife, sons and daughter--not his English

relatives, who are generous and good in every way.

Take any opportunity of telling dear Mrs. Sartoris (however

unnecessarily) that I and my wife remember her with the old feeling--I

trust she is well and happy to heart's content. Pen is quite well and

rejoicing just now in a Sardinian pony on which he gallops like Puck on

a dragon-fly's back. My wife's kind regard and best wishes go with those

of, Dear Leighton, yours affectionately ever, R. Browning.

October 1859.

Mrs. to Miss Browning.

'. . . After all, it is not a cruel punishment to have to go to Rome

again this winter, though it will be an undesirable expense, and we

did wish to keep quiet this winter,--the taste for constant wanderings

having passed away as much for me as for Robert. We begin to see that

by no possible means can one spend as much money to so small an end--and

then we don't work so well, don't live to as much use either for

ourselves or others. Isa Blagden bids us observe that we pretend to live

at Florence, and are not there much above two months in the year, what

with going away for the summer and going away for the winter. It's

too true. It's the drawback of Italy. To live in one place there is

impossible for us, almost just as to live out of Italy at all, is

impossible for us. It isn't caprice on our part. Siena pleases us very

much--the silence and repose have been heavenly things to me, and the

country is very pretty--though no more than pretty--nothing marked or

romantic--no mountains, except so far off as to be like a cloud only

on clear days--and no water. Pretty dimpled ground, covered with low

vineyards, purple hills, not high, with the sunsets clothing them. . . .

We shall not leave Florence till November--Robert must see Mr. Landor

(his adopted son, Sarianna) settled in his new apartments with Wilson

for a duenna. It's an excellent plan for him and not a bad one for

Wilson. . . . Forgive me if Robert has told you this already. Dear

darling Robert amuses me by talking of his "gentleness and sweetness".

A most courteous and refined gentleman he is, of course, and very

affectionate to Robert (as he ought to be), but of self-restraint, he

has not a grain, and of suspiciousness, many grains. Wilson will run

many risks, and I, for one, would rather not run them. What do you say

to dashing down a plate on the floor when you don't like what's on it?

And the contadini at whose house he is lodging now have been already

accused of opening desks. Still upon that occasion (though there

was talk of the probability of Mr. Landor's "throat being cut in his

sleep"--) as on other occasions, Robert succeeded in soothing him--and

the poor old lion is very quiet on the whole, roaring softly, to beguile

the time, in Latin alcaics against his wife and Louis Napoleon. He

laughs carnivorously when I tell him that one of these days he will have

to write an ode in honour of the Emperor, to please me.'

Mrs. Browning writes, somewhat later, from Rome:

'. . . We left Mr. Landor in great comfort. I went to see his apartment

before it was furnished. Rooms small, but with a look-out into a little

garden, quiet and cheerful, and he doesn't mind a situation rather out

of the way. He pays four pounds ten (English) the month. Wilson has

thirty pounds a year for taking care of him--which sounds a good deal,

but it is a difficult position. He has excellent, generous, affectionate

impulses--but the impulses of the tiger, every now and then. Nothing

coheres in him--either in his opinions, or, I fear, his affections. It

isn't age--he is precisely the man of his youth, I must believe. Still,

his genius gives him the right of gratitude on all artists at least, and

I must say that my Robert has generously paid the debt. Robert always

said that he owed more as a writer to Landor than to any contemporary.

At present Landor is very fond of him--but I am quite prepared for his

turning against us as he has turned against Forster, who has been so

devoted for years and years. Only one isn't kind for what one gets by

it, or there wouldn't be much kindness in this world. . . .'

Mr. Browning always declared that his wife could impute evil to no one,

that she was a living denial of that doctrine of original sin to which

her Christianity pledged her; and the great breadth and perfect charity

of her views habitually justified the assertion; but she evidently

possessed a keen insight into character, which made her complete

suspension of judgment on the subject of Spiritualism very difficult to

understand.

The spiritualistic coterie had found a satisfactory way of explaining

Mr. Browning's antagonistic attitude towards it. He was jealous, it was

said, because the Spirits on one occasion had dropped a crown on to his

wife's head and none on to his own. The first instalment of his

long answer to this grotesque accusation appears in a letter of Mrs.

Browning's, probably written in the course of the winter of 1859-60.

'. . . My brother George sent me a number of the "National Magazine"

with my face in it, after Marshall Wood's medallion. My comfort is that

my greatest enemy will not take it to be like me, only that does not go

far with the indifferent public: the portrait I suppose will have its

due weight in arresting the sale of "Aurora Leigh" from henceforth. You

never saw a more determined visage of a strong-minded woman with the

neck of a vicious bull. . . . Still, I am surprised, I own, at the

amount of success, and that golden-hearted Robert is in ecstasies about

it, far more than if it all related to a book of his own. The form of

the story, and also, something in the philosophy, seem to have caught

the crowd. As to the poetry by itself, anything good in that repels

rather. I am not so blind as Romney, not to perceive this . . . Give

Peni's and my love to the dearest 'nonno' (grandfather) whose sublime

unselfishness and want of common egotism presents such a contrast to

what is here. Tell him I often think of him, and always with touched

feeling. (When \_he\_ is eighty-six or ninety-six, nobody will be pained or

humbled by the spectacle of an insane self-love resulting from a long

life's ungoverned will.) May God bless him!--. . . Robert has made his

third bust copied from the antique. He breaks them all up as they are

finished--it's only matter of education. When the power of execution is

achieved, he will try at something original. Then reading hurts him; as

long as I have known him he has not been able to read long at a time--he

can do it now better than at the beginning. The consequence of which

is that an active occupation is salvation to him. . . . Nobody exactly

understands him except me, who am in the inside of him and hear him

breathe. For the peculiarity of our relation is, that he thinks aloud

with me and can't stop himself. . . . I wanted his poems done this

winter very much, and here was a bright room with three windows

consecrated to his use. But he had a room all last summer, and did

nothing. Then, he worked himself out by riding for three or four hours

together--there has been little poetry done since last winter, when

he did much. He was not inclined to write this winter. The modelling

combines body-work and soul-work, and the more tired he has been, and

the more his back ached, poor fellow, the more he has exulted and been

happy. So I couldn't be much in opposition against the sculpture--I

couldn't in fact at all. He has material for a volume, and will work at

it this summer, he says.

'His power is much in advance of "Strafford", which is his poorest work

of art. Ah, the brain stratifies and matures, even in the pauses of the

pen.

'At the same time, his treatment in England affects him, naturally, and

for my part I set it down as an infamy of that public--no other word.

He says he has told you some things you had not heard, and which I

acknowledge I always try to prevent him from repeating to anyone. I

wonder if he has told you besides (no, I fancy not) that an English lady

of rank, an acquaintance of ours, (observe that!) asked, the other

day, the American minister, whether "Robert was not an American." The

minister answered--"is it possible that \_you\_ ask me this? Why, there is

not so poor a village in the United States, where they would not tell

you that Robert Browning was an Englishman, and that they were sorry

he was not an American." Very pretty of the American minister, was it

not?--and literally true, besides. . . . Ah, dear Sarianna--I don't

complain for myself of an unappreciating public. I \_have no reason\_. But,

just for \_that\_ reason, I complain more about Robert--only he does not

hear me complain--to \_you\_ I may say, that the blindness, deafness and

stupidity of the English public to Robert are amazing. Of course Milsand

had heard his name--well the contrary would have been strange. Robert

\_is\_. All England can't prevent his existence, I suppose. But nobody

there, except a small knot of pre-Raffaellite men, pretend to do him

justice. Mr. Forster has done the best,--in the press. As a sort of

lion, Robert has his range in society--and--for the rest, you should

see Chapman's returns!--While, in America he is a power, a writer, a

poet--he is read--he lives in the hearts of the people.

'"Browning readings" here in Boston--"Browning evenings" there. For the

rest, the English hunt lions, too, Sarianna, but their lions are chiefly

chosen among lords and railway kings. . . .'

We cannot be surprised at Mrs. Browning's desire for a more sustained

literary activity on her husband's part. We learn from his own

subsequent correspondence that he too regarded the persevering exercise

of his poetic faculty as almost a religious obligation. But it becomes

the more apparent that the restlessness under which he was now labouring

was its own excuse; and that its causes can have been no mystery even

to those 'outside' him. The life and climate of Italy were beginning

to undermine his strength. We owe it perhaps to the great and sorrowful

change, which was then drawing near, that the full power of work

returned to him.

During the winter of 1859-60, Mr. Val Prinsep was in Rome. He had gone

to Siena with Mr. Burne Jones, bearing an introduction from Rossetti to

Mr. Browning and his wife; and the acquaintance with them was renewed

in the ensuing months. Mr. Prinsep had acquired much knowledge of the

popular, hence picturesque aspects of Roman life, through a French

artist long resident in the city; and by the help of the two young men

Mr. Browning was also introduced to them. The assertion that during his

married life he never dined away from home must be so far modified, that

he sometimes joined Mr. Prinsep and his friend in a Bohemian meal, at an

inn near the Porta Pinciana which they much frequented; and he gained in

this manner some distinctive experiences which he liked long afterwards

to recall. I am again indebted to Mr. Prinsep for a description of some

of these.

'The first time he honoured us was on an evening when the poet of

the quarter of the "Monte" had announced his intention of coming to

challenge a rival poet to a poetical contest. Such contests are, or

were, common in Rome. In old times the Monte and the Trastevere, the

two great quarters of the eternal city, held their meetings on the Ponte

Rotto. The contests were not confined to the effusions of the poetical

muse. Sometimes it was a strife between two lute-players, sometimes

guitarists would engage, and sometimes mere wrestlers. The rivalry was

so keen that the adverse parties finished up with a general fight. So

the Papal Government had forbidden the meetings on the old bridge.

But still each quarter had its pet champions, who were wont to meet in

private before an appreciative, but less excitable audience, than in

olden times.

'Gigi (the host) had furnished a first-rate dinner, and his usual tap

of excellent wine. ('Vino del Popolo' he called it.) The 'Osteria' had

filled; the combatants were placed opposite each other on either side

of a small table on which stood two 'mezzi'--long glass bottles holding

about a quart apiece. For a moment the two poets eyed each other like

two cocks seeking an opportunity to engage. Then through the crowd a

stalwart carpenter, a constant attendant of Gigi's, elbowed his way.

He leaned over the table with a hand on each shoulder, and in a neatly

turned couplet he then addressed the rival bards.

'"You two," he said, "for the honour of Rome, must do your best, for

there is now listening to you a great Poet from England."

'Having said this, he bowed to Browning, and swaggered back to his place

in the crowd, amid the applause of the on-lookers.

'It is not necessary to recount how the two Improvisatori poetized, even

if I remembered, which I do not.

'On another occasion, when Browning and Story were dining with us, we

had a little orchestra (mandolins, two guitars, and a lute,) to play to

us. The music consisted chiefly of well-known popular airs. While they

were playing with great fervour the Hymn to Garibaldi--an air strictly

forbidden by the Papal Government, three blows at the door resounded

through the 'Osteria'. The music stopped in a moment. I saw Gigi was

very pale as he walked down the room. There was a short parley at the

door. It opened, and a sergeant and two Papal gendarmes marched solemnly

up to the counter from which drink was supplied. There was a dead

silence while Gigi supplied them with large measures of wine, which the

gendarmes leisurely imbibed. Then as solemnly they marched out again,

with their heads well in the air, looking neither to the right nor the

left. Most discreet if not incorruptible guardians of the peace! When

the door was shut the music began again; but Gigi was so earnest in

his protestations, that my friend Browning suggested we should get into

carriages and drive to see the Coliseum by moonlight. And so we sallied

forth, to the great relief of poor Gigi, to whom it meant, if reported,

several months of imprisonment, and complete ruin.

'In after-years Browning frequently recounted with delight this night

march.

'"We drove down the Corso in two carriages," he would say. "In one were

our musicians, in the other we sat. Yes! and the people all asked, 'who

are these who make all this parade?' At last some one said, 'Without

doubt these are the fellows who won the lottery,' and everybody cried,

'Of course these are the lucky men who have won.'"'

The two persons whom Mr. Browning saw most, and most intimately, during

this and the ensuing winter, were probably Mr. and Mrs. Story. Allusion

has already been made to the opening of the acquaintance at the Baths

of Lucca in 1853, to its continuance in Rome in '53 and '54, and to the

artistic pursuits which then brought the two men into close and frequent

contact with each other. These friendly relations were cemented by their

children, who were of about the same age; and after Mrs. Browning's

death, Miss Browning took her place in the pleasant intercourse which

renewed itself whenever their respective visits to Italy and to England

again brought the two families together. A no less lasting and truly

affectionate intimacy was now also growing up with Mr. Cartwright and

his wife--the Cartwrights (of Aynhoe) of whom mention was made in the

Siena letter to F. Leighton; and this too was subsequently to include

their daughter, now Mrs. Guy Le Strange, and Mr. Browning's sister. I

cannot quite ascertain when the poet first knew Mr. Odo Russell, and his

mother, Lady William Russell, who was also during this, or at all

events the following winter, in Rome; and whom afterwards in London

he regularly visited until her death; but the acquaintance was already

entering on the stage in which it would spread as a matter of course

through every branch of the family. His first country visit, when he had

returned to England, was paid with his son to Woburn Abbey.

We are now indeed fully confronted with one of the great difficulties

of Mr. Browning's biography: that of giving a sufficient idea of the

growing extent and growing variety of his social relations. It is

evident from the fragments of his wife's correspondence that during, as

well as after, his married life, he always and everywhere knew everyone

whom it could interest him to know. These acquaintances constantly

ripened into friendliness, friendliness into friendship. They were

necessarily often marked by interesting circumstances or distinctive

character. To follow them one by one, would add not chapters, but

volumes, to our history. The time has not yet come at which this could

even be undertaken; and any attempt at systematic selection would create

a false impression of the whole. I must therefore be still content to

touch upon such passages of Mr. Browning's social experience as lie in

the course of a comparatively brief record; leaving all such as are not

directly included in it to speak indirectly for themselves.

Mrs. Browning writes again, in 1859:

'Massimo d'Azeglio came to see us, and talked nobly, with that noble

head of his. I was far prouder of his coming than of another personal

distinction you will guess at,\* though I don't pretend to have been

insensible to that.'

\* An invitation to Mr. Browning to dine in company

with the young Prince of Wales.

Dr.--afterwards Cardinal--Manning was also among the distinguished or

interesting persons whom they knew in Rome.

Another, undated extract might refer to the early summer of 1859 or

1860, when a meeting with the father and sister must have been once more

in contemplation.

Casa Guidi.

'My dearest Sarianna,--I am delighted to say that we have arrived, and

see our dear Florence--the Queen of Italy, after all . . . A comfort

is that Robert is considered here to be looking better than he ever was

known to look--and this, notwithstanding the greyness of his beard . . .

which indeed, is, in my own mind, very becoming to him, the argentine

touch giving a character of elevation and thought to the whole

physiognomy. This greyness was suddenly developed--let me tell you how.

He was in a state of bilious irritability on the morning of his arrival

in Rome, from exposure to the sun or some such cause, and in a fit of

suicidal impatience shaved away his whole beard . . . whiskers and all!!

I \_cried\_ when I saw him, I was so horror-struck. I might have gone into

hysterics and still been reasonable--for no human being was ever so

disfigured by so simple an act. Of course I said when I recovered heart

and voice, that everything was at an end between him and me if he didn't

let it all grow again directly, and (upon the further advice of his

looking-glass) he yielded the point,--and the beard grew--but it grew

white--which was the just punishment of the gods--our sins leave their

traces.

'Well, poor darling Robert won't shock you after all--you can't choose

but be satisfied with his looks. M. de Monclar swore to me that he was

not changed for the intermediate years. . . .'

The family returned, however, to Siena for the summer of 1860, and from

thence Mrs. Browning writes to her sister-in-law of her great anxiety

concerning her sister Henrietta, Mrs. Surtees Cook,\* then attacked by a

fatal disease.

\* The name was afterwards changed to Altham.

'. . . There is nothing or little to add to my last account of my

precious Henrietta. But, dear, you think the evil less than it

is--be sure that the fear is too reasonable. I am of a very hopeful

temperament, and I never could go on systematically making the worst of

any case. I bear up here for a few days, and then comes the expectation

of a letter, which is hard. I fight with it for Robert's sake, but all

the work I put myself to do does not hinder a certain effect. She is

confined to her bed almost wholly and suffers acutely. . . . In fact,

I am living from day to day, on the merest crumbs of hope--on the daily

bread which is very bitter. Of course it has shaken me a good deal, and

interfered with the advantages of the summer, but that's the least. Poor

Robert's scheme for me of perfect repose has scarcely been carried out.

. . .'

This anxiety was heightened during the ensuing winter in Rome, by just

the circumstance from which some comfort had been expected--the second

postal delivery which took place every day; for the hopes and fears

which might have found a moment's forgetfulness in the longer absence of

news, were, as it proved, kept at fever-heat. On one critical occasion

the suspense became unbearable, because Mr. Browning, by his wife's

desire, had telegraphed for news, begging for a telegraphic answer. No

answer had come, and she felt convinced that the worst had happened, and

that the brother to whom the message was addressed could not make up

his mind to convey the fact in so abrupt a form. The telegram had been

stopped by the authorities, because Mr. Odo Russell had undertaken

to forward it, and his position in Rome, besides the known Liberal

sympathies of Mr. and Mrs. Browning and himself, had laid it open to

political suspicion.

Mrs. Surtees Cook died in the course of the winter. Mr. Browning always

believed that the shock and sorrow of this event had shortened his

wife's life, though it is also possible that her already lowered

vitality increased the dejection into which it plunged her. Her own

casual allusions to the state of her health had long marked arrested

progress, if not steady decline. We are told, though this may have been

a mistake, that active signs of consumption were apparent in her even

before the illness of 1859, which was in a certain sense the beginning

of the end. She was completely an invalid, as well as entirely a

recluse, during the greater part if not the whole of this last stay in

Rome.

She rallied nevertheless sufficiently to write to Miss Browning in

April, in a tone fully suggestive of normal health and energy.

'. . . In my own opinion he is infinitely handsomer and more attractive

than when I saw him first, sixteen years ago. . . . I believe people in

general would think the same exactly. As to the modelling--well, I told

you that I grudged a little the time from his own particular art. But it

does not do to dishearten him about his modelling. He has given a great

deal of time to anatomy with reference to the expression of form, and

the clay is only the new medium which takes the place of drawing. Also,

Robert is peculiar in his ways of work as a poet. I have struggled a

little with him on this point, for I don't think him right; that is

to say, it would not be right for me . . . But Robert waits for an

inclination, works by fits and starts; he can't do otherwise he says,

and his head is full of ideas which are to come out in clay or marble. I

yearn for the poems, but he leaves that to me for the present. . . . You

will think Robert looking very well when you see him; indeed, you may

judge by the photographs meanwhile. You know, Sarianna, how I used to

forbid the moustache. I insisted as long as I could, but all artists

were against me, and I suppose that the bare upper lip does not

harmonise with the beard. He keeps the hair now closer, and the beard is

pointed. . . . As to the moony whiteness of the beard, it is beautiful,

\_I\_ think, but then I think him all beautiful, and always. . . .'

Mr. Browning's old friend, Madame du Quaire,\* came to Rome in December.

She had visited Florence three years before, and I am indebted to her

for some details of the spiritualist controversy by which its English

colony was at that time divided. She was now a widow, travelling with

her brother; and Mr. Browning came whenever he could, to comfort her in

her sorrow, and, as she says, discourse of nature, art, the beautiful,

and all that 'conquers death'. He little knew how soon he would need the

same comfort for himself. He would also declaim passages from his wife's

poems; and when, on one of these occasions, Madame du Quaire had said,

as so many persons now say, that she much preferred his poetry to hers,

he made this characteristic answer, to be repeated in substance some

years afterwards to another friend: 'You are wrong--quite wrong--she has

genius; I am only a painstaking fellow. Can't you imagine a clever sort

of angel who plots and plans, and tries to build up something--he wants

to make you see it as he sees it--shows you one point of view, carries

you off to another, hammering into your head the thing he wants you to

understand; and whilst this bother is going on God Almighty turns you

off a little star--that's the difference between us. The true creative

power is hers, not mine.'

\* Formerly Miss Blackett, and sister of the member for New

Castle.

Mrs. Browning died at Casa Guidi on June 29, 1861, soon after their

return to Florence. She had had a return of the bronchial affection to

which she was subject; and a new doctor who was called in discovered

grave mischief at the lungs, which she herself had long believed to

be existent or impending. But the attack was comparatively, indeed

actually, slight; and an extract from her last letter to Miss Browning,

dated June 7, confirms what her family and friends have since asserted,

that it was the death of Cavour which gave her the final blow.

'. . . We come home into a cloud here. I can scarcely command voice or

hand to name 'Cavour'. That great soul which meditated and made Italy

has gone to the diviner Country. If tears or blood could have saved

him to us, he should have had mine. I feel yet as if I could scarcely

comprehend the greatness of the vacancy. A hundred Garibaldis for such a

man!'

Her death was signalized by the appearance--this time, I am told,

unexpected--of another brilliant comet, which passed so near the earth

as to come into contact with it.

Chapter 14

1861-1863

Miss Blagden--Letters from Mr. Browning to Miss Haworth and Mr.

Leighton--His Feeling in regard to Funeral Ceremonies--Establishment

in London--Plan of Life--Letter to Madame du Quaire--Miss Arabel

Barrett--Biarritz--Letters to Miss Blagden--Conception of 'The Ring and

the Book'--Biographical Indiscretion--New Edition of his Works--Mr. and

Mrs. Procter.

The friend who was nearest, at all events most helpful, to Mr. Browning

in this great and sudden sorrow was Miss Blagden--Isa Blagden, as she

was called by all her intimates. Only a passing allusion to her could

hitherto find place in this fragmentary record of the Poet's life; but

the friendship which had long subsisted between her and Mrs. Browning

brings her now into closer and more frequent relation to it. She was

for many years a centre of English society in Florence; for her genial,

hospitable nature, as well as literary tastes (she wrote one or two

novels, I believe not without merit), secured her the acquaintance of

many interesting persons, some of whom occasionally made her house their

home; and the evenings spent with her at her villa on Bellosguardo live

pleasantly in the remembrance of those of our older generation who were

permitted to share in them.

She carried the boy away from the house of mourning, and induced his

father to spend his nights under her roof, while the last painful duties

detained him in Florence. He at least gave her cause to deny, what has

been so often affirmed, that great griefs are necessarily silent. She

always spoke of this period as her 'apocalyptic month', so deeply poetic

were the ravings which alternated with the simple human cry of the

desolate heart: 'I want her, I want her!' But the ear which received

these utterances has long been closed in death. The only written

outbursts of Mr. Browning's frantic sorrow were addressed, I believe, to

his sister, and to the friend, Madame du Quaire, whose own recent loss

most naturally invoked them, and who has since thought best, so far as

rested with her, to destroy the letters in which they were contained. It

is enough to know by simple statement that he then suffered as he did.

Life conquers Death for most of us; whether or not 'nature, art,

and beauty' assist in the conquest. It was bound to conquer in Mr.

Browning's case: first through his many-sided vitality; and secondly,

through the special motive for living and striving which remained to

him in his son. This note is struck in two letters which are given me to

publish, written about three weeks after Mrs. Browning's death; and we

see also that by this time his manhood was reacting against the blow,

and bracing itself with such consoling remembrance as the peace and

painlessness of his wife's last moments could afford to him.

Florence: July 19, '61.

Dear Leighton,--It is like your old kindness to write to me and to say

what you do--I know you feel for me. I can't write about it--but there

were many alleviating circumstances that you shall know one day--there

seemed no pain, and (what she would have felt most) the knowledge of

separation from us was spared her. I find these things a comfort indeed.

I shall go away from Italy for many a year--to Paris, then London for a

day or two just to talk with her sister--but if I can see you it will be

a great satisfaction. Don't fancy I am 'prostrated', I have enough to do

for the boy and myself in carrying out her wishes. He is better than one

would have thought, and behaves dearly to me. Everybody has been very

kind.

Tell dear Mrs. Sartoris that I know her heart and thank her with all

mine. After my day or two at London I shall go to some quiet place in

France to get right again and then stay some time at Paris in order to

find out leisurely what it will be best to do for Peni--but eventually I

shall go to England, I suppose. I don't mean to live with anybody, even

my own family, but to occupy myself thoroughly, seeing dear friends,

however, like you. God bless you. Yours ever affectionately, Robert

Browning.

The second is addressed to Miss Haworth.

Florence: July 20, 1861.

My dear Friend,--I well know you feel as you say, for her once and for

me now. Isa Blagden, perfect in all kindness to me, will have told you

something perhaps--and one day I shall see you and be able to tell you

myself as much as I can. The main comfort is that she suffered very

little pain, none beside that ordinarily attending the simple attacks

of cold and cough she was subject to--had no presentiment of the result

whatever, and was consequently spared the misery of knowing she was

about to leave us; she was smilingly assuring me she was 'better',

'quite comfortable--if I would but come to bed,' to within a few minutes

of the last. I think I foreboded evil at Rome, certainly from the

beginning of the week's illness--but when I reasoned about it, there

was no justifying fear--she said on the last evening 'it is merely the

old attack, not so severe a one as that of two years ago--there is no

doubt I shall soon recover,' and we talked over plans for the summer,

and next year. I sent the servants away and her maid to bed--so little

reason for disquietude did there seem. Through the night she slept

heavily, and brokenly--that was the bad sign--but then she would sit

up, take her medicine, say unrepeatable things to me and sleep again. At

four o'clock there were symptoms that alarmed me, I called the maid and

sent for the doctor. She smiled as I proposed to bathe her feet, 'Well,

you \_are\_ determined to make an exaggerated case of it!' Then came what

my heart will keep till I see her again and longer--the most perfect

expression of her love to me within my whole knowledge of her. Always

smilingly, happily, and with a face like a girl's--and in a few minutes

she died in my arms; her head on my cheek. These incidents so sustain

me that I tell them to her beloved ones as their right: there was no

lingering, nor acute pain, nor consciousness of separation, but God took

her to himself as you would lift a sleeping child from a dark, uneasy

bed into your arms and the light. Thank God. Annunziata thought by her

earnest ways with me, happy and smiling as they were, that she must have

been aware of our parting's approach--but she was quite conscious, had

words at command, and yet did not even speak of Peni, who was in

the next room. Her last word was when I asked 'How do you feel?'

--'Beautiful.' You know I have her dearest wishes and interests to

attend to \_at once\_--her child to care for, educate, establish properly;

and my own life to fulfil as properly,--all just as she would require

were she here. I shall leave Italy altogether for years--go to London

for a few days' talk with Arabel--then go to my father and begin to try

leisurely what will be the best for Peni--but no more 'housekeeping'

for me, even with my family. I shall grow, still, I hope--but my root is

taken and remains.

I know you always loved her, and me too in my degree. I shall always be

grateful to those who loved her, and that, I repeat, you did.

She was, and is, lamented with extraordinary demonstrations, if one

consider it. The Italians seem to have understood her by an instinct.

I have received strange kindness from everybody. Pen is very well--very

dear and good, anxious to comfort me as he calls it. He can't know his

loss yet. After years, his will be worse than mine--he will want what he

never had--that is, for the time when he could be helped by her wisdom,

and genius and piety--I \_have\_ had everything and shall not forget.

God bless you, dear friend. I believe I shall set out in a week. Isa

goes with me--dear, true heart. You, too, would do what you could for us

were you here and your assistance needful. A letter from you came a day

or two before the end--she made me enquire about the Frescobaldi Palace

for you,--Isa wrote to you in consequence. I shall be heard of at 151,

rue de Grenelle St. Germain. Faithfully and affectionately yours, Robert

Browning.

The first of these displays even more self-control, it might be thought

less feeling, than the second; but it illustrates the reserve which, I

believe, habitually characterized Mr. Browning's attitude towards men.

His natural, and certainly most complete, confidants were women. At

about the end of July he left Florence with his son; also accompanied by

Miss Blagden, who travelled with them as far as Paris. She herself must

soon have returned to Italy; since he wrote to her in September on the

subject of his wife's provisional disinterment,\* in a manner which shows

her to have been on the spot.

\* Required for the subsequent placing of the monument

designed by F. Leighton.

Sept. '61.

'. . . Isa, may I ask you one favour? Will you, whenever these dreadful

preliminaries, the provisional removement &c. when they are proceeded

with,--will you do--all you can--suggest every regard to decency and

proper feeling to the persons concerned? I have a horror of that man

of the grave-yard, and needless publicity and exposure--I rely on you,

dearest friend of ours, to at least lend us your influence when the

time shall come--a word may be invaluable. If there is any show made,

or gratification of strangers' curiosity, far better that I had left

the turf untouched. These things occur through sheer thoughtlessness,

carelessness, not anything worse, but the effect is irreparable. I won't

think any more of it--now--at least. . . .'

The dread expressed in this letter of any offence to the delicacies of

the occasion was too natural to be remarked upon here; but it connects

itself with an habitual aversion for the paraphernalia of death, which

was a marked peculiarity of Mr. Browning's nature. He shrank, as his

wife had done, from the 'earth side' of the portentous change; but truth

compels me to own that her infinite pity had little or no part in his

attitude towards it. For him, a body from which the soul had passed,

held nothing of the person whose earthly vesture it had been. He had no

sympathy for the still human tenderness with which so many of us regard

the mortal remains of those they have loved, or with the solemn or

friendly interest in which that tenderness so often reflects itself in

more neutral minds. He would claim all respect for the corpse, but he

would turn away from it. Another aspect of this feeling shows itself in

a letter to one of his brothers-in-law, Mr. George Moulton-Barrett, in

reference to his wife's monument, with which Mr. Barrett had professed

himself pleased. His tone is characterized by an almost religious

reverence for the memory which that monument enshrines. He nevertheless

writes:

'I hope to see it one day--and, although I have no kind of concern as to

where the old clothes of myself shall be thrown, yet, if my fortune be

such, and my survivors be not unduly troubled, I should like them to lie

in the place I have retained there. It is no matter, however.'

The letter is dated October 19, 1866. He never saw Florence again.

Mr. Browning spent two months with his father and sister at St.-Enogat,

near Dinard, from which place the letter to Miss Blagden was written;

and then proceeded to London, where his wife's sister, Miss Arabel

Barrett, was living. He had declared in his first grief that he would

never keep house again, and he began his solitary life in lodgings

which at his request she had engaged for him; but the discomfort of this

arrangement soon wearied him of it; and before many months had passed,

he had sent to Florence for his furniture, and settled himself in the

house in Warwick Crescent, which possessed, besides other advantages,

that of being close to Delamere Terrace, where Miss Barrett had taken up

her abode.

This first period of Mr. Browning's widowed life was one of unutterable

dreariness, in which the smallest and yet most unconquerable element was

the prosaic ugliness of everything which surrounded him. It was fifteen

years since he had spent a winter in England; he had never spent one in

London. There had been nothing to break for him the transition from the

stately beauty of Florence to the impressions and associations of the

Harrow and Edgware Roads, and of Paddington Green. He might have

escaped this neighbourhood by way of Westbourne Terrace; but his

walks constantly led him in an easterly direction; and whether in an

unconscious hugging of his chains, or, as was more probable, from the

desire to save time, he would drag his aching heart and reluctant body

through the sordidness or the squalor of this short cut, rather than

seek the pleasanter thoroughfares which were open to him. Even the

prettiness of Warwick Crescent was neutralized for him by the atmosphere

of low or ugly life which encompassed it on almost every side. His

haunting dream was one day to have done with it all; to have fulfilled

his mission with his son, educated him, launched him in a suitable

career, and to go back to sunshine and beauty again. He learned by

degrees to regard London as a home; as the only fitting centre for the

varied energies which were reviving in him; to feel pride and pleasure

in its increasingly picturesque character. He even learned to appreciate

the outlook from his house--that 'second from the bridge' of which so

curious a presentment had entered into one of the poems of the 'Men and

Women'\*--in spite of the refuse of humanity which would sometimes yell

at the street corner, or fling stones at his plate-glass. But all this

had to come; and it is only fair to admit that twenty-nine years ago the

beauties of which I have spoken were in great measure to come also. He

could not then in any mood have exclaimed, as he did to a friend two or

three years ago: 'Shall we not have a pretty London if things go on in

this way?' They were driving on the Kensington side of Hyde Park.

\* 'How it strikes a Contemporary'.

The paternal duty, which, so much against his inclination, had

established Mr. Browning in England, would in every case have lain very

near to his conscience and to his heart; but it especially urged itself

upon them through the absence of any injunction concerning it on his

wife's part. No farewell words of hers had commended their child to his

father's love and care; and though he may, for the moment, have imputed

this fact to unconsciousness of her approaching death, his deeper

insight soon construed the silence into an expression of trust, more

binding upon him than the most earnest exacted promise could have been.

The growing boy's education occupied a considerable part of his time and

thoughts, for he had determined not to send him to school, but, as far

as possible, himself prepare him for the University. He must also, in

some degree, have supervised his recreations. He had therefore, for the

present, little leisure for social distractions, and probably at first

very little inclination for them. His plan of life and duty, and the

sense of responsibility attendant on it, had been communicated to Madame

du Quaire in a letter written also from St.-Enogat.

M. Chauvin, St.-Enogat pres Dinard, Ile et Vilaine: Aug. 17, '61.

Dear Madame du Quaire,--I got your note on Sunday afternoon, but found

myself unable to call on you as I had been intending to do. Next morning

I left for this place (near St.-Malo, but I give what they say is the

proper address). I want first to beg you to forgive my withholding so

long your little oval mirror--it is safe in Paris, and I am vexed at

having stupidly forgotten to bring it when I tried to see you. I shall

stay here till the autumn sets in, then return to Paris for a few

days--the first of which will be the best, if I can see you in the

course of it--afterward, I settle in London.

When I meant to pass the winter in Paris, I hoped, the first thing

almost, to be near you--it now seems to me, however, that the best

course for the Boy is to begin a good English education at once. I shall

take quiet lodgings (somewhere near Kensington Gardens, I rather

think) and get a Tutor. I want, if I can (according to my present

very imperfect knowledge) to get the poor little fellow fit for the

University without passing thro' a Public School. I, myself, could never

have done much by either process, but he is made differently--imitates

and emulates and all that. How I should be grateful if you would help me

by any word that should occur to you! I may easily do wrong, begin ill,

thro' too much anxiety--perhaps, however, all may be easier than seems

to me just now.

I shall have a great comfort in talking to you--this writing is stiff,

ineffectual work. Pen is very well, cheerful now,--has his little horse

here. The place is singularly unspoiled, fresh and picturesque, and

lovely to heart's content. I wish you were here!--and if you knew

exactly what such a wish means, you would need no assuring in addition

that I am Yours affectionately and gratefully ever Robert Browning.

The person of whom he saw most was his sister-in-law, whom he visited, I

believe, every evening. Miss Barrett had been a favourite sister of Mrs.

Browning's, and this constituted a sufficient title to her husband's

affection. But she was also a woman to be loved for her own sake. Deeply

religious and very charitable, she devoted herself to visiting the

poor--a form of philanthropy which was then neither so widespread nor so

fashionable as it has since become; and she founded, in 1850, the first

Training School or Refuge which had ever existed for destitute little

girls. It need hardly be added that Mr. and Miss Browning co-operated in

the work. The little poem, 'The Twins', republished in 1855 in 'Men and

Women', was first printed (with Mrs. Browning's 'Plea for the Ragged

Schools of London') for the benefit of this Refuge. It was in Miss

Barrett's company that Mr. Browning used to attend the church of Mr.

Thomas Jones, to a volume of whose 'Sermons and Addresses' he wrote a

short introduction in 1884.

On February 15, 1862, he writes again to Miss Blagden.

Feb. 15, '62.

'. . . While I write, my heart is sore for a great calamity just

befallen poor Rossetti, which I only heard of last night--his wife, who

had been, as an invalid, in the habit of taking laudanum, swallowed

an overdose--was found by the poor fellow on his return from the

working-men's class in the evening, under the effects of it--help was

called in, the stomach-pump used; but she died in the night, about a

week ago. There has hardly been a day when I have not thought, "if I

can, to-morrow, I will go and see him, and thank him for his book, and

return his sister's poems." Poor, dear fellow! . . .

'. . . Have I not written a long letter, for me who hate the sight of

a pen now, and see a pile of unanswered things on the table before me?

--on this very table. Do you tell me in turn all about yourself. I shall

be interested in the minutest thing you put down. What sort of weather

is it? You cannot but be better at your new villa than in the large

solitary one. There I am again, going up the winding way to it, and

seeing the herbs in red flower, and the butterflies on the top of the

wall under the olive-trees! Once more, good-bye. . . .'

The hatred of writing of which he here speaks refers probably to the

class of letters which he had lately been called upon to answer, and

which must have been painful in proportion to the kindness by which

they were inspired. But it returned to him many years later, in simple

weariness of the mental and mechanical act, and with such force that he

would often answer an unimportant note in person, rather than make the

seemingly much smaller exertion of doing so with his pen. It was the

more remarkable that, with the rarest exceptions, he replied to every

letter which came to him.

The late summer of the former year had been entirely unrefreshing, in

spite of his acknowledgment of the charms of St.-Enogat. There was more

distraction and more soothing in the stay at Cambo and Biarritz, which

was chosen for the holiday of 1862. Years afterwards, when the thought

of Italy carried with it less longing and even more pain, Mr. Browning

would speak of a visit to the Pyrenees, if not a residence among them,

as one of the restful possibilities of his later and freer life. He

wrote to Miss Blagden:

Biarritz, Maison Gastonbide: Sept. 19, '62.

'. . . I stayed a month at green pleasant little Cambo, and then came

here from pure inability to go elsewhere--St.-Jean de Luz, on which

I had reckoned, being still fuller of Spaniards who profit by the new

railway. This place is crammed with gay people of whom I see nothing

but their outsides. The sea, sands, and view of the Spanish coast and

mountains, are superb and this house is on the town's outskirts. I stay

till the end of the month, then go to Paris, and then get my neck back

into the old collar again. Pen has managed to get more enjoyment out of

his holiday than seemed at first likely--there was a nice French family

at Cambo with whom he fraternised, riding with the son and escorting

the daughter in her walks. His red cheeks look as they should. For me, I

have got on by having a great read at Euripides--the one book I brought

with me, besides attending to my own matters, my new poem that is about

to be; and of which the whole is pretty well in my head,--the Roman

murder story you know.

'. . . How I yearn, yearn for Italy at the close of my life! . . .'

The 'Roman murder story' was, I need hardly say, to become 'The Ring and

the Book'.

It has often been told, though with curious confusion as regards the

date, how Mr. Browning picked up the original parchment-bound record of

the Franceschini case, on a stall of the Piazza San Lorenzo. We read

in the first section of his own work that he plunged instantly into the

study of this record; that he had mastered it by the end of the day; and

that he then stepped out on to the terrace of his house amid the sultry

blackness and silent lightnings of the June night, as the adjacent

church of San Felice sent forth its chants, and voices buzzed in the

street below,--and saw the tragedy as a living picture unfold itself

before him. These were his last days at Casa Guidi. It was four years

before he definitely began the work. The idea of converting the story

into a poem cannot even have occurred to him for some little time, since

he offered it for prose treatment to Miss Ogle, the author of 'A Lost

Love'; and for poetic use, I am almost certain, to one of his leading

contemporaries. It was this slow process of incubation which gave

so much force and distinctness to his ultimate presentment of the

characters; though it infused a large measure of personal imagination,

and, as we shall see, of personal reminiscence, into their historical

truth.

Before 'The Ring and the Book' was actually begun, 'Dramatis Personae'

and 'In a Balcony' were to be completed. Their production had been

delayed during Mrs. Browning's lifetime, and necessarily interrupted by

her death; but we hear of the work as progressing steadily during this

summer of 1862.

A painful subject of correspondence had been also for some time engaging

Mr. Browning's thoughts and pen. A letter to Miss Blagden written

January 19, '63, is so expressive of his continued attitude towards the

questions involved that, in spite of its strong language, his family

advise its publication. The name of the person referred to will alone be

omitted.

'. . . Ever since I set foot in England I have been pestered with

applications for leave to write the Life of my wife--I have refused--and

there an end. I have last week received two communications from friends,

enclosing the letters of a certain . . . of . . ., asking them for

details of life and letters, for a biography he is engaged in--adding,

that he "has secured the correspondence with her old friend . . ." Think

of this beast working away at this, not deeming my feelings or those of

her family worthy of notice--and meaning to print letters written years

and years ago, on the most intimate and personal subjects to an "old

friend"--which, at the poor . . . [friend's] death fell into the hands

of a complete stranger, who, at once wanted to print them, but desisted

through Ba's earnest expostulation enforced by my own threat to take

law proceedings--as fortunately letters are copyright. I find this woman

died last year, and her son writes to me this morning that . . . got

them from him as autographs merely--he will try and get them back. . . ,

evidently a blackguard, got my letter, which gave him his deserts, on

Saturday--no answer yet,--if none comes, I shall be forced to advertise

in the 'Times', and obtain an injunction. But what I suffer in feeling

the hands of these blackguards (for I forgot to say another man has been

making similar applications to friends) what I undergo with their paws

in my very bowels, you can guess, and God knows! No friend, of course,

would ever give up the letters--if anybody ever is forced to do that

which \_she\_ would have writhed under--if it ever \_were\_ necessary, why, \_I\_

should be forced to do it, and, with any good to her memory and fame,

my own pain in the attempt would be turned into joy--I should \_do\_ it at

whatever cost: but it is not only unnecessary but absurdly useless--and,

indeed, it shall not be done if I can stop the scamp's knavery along

with his breath.

'I am going to reprint the Greek Christian Poets and another

essay--nothing that ought to be published shall be kept back,--and this

she certainly intended to correct, augment, and re-produce--but \_I\_ open

the doubled-up paper! Warn anyone you may think needs the warning of the

utter distress in which I should be placed were this scoundrel, or

any other of the sort, to baffle me and bring out the letters--I can't

prevent fools from uttering their folly upon her life, as they do on

every other subject, but the law protects property,--as these letters

are. Only last week, or so, the Bishop of Exeter stopped the publication

of an announced "Life"--containing extracts from his correspondence--and

so I shall do. . . .'

Mr. Browning only resented the exactions of modern biography in the

same degree as most other right-minded persons; but there was, to

his thinking, something specially ungenerous in dragging to light any

immature or unconsidered utterance which the writer's later judgment

would have disclaimed. Early work was always for him included in this

category; and here it was possible to disagree with him; since the

promise of genius has a legitimate interest from which no distance

from its subsequent fulfilment can detract. But there could be no

disagreement as to the rights and decencies involved in the present

case; and, as we hear no more of the letters to Mr. . . ., we may

perhaps assume that their intending publisher was acting in ignorance,

but did not wish to act in defiance, of Mr. Browning's feeling in the

matter.

In the course of this year, 1863, Mr. Browning brought out, through

Chapman and Hall, the still well-known and well-loved three-volume

edition of his works, including 'Sordello', but again excluding

'Pauline'. A selection of his poems which appeared somewhat earlier, if

we may judge by the preface, dated November 1862, deserves mention as a

tribute to friendship. The volume had been prepared by John Forster and

Bryan Waller Procter (Barry Cornwall), 'two friends,' as the preface

states, 'who from the first appearance of 'Paracelsus' have regarded its

writer as among the few great poets of the century.' Mr. Browning had

long before signalized his feeling for Barry Cornwall by the dedication

of 'Colombe's Birthday'. He discharged the present debt to Mr. Procter,

if such there was, by the attentions which he rendered to his infirm old

age. For many years he visited him every Sunday, in spite of a deafness

ultimately so complete that it was only possible to converse with him in

writing. These visits were afterwards, at her urgent request, continued

to Mr. Procter's widow.

Chapter 15

1863-1869

Pornic--'James Lee's Wife'--Meeting at Mr. F. Palgrave's--Letters to

Miss Blagden--His own Estimate of his Work--His Father's Illness and

Death; Miss Browning--Le Croisic--Academic Honours; Letter to the Master

of Balliol--Death of Miss Barrett--Audierne--Uniform Edition of his

Works--His rising Fame--'Dramatis Personae'--'The Ring and the Book';

Character of Pompilia.

The most constant contributions to Mr. Browning's history are supplied

during the next eight or nine years by extracts from his letters to Miss

Blagden. Our next will be dated from Ste.-Marie, near Pornic, where he

and his family again spent their holiday in 1864 and 1865. Some idea

of the life he led there is given at the close of a letter to Frederic

Leighton, August 17, 1863, in which he says:

'I live upon milk and fruit, bathe daily, do a good morning's work, read

a little with Pen and somewhat more by myself, go to bed early, and get

up earlyish--rather liking it all.'

This mention of a diet of milk and fruit recalls a favourite habit of

Mr. Browning's: that of almost renouncing animal food whenever he went

abroad. It was partly promoted by the inferior quality of foreign meat,

and showed no sign of specially agreeing with him, at all events in his

later years, when he habitually returned to England looking thinner and

more haggard than before he left it. But the change was always congenial

to his taste.

A fuller picture of these simple, peaceful, and poetic Pornic days comes

to us through Miss Blagden, August 18:

'. . . This is a wild little place in Brittany, something like that

village where we stayed last year. Close to the sea--a hamlet of a dozen

houses, perfectly lonely--one may walk on the edge of the low rocks by

the sea for miles. Our house is the Mayor's, large enough, clean and

bare. If I could, I would stay just as I am for many a day. I feel out

of the very earth sometimes as I sit here at the window; with the little

church, a field, a few houses, and the sea. On a weekday there is nobody

in the village, plenty of hay-stacks, cows and fowls; all our butter,

eggs, milk, are produced in the farm-house. Such a soft sea, and such a

mournful wind!

'I wrote a poem yesterday of 120 lines, and mean to keep writing whether

I like it or not. . . .'

That 'window' was the 'Doorway' in 'James Lee's Wife'. The sea, the

field, and the fig-tree were visible from it.

A long interval in the correspondence, at all events so far as we are

concerned, carries us to the December of 1864, and then Mr. Browning

wrote:

'. . . on the other hand, I feel such comfort and delight in doing the

best I can with my own object of life, poetry--which, I think, I never

could have seen the good of before, that it shows me I have taken the

root I \_did\_ take, \_well\_. I hope to do much more yet--and that the

flower of it will be put into Her hand somehow. I really have great

opportunities and advantages--on the whole, almost unprecedented ones--I

think, no other disturbances and cares than those I am most grateful for

being allowed to have. . . .'

One of our very few written reminiscences of Mr. Browning's social life

refers to this year, 1864, and to the evening, February 12, on which

he signed his will in the presence of Mr. Francis Palgrave and Alfred

Tennyson. It is inscribed in the diary of Mr. Thomas Richmond, then

chaplain to St. George's Hospital; and Mr. Reginald Palgrave has kindly

procured me a copy of it. A brilliant party had met at dinner at the

house of Mr. F. Palgrave, York Gate, Regent's Park; Mr. Richmond, having

fulfilled a prior engagement, had joined it later. 'There were, in

order,' he says, 'round the dinner-table (dinner being over), Gifford

Palgrave, Tennyson, Dr. John Ogle, Sir Francis H. Doyle, Frank Palgrave,

W. E. Gladstone, Browning, Sir John Simeon, Monsignor Patterson,

Woolner, and Reginald Palgrave.'

Mr. Richmond closes his entry by saying he will never forget that

evening. The names of those whom it had brought together, almost all to

be sooner or later numbered among the Poet's friends, were indeed

enough to stamp it as worthy of recollection. One or two characteristic

utterances of Mr. Browning are, however, the only ones which it

seems advisable to repeat here. The conversation having turned on the

celebration of the Shakespeare ter-centenary, he said: 'Here we are

called upon to acknowledge Shakespeare, we who have him in our very

bones and blood, our very selves. The very recognition of Shakespeare's

merits by the Committee reminds me of nothing so apt as an illustration,

as the decree of the Directoire that men might acknowledge God.'

Among the subjects discussed was the advisability of making schoolboys

write English verses as well as Latin and Greek. 'Woolner and Sir

Francis Doyle were for this; Gladstone and Browning against it.'

Work had now found its fitting place in the Poet's life. It was no

longer the overflow of an irresistible productive energy; it was the

deliberate direction of that energy towards an appointed end. We hear

something of his own feeling concerning this in a letter of August '65,

again from Ste.-Marie, and called forth by some gossip concerning him

which Miss Blagden had connected with his then growing fame.

'. . . I suppose that what you call "my fame within these four years"

comes from a little of this gossiping and going about, and showing

myself to be alive: and so indeed some folks say--but I hardly think it:

for remember I was uninterruptedly (almost) in London from the time

I published 'Paracelsus' till I ended that string of plays with

'Luria'--and I used to go out then, and see far more of merely literary

people, critics &c. than I do now,--but what came of it? There were

always a few people who had a certain opinion of my poems, but nobody

cared to speak what he thought, or the things printed twenty-five years

ago would not have waited so long for a good word; but at last a new set

of men arrive who don't mind the conventionalities of ignoring one and

seeing everything in another--Chapman says, "the new orders come from

Oxford and Cambridge," and all my new cultivators are young men--more

than that, I observe that some of my old friends don't like at all

the irruption of outsiders who rescue me from their sober and private

approval, and take those words out of their mouths "which they always

meant to say" and never did. When there gets to be a general feeling of

this kind, that there must be something in the works of an author, the

reviews are obliged to notice him, such notice as it is--but what poor

work, even when doing its best! I mean poor in the failure to give a

general notion of the whole works; not a particular one of such and

such points therein. As I begun, so I shall end,--taking my own course,

pleasing myself or aiming at doing so, and thereby, I hope, pleasing

God.

'As I never did otherwise, I never had any fear as to what I did going

ultimately to the bad,--hence in collected editions I always reprinted

everything, smallest and greatest. Do you ever see, by the way, the

numbers of the selection which Moxons publish? They are exclusively

poems omitted in that other selection by Forster; it seems little use

sending them to you, but when they are completed, if they give me a

few copies, you shall have one if you like. Just before I left London,

Macmillan was anxious to print a third selection, for his Golden

Treasury, which should of course be different from either--but \_three\_

seem too absurd. There--enough of me--

'I certainly will do my utmost to make the most of my poor self before

I die; for one reason, that I may help old Pen the better; I was

much struck by the kind ways, and interest shown in me by the Oxford

undergraduates,--those introduced to me by Jowett.--I am sure they would

be the more helpful to my son. So, good luck to my great venture, the

murder-poem, which I do hope will strike you and all good lovers of

mine. . . .'

We cannot wonder at the touch of bitterness with which Mr. Browning

dwells on the long neglect which he had sustained; but it is at first

sight difficult to reconcile this high positive estimate of the value of

his poetry with the relative depreciation of his own poetic genius which

constantly marks his attitude towards that of his wife. The facts

are, however, quite compatible. He regarded Mrs. Browning's genius as

greater, because more spontaneous, than his own: owing less to life and

its opportunities; but he judged his own work as the more important,

because of the larger knowledge of life which had entered into its

production. He was wrong in the first terms of his comparison: for he

underrated the creative, hence spontaneous element in his own nature,

while claiming primarily the position of an observant thinker; and he

overrated the amount of creativeness implied by the poetry of his wife.

He failed to see that, given her intellectual endowments, and the lyric

gift, the characteristics of her genius were due to circumstances as

much as those of his own. Actual life is not the only source of poetic

inspiration, though it may perhaps be the best. Mrs. Browning as a poet

became what she was, not in spite of her long seclusion, but by help of

it. A touching paragraph, bearing upon this subject, is dated October

'65.

'. . . Another thing. I have just been making a selection of Ba's poems

which is wanted--how I have done it, I can hardly say--it is one dear

delight to know that the work of her goes on more effectually than

ever--her books are more and more read--certainly, sold. A new edition

of Aurora Leigh is completely exhausted within this year. . . .'

Of the thing next dearest to his memory, his Florentine home, he had

written in the January of this year:

'. . . Yes, Florence will never be \_my\_ Florence again. To build over or

beside Poggio seems barbarous and inexcusable. The Fiesole side don't

matter. Are they going to pull the old walls down, or any part of them,

I want to know? Why can't they keep the old city as a nucleus and build

round and round it, as many rings of houses as they please,--framing the

picture as deeply as they please? Is Casa Guidi to be turned into any

Public Office? I should think that its natural destination. If I am at

liberty to flee away one day, it will not be to Florence, I dare say.

As old Philipson said to me once of Jerusalem--"No, I don't want to go

there,--I can see it in my head." . . . Well, goodbye, dearest Isa. I

have been for a few minutes--nay, a good many,--so really with you in

Florence that it would be no wonder if you heard my steps up the lane to

your house. . . .'

Part of a letter written in the September of '65 from Ste.-Marie may be

interesting as referring to the legend of Pornic included in 'Dramatis

Personae'.

'. . . I suppose my "poem" which you say brings me and Pornic together

in your mind, is the one about the poor girl--if so, "fancy" (as I

hear you say) they have pulled down the church since I arrived last

month--there are only the shell-like, roofless walls left, for a few

weeks more; it was very old--built on a natural base of rock--small

enough, to be sure--so they build a smart new one behind it, and down

goes this; just as if they could not have pitched down their brick

and stucco farther away, and left the old place for the fishermen--so

here--the church is even more picturesque--and certain old Norman

ornaments, capitals of pillars and the like, which we left erect in the

doorway, are at this moment in a heap of rubbish by the road-side. The

people here are good, stupid and dirty, without a touch of the sense of

picturesqueness in their clodpolls. . . .'

The little record continues through 1866.

Feb. 19, '66.

'. . . I go out a great deal; but have enjoyed nothing so much as a

dinner last week with Tennyson, who, with his wife and one son, is

staying in town for a few weeks,--and she is just what she was and

always will be--very sweet and dear: he seems to me better than ever. I

met him at a large party on Saturday--also Carlyle, whom I never met at

a "drum" before. . . . Pen is drawing our owl--a bird that is the light

of our house, for his tameness and engaging ways. . . .'

May 19, '66.

'. . . My father has been unwell,--he is better and will go into

the country the moment the east winds allow,--for in Paris,--as

here,--there is a razor wrapped up in the flannel of sunshine. I hope to

hear presently from my sister, and will tell you if a letter comes: he

is eighty-five, almost,--you see! otherwise his wonderful constitution

would keep me from inordinate apprehension. His mind is absolutely as

I always remember it,--and the other day when I wanted some information

about a point of mediaeval history, he wrote a regular bookful of notes

and extracts thereabout. . . .'

June 20, '66.

'My dearest Isa, I was telegraphed for to Paris last week, and arrived

time enough to pass twenty-four hours more with my father: he died on

the 14th--quite exhausted by internal haemorrhage, which would have

overcome a man of thirty. He retained all his faculties to the last--was

utterly indifferent to death,--asking with surprise what it was we were

affected about since he was perfectly happy?--and kept his own strange

sweetness of soul to the end--nearly his last words to me, as I was

fanning him, were "I am so afraid that I fatigue you, dear!" this, while

his sufferings were great; for the strength of his constitution seemed

impossible to be subdued. He wanted three weeks exactly to complete his

eighty-fifth year. So passed away this good, unworldly, kind-hearted,

religious man, whose powers natural and acquired would so easily have

made him a notable man, had he known what vanity or ambition or the

love of money or social influence meant. As it is, he was known by

half-a-dozen friends. He was worthy of being Ba's father--out of the

whole world, only he, so far as my experience goes. She loved him,--and

\_he\_ said, very recently, while gazing at her portrait, that only that

picture had put into his head that there might be such a thing as the

worship of the images of saints. My sister will come and live with

me henceforth. You see what she loses. All her life has been spent in

caring for my mother, and seventeen years after that, my father. You may

be sure she does not rave and rend hair like people who have plenty to

atone for in the past; but she loses very much. I returned to London

last night. . . .'

During his hurried journey to Paris, Mr. Browning was mentally blessing

the Emperor for having abolished the system of passports, and thus

enabled him to reach his father's bedside in time. His early Italian

journeys had brought him some vexatious experience of the old order of

things. Once, at Venice, he had been mistaken for a well-known Liberal,

Dr. Bowring, and found it almost impossible to get his passport 'vise';

and, on another occasion, it aroused suspicion by being 'too good';

though in what sense I do not quite remember.

Miss Browning did come to live with her brother, and was thenceforward

his inseparable companion. Her presence with him must therefore be

understood wherever I have had no special reason for mentioning it.

They tried Dinard for the remainder of the summer; but finding it

unsuitable, proceeded by St.-Malo to Le Croisic, the little sea-side

town of south-eastern Brittany which two of Mr. Browning's poems have

since rendered famous.

The following extract has no date.

Le Croisic, Loire Inferieure.

'. . . We all found Dinard unsuitable, and after staying a few days at

St. Malo resolved to try this place, and well for us, since it serves

our purpose capitally. . . . We are in the most delicious and peculiar

old house I ever occupied, the oldest in the town--plenty of great

rooms--nearly as much space as in Villa Alberti. The little town, and

surrounding country are wild and primitive, even a trifle beyond Pornic

perhaps. Close by is Batz, a village where the men dress in white from

head to foot, with baggy breeches, and great black flap hats;--opposite

is Guerande, the old capital of Bretagne: you have read about it in

Balzac's 'Beatrix',--and other interesting places are near. The sea is

all round our peninsula, and on the whole I expect we shall like it very

much. . . .'

Later.

'. . . We enjoyed Croisic increasingly to the last--spite of three

weeks' vile weather, in striking contrast to the golden months at Pornic

last year. I often went to Guerande--once Sarianna and I walked from it

in two hours and something under,--nine miles:--though from our house,

straight over the sands and sea, it is not half the distance. . . .'

In 1867 Mr. Browning received his first and greatest academic honours.

The M.A. degree by diploma, of the University of Oxford, was conferred

on him in June;\* and in the month of October he was made honorary Fellow

of Balliol College. Dr. Jowett allows me to publish the, as he terms it,

very characteristic letter in which he acknowledged the distinction. Dr.

Scott, afterwards Dean of Rochester, was then Master of Balliol.

\* 'Not a lower degree than that of D.C.L., but a much higher

honour, hardly given since Dr. Johnson's time except to

kings and royal personages. . . .' So the Keeper of the

Archives wrote to Mr. Browning at the time.

19, Warwick Crescent: Oct. 21, '67.

Dear Dr. Scott,--I am altogether unable to say how I feel as to the

fact you communicate to me. I must know more intimately than you can how

little worthy I am of such an honour,--you hardly can set the value of

that honour, you who give, as I who take it.

Indeed, there \_are\_ both 'duties and emoluments' attached to this

position,--duties of deep and lasting gratitude, and emoluments through

which I shall be wealthy my life long. I have at least loved learning

and the learned, and there needed no recognition of my love on their

part to warrant my professing myself, as I do, dear Dr. Scott, yours

ever most faithfully, Robert Browning.

In the following year he received and declined the virtual offer of the

Lord Rectorship of the University of St. Andrews, rendered vacant by the

death of Mr. J. S. Mill.

He returned with his sister to Le Croisic for the summer of 1867.

In June 1868, Miss Arabel Barrett died, of a rheumatic affection of

the heart. As did her sister seven years before, she passed away in

Mr. Browning's arms. He wrote the event to Miss Blagden as soon as it

occurred, describing also a curious circumstance attendant on it.

19th June, '68.

'. . . You know I am not superstitious--here is a note I made in a book,

Tuesday, July 21, 1863. "Arabel told me yesterday that she had been much

agitated by a dream which happened the night before, Sunday, July

19. She saw Her and asked 'when shall I be with you?' the reply was,

'Dearest, in five years,' whereupon Arabella woke. She knew in her dream

that it was not to the living she spoke."--In five years, within a

month of their completion--I had forgotten the date of the dream, and

supposed it was only three years ago, and that two had still to run.

Only a coincidence, but noticeable. . . .'

In August he writes again from Audierne, Finisterre (Brittany).

'. . . You never heard of this place, I daresay. After staying a

few days at Paris we started for Rennes,--reached Caen and halted a

little--thence made for Auray, where we made excursions to Carnac,

Lokmariaker, and Ste.-Anne d'Auray; all very interesting of their kind;

then saw Brest, Morlaix, St.-Pol de Leon, and the sea-port Roscoff,--our

intended bathing place--it was full of folk, however, and otherwise

impracticable, so we had nothing for it, but to "rebrousser chemin" and

get to the south-west again. At Quimper we heard (for a second time)

that Audierne would suit us exactly, and to it we came--happily, for

"suit" it certainly does. Look on the map for the most westerly point

of Bretagne--and of the mainland of Europe--there is niched Audierne, a

delightful quite unspoiled little fishing-town, with the open ocean in

front, and beautiful woods, hills and dales, meadows and lanes behind

and around,--sprinkled here and there with villages each with its fine

old Church. Sarianna and I have just returned from a four hours' walk

in the course of which we visited a town, Pont Croix, with a beautiful

cathedral-like building amid the cluster of clean bright Breton

houses,--and a little farther is another church, "Notre Dame de

Comfort", with only a hovel or two round it, worth the journey from

England to see; we are therefore very well off--at an inn, I should say,

with singularly good, kind, and liberal people, so have no cares for the

moment. May you be doing as well! The weather has been most propitious,

and to-day is perfect to a wish. We bathe, but somewhat ingloriously, in

a smooth creek of mill-pond quietude, (there being no cabins on the bay

itself,) unlike the great rushing waves of Croisic--the water is much

colder. . . .'

The tribute contained in this letter to the merits of le Pere

Batifoulier and his wife would not, I think, be endorsed by the few

other English travellers who have stayed at their inn. The writer's

own genial and kindly spirit no doubt partly elicited, and still more

supplied, the qualities he saw in them.

The six-volume, so long known as 'uniform' edition of Mr. Browning's

works, was brought out in the autumn of this year by Messrs. Smith,

Elder & Co.; practically Mr. George Murray Smith, who was to be

thenceforward his exclusive publisher and increasingly valued friend. In

the winter months appeared the first two volumes (to be followed in the

ensuing spring by the third and fourth) of 'The Ring and the Book'.

With 'The Ring and the Book' Mr. Browning attained the full recognition

of his genius. The 'Athenaeum' spoke of it as the 'opus magnum' of

the generation; not merely beyond all parallel the supremest poetic

achievement of the time, but the most precious and profound spiritual

treasure that England had produced since the days of Shakespeare.

His popularity was yet to come, so also the widespread reading of his

hitherto neglected poems; but henceforth whatever he published was sure

of ready acceptance, of just, if not always enthusiastic, appreciation.

The ground had not been gained at a single leap. A passage in another

letter to Miss Blagden shows that, when 'The Ring and the Book'

appeared, a high place was already awaiting it outside those higher

academic circles in which its author's position was secured.

'. . . I want to get done with my poem. Booksellers are making me pretty

offers for it. One sent to propose, last week, to publish it at his

risk, giving me \_all\_ the profits, and pay me the whole in advance--"for

the incidental advantages of my name"--the R. B. who for six months

once did not sell one copy of the poems! I ask 200 Pounds for the sheets

to America, and shall get it. . . .'

His presence in England had doubtless stimulated the public interest

in his productions; and we may fairly credit 'Dramatis Personae' with

having finally awakened his countrymen of all classes to the fact that a

great creative power had arisen among them. 'The Ring and the Book'

and 'Dramatis Personae' cannot indeed be dissociated in what was the

culminating moment in the author's poetic life, even more than

the zenith of his literary career. In their expression of all that

constituted the wide range and the characteristic quality of his genius,

they at once support and supplement each other. But a fact of more

distinctive biographical interest connects itself exclusively with the

later work.

We cannot read the emotional passages of 'The Ring and the Book' without

hearing in them a voice which is not Mr. Browning's own: an echo, not

of his past, but from it. The remembrance of that past must have

accompanied him through every stage of the great work. Its subject had

come to him in the last days of his greatest happiness. It had lived

with him, though in the background of consciousness, through those of

his keenest sorrow. It was his refuge in that aftertime, in which a

subsiding grief often leaves a deeper sense of isolation. He knew the

joy with which his wife would have witnessed the diligent performance

of this his self-imposed task. The beautiful dedication contained in the

first and last books was only a matter of course. But Mrs. Browning's

spiritual presence on this occasion was more than a presiding memory of

the heart. I am convinced that it entered largely into the conception

of 'Pompilia', and, so far as this depended on it, the character of the

whole work. In the outward course of her history, Mr. Browning proceeded

strictly on the ground of fact. His dramatic conscience would not have

allowed it otherwise. He had read the record of the case, as he has

been heard to say, fully eight times over before converting it into the

substance of his poem; and the form in which he finally cast it, was

that which recommended itself to him as true--which, within certain

limits, \_was\_ true. The testimony of those who watched by Pompilia's

death-bed is almost conclusive as to the absence of any criminal motive

to her flight, or criminal circumstance connected with it. Its time

proved itself to have been that of her impending, perhaps newly expected

motherhood, and may have had some reference to this fact. But the real

Pompilia was a simple child, who lived in bodily terror of her husband,

and had made repeated efforts to escape from him. Unless my memory much

deceives me, her physical condition plays no part in the historical

defence of her flight. If it appeared there at all, it was as a merely

practical incentive to her striving to place herself in safety. The

sudden rapturous sense of maternity which, in the poetic rendering of

the case, becomes her impulse to self-protection, was beyond her age

and her culture; it was not suggested by the facts; and, what is more

striking, it was not a natural development of Mr. Browning's imagination

concerning them.

The parental instinct was among the weakest in his nature--a fact which

renders the more conspicuous his devotion to his own son; it finds

little or no expression in his work. The apotheosis of motherhood which

he puts forth through the aged priest in 'Ivan Ivanovitch' was due to

the poetic necessity of lifting a ghastly human punishment into the

sphere of Divine retribution. Even in the advancing years which

soften the father into the grandfather, the essential quality of early

childhood was not that which appealed to him. He would admire its

flower-like beauty, but not linger over it. He had no special emotion

for its helplessness. When he was attracted by a child it was through

the evidence of something not only distinct from, but opposed to this.

'It is the soul' (I see) 'in that speck of a body,' he said, not many

years ago, of a tiny boy--now too big for it to be desirable that I

should mention his name, but whose mother, if she reads this, will know

to whom I allude--who had delighted him by an act of intelligent grace

which seemed beyond his years. The ingenuously unbounded maternal pride,

the almost luscious maternal sentiment, of Pompilia's dying moments

can only associate themselves in our mind with Mrs. Browning's personal

utterances, and some notable passages in 'Casa Guidi Windows'

and 'Aurora Leigh'. Even the exalted fervour of the invocation to

Caponsacchi, its blending of spiritual ecstasy with half-realized

earthly emotion, has, I think, no parallel in her husband's work.

'Pompilia' bears, still, unmistakably, the stamp of her author's genius.

Only he could have imagined her peculiar form of consciousness; her

childlike, wondering, yet subtle, perception of the anomalies of life.

He has raised the woman in her from the typical to the individual by

this distinguishing touch of his supreme originality; and thus infused

into her character a haunting pathos which renders it to many readers

the most exquisite in the whole range of his creations. For others

at the same time, it fails in the impressiveness because it lacks the

reality which habitually marks them.

So much, however, is certain: Mr. Browning would never have accepted

this 'murder story' as the subject of a poem, if he could not in some

sense have made it poetical. It was only in an idealized Pompilia that

the material for such a process could be found. We owe it, therefore, to

the one departure from his usual mode of dramatic conception, that the

Poet's masterpiece has been produced. I know no other instance of what

can be even mistaken for reflected inspiration in the whole range of his

work, the given passages in 'Pauline' excepted.

The postscript of a letter to Frederic Leighton written so far back as

October 17, 1864, is interesting in its connection with the preliminary

stages of this great undertaking.

'A favour, if you have time for it. Go into the church St. Lorenzo in

Lucina in the Corso--and look attentively at it--so as to describe it

to me on your return. The general arrangement of the building, if with a

nave--pillars or not--the number of altars, and any particularity there

may be--over the High Altar is a famous Crucifixion by Guido. It will be

of great use to me. I don't care about the \_outsid\_.'

Chapter 16

1869-1873

Lord Dufferin; Helen's Tower--Scotland; Visit to Lady Ashburton--Letters

to Miss Blagden--St.-Aubin; The Franco-Prussian War--'Herve

Riel'--Letter to Mr. G. M. Smith--'Balaustion's Adventure'; 'Prince

Hohenstiel-Schwangau'--'Fifine at the Fair'--Mistaken Theories of Mr.

Browning's Work--St.-Aubin; 'Red Cotton Nightcap Country'.

From 1869 to 1871 Mr. Browning published nothing; but in April 1870

he wrote the sonnet called 'Helen's Tower', a beautiful tribute to the

memory of Helen, mother of Lord Dufferin, suggested by the memorial

tower which her son was erecting to her on his estate at Clandeboye. The

sonnet appeared in 1883, in the 'Pall Mall Gazette', and was reprinted

in 1886, in 'Sonnets of the Century', edited by Mr. Sharp; and again

in the fifth part of the Browning Society's 'Papers'; but it is still I

think sufficiently little known to justify its reproduction.

Who hears of Helen's Tower may dream perchance

How the Greek Beauty from the Scaean Gate

Gazed on old friends unanimous in hate,

Death-doom'd because of her fair countenance.

Hearts would leap otherwise at thy advance,

Lady, to whom this Tower is consecrate!

Like hers, thy face once made all eyes elate,

Yet, unlike hers, was bless'd by every glance.

The Tower of Hate is outworn, far and strange;

A transitory shame of long ago;

It dies into the sand from which it sprang;

But thine, Love's rock-built Tower, shall fear no change.

God's self laid stable earth's foundations so,

When all the morning-stars together sang.

April 26, 1870.

Lord Dufferin is a warm admirer of Mr. Browning's genius. He also held

him in strong personal regard.

In the summer of 1869 the poet, with his sister and son, changed the

manner of his holiday, by joining Mr. Story and his family in a tour in

Scotland, and a visit to Louisa, Lady Ashburton, at Loch Luichart Lodge;

but in the August of 1870 he was again in the primitive atmosphere of a

French fishing village, though one which had little to recommend it but

the society of a friend; it was M. Milsand's St.-Aubin. He had written,

February 24, to Miss Blagden, under the one inspiration which naturally

recurred in his correspondence with her.

'. . . So you, too, think of Naples for an eventual resting-place! Yes,

that is the proper basking-ground for "bright and aged snakes." Florence

would be irritating, and, on the whole, insufferable--Yet I never hear

of any one going thither but my heart is twitched. There is a good,

charming, little singing German lady, Miss Regan, who told me the other

day that she was just about revisiting her aunt, Madame Sabatier, whom

you may know, or know of--and I felt as if I should immensely like to

glide, for a long summer-day through the streets and between the old

stone-walls,--unseen come and unheard go--perhaps by some miracle, I

shall do so--and look up at Villa Brichieri as Arnold's Gypsy-Scholar

gave one wistful look at "the line of festal light in Christ Church

Hall," before he went to sleep in some forgotten grange. . . . I am so

glad I can be comfortable in your comfort. I fancy exactly how you feel

and see how you live: it \_is\_ the Villa Geddes of old days, I find. I well

remember the fine view from the upper room--that looking down the steep

hill, by the side of which runs the road you describe--that path was

always my preferred walk, for its shortness (abruptness) and the fine

old wall to your left (from the Villa) which is overgrown with weeds and

wild flowers--violets and ground-ivy, I remember. Oh, me! to find

myself some late sunshiny Sunday afternoon, with my face turned to

Florence--"ten minutes to the gate, ten minutes \_home\_!" I think I should

fairly end it all on the spot. . . .'

He writes again from St.-Aubin, August 19, 1870:

'Dearest Isa,--Your letter came prosperously to this little wild place,

where we have been, Sarianna and myself, just a week. Milsand lives in a

cottage with a nice bit of garden, two steps off, and we occupy another

of the most primitive kind on the sea-shore--which shore is a good sandy

stretch for miles and miles on either side. I don't think we were ever

quite so thoroughly washed by the sea-air from all quarters as here--the

weather is fine, and we do well enough. The sadness of the war and its

consequences go far to paralyse all our pleasure, however. . . .

'Well, you are at Siena--one of the places I love best to remember. You

are returned--or I would ask you to tell me how the Villa Alberti wears,

and if the fig-tree behind the house is green and strong yet. I have

a pen-and-ink drawing of it, dated and signed the last day Ba was ever

there--"my fig tree--" she used to sit under it, reading and writing.

Nine years, or ten rather, since then! Poor old Landor's oak, too,

and his cottage, ought not to be forgotten. Exactly opposite this

house,--just over the way of the water,--shines every night the

light-house of Havre--a place I know well, and love very moderately:

but it always gives me a thrill as I see afar, \_exactly\_ a particular spot

which I was at along with her. At this moment, I see the white streak of

the phare in the sun, from the window where I write and I \_think\_. . . .

Milsand went to Paris last week, just before we arrived, to transport

his valuables to a safer place than his house, which is near the

fortifications. He is filled with as much despondency as can be--while

the old dear and perfect kindness remains. I never knew or shall know

his like among men. . . .'

The war did more than sadden Mr. and Miss Browning's visit to St.-Aubin;

it opposed unlooked-for difficulties to their return home. They had

remained, unconscious of the impending danger, till Sedan had been

taken, the Emperor's downfall proclaimed, and the country suddenly

placed in a state of siege. One morning M. Milsand came to them in

anxious haste, and insisted on their starting that very day. An order,

he said, had been issued that no native should leave the country, and

it only needed some unusually thick-headed Maire for Mr. Browning to be

arrested as a runaway Frenchman or a Prussian spy. The usual passenger

boats from Calais and Boulogne no longer ran; but there was, he

believed, a chance of their finding one at Havre. They acted on this

warning, and discovered its wisdom in the various hindrances which they

found on their way. Everywhere the horses had been requisitioned for the

war. The boat on which they had relied to take them down the river

to Caen had been stopped that very morning; and when they reached the

railroad they were told that the Prussians would be at the other end

before night. At last they arrived at Honfleur, where they found an

English vessel which was about to convey cattle to Southampton; and in

this, setting out at midnight, they made their passage to England.

Some words addressed to Miss Blagden, written I believe in 1871, once

more strike a touching familiar note.

'. . . But \_no\_, dearest Isa. The simple truth is that \_she\_ was the poet,

and I the clever person by comparison--remember her limited experience

of all kinds, and what she made of it. Remember on the other hand, how

my uninterrupted health and strength and practice with the world have

helped me. . . .'

'Balaustion's Adventure' and 'Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau' were

published, respectively, in August and December 1871. They had been

preceded in the March of the same year by a ballad, 'Herve Riel',

afterwards reprinted in the 'Pacchiarotto' volume, and which Mr.

Browning now sold to the 'Cornhill Magazine' for the benefit of the

French sufferers by the war.

The circumstances of this little transaction, unique in Mr. Browning's

experience, are set forth in the following letter:

Feb. 4, '71.

'My dear Smith,--I want to give something to the people in Paris, and

can afford so very little just now, that I am forced upon an expedient.

Will you buy of me that poem which poor Simeon praised in a letter

you saw, and which I like better than most things I have done of

late?--Buy,--I mean,--the right of printing it in the Pall Mall and,

if you please, the Cornhill also,--the copyright remaining with me. You

remember you wanted to print it in the Cornhill, and I was obstinate:

there is hardly any occasion on which I should be otherwise, if the

printing any poem of mine in a magazine were purely for my own sake: so,

any liberality you exercise will not be drawn into a precedent against

you. I fancy this is a case in which one may handsomely puff one's own

ware, and I venture to call my verses good for once. I send them to

you directly, because expedition will render whatever I contribute more

valuable: for when you make up your mind as to how liberally I shall be

enabled to give, you must send me a cheque and I will send the same as

the "Product of a Poem"--so that your light will shine deservedly. Now,

begin proceedings by reading the poem to Mrs. Smith,--by whose judgment

I will cheerfully be bound; and, with her approval, second my endeavour

as best you can. Would,--for the love of France,--that this were a "Song

of a Wren"--then should the guineas equal the lines; as it is, do what

you safely may for the song of a Robin--Browning--who is yours very

truly, into the bargain.

'P.S. The copy is so clear and careful that you might, with a good

Reader, print it on Monday, nor need my help for corrections: I shall

however be always at home, and ready at a moment's notice: return the

copy, if you please, as I promised it to my son long ago.'

Mr. Smith gave him 100 guineas as the price of the poem.

He wrote concerning the two longer poems, first probably at the close of

this year, and again in January 1872, to Miss Blagden.

'. . . By this time you have got my little book ('Hohenstiel') and seen

for yourself whether I make the best or worst of the case. I think, in

the main, he meant to do what I say, and, but for weakness,--grown more

apparent in his last years than formerly,--would have done what I say he

did not.\* I thought badly of him at the beginning of his career, \_et pour

cause\_: better afterward, on the strength of the promises he made, and

gave indications of intending to redeem. I think him very weak in the

last miserable year. At his worst I prefer him to Thiers' best. I am

told my little thing is succeeding--sold 1,400 in the first five days,

and before any notice appeared. I remember that the year I made the

little rough sketch in Rome, '60, my account for the last six months

with Chapman was--\_nil\_, not one copy disposed of! . . .

\* This phrase is a little misleading.

'. . . I am glad you like what the editor of the Edinburgh calls my

eulogium on the second empire,--which it is not, any more than what

another wiseacre affirms it to be "a scandalous attack on the old

constant friend of England"--it is just what I imagine the man might, if

he pleased, say for himself.'

Mr. Browning continues:

'Spite of my ailments and bewailments I have just all but finished

another poem of quite another kind, which shall amuse you in the spring,

I hope! I don't go sound asleep at all events. 'Balaustion'--the second

edition is in the press I think I told you. 2,500 in five months, is a

good sale for the likes of me. But I met Henry Taylor (of Artevelde)

two days ago at dinner, and he said he had never gained anything by his

books, which surely is a shame--I mean, if no buyers mean no

readers. . . .'

'Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau' was written in Scotland, where Mr.

Browning was the guest of Mr. Ernest Benzon: having left his sister to

the care of M. and Madame Milsand at St.-Aubin. The ailment he speaks

of consisted, I believe, of a severe cold. Another of the occurrences

of 1871 was Mr. Browning's election as Life Governor of the London

University.

A passage from a letter dated March 30, '72, bears striking testimony to

the constant warmth of his affections.

'. . . The misfortune, which I did not guess when I accepted the

invitation, is that I shall lose some of the last days of Milsand, who

has been here for the last month: no words can express the love I have

for him, you know. He is increasingly precious to me. . . . Waring

came back the other day, after thirty years' absence, the same as

ever,--nearly. He has been Prime Minister at New Zealand for a year and

a half, but gets tired, and returns home with a poem.'\*

\* 'Ranolf and Amohia'.

This is my last extract from the correspondence with Miss Blagden. Her

death closed it altogether within the year.

It is difficult to infer from letters, however intimate, the dominant

state of the writer's mind: most of all to do so in Mr. Browning's case,

from such passages of his correspondence as circumstances allow me

to quote. Letters written in intimacy, and to the same friend, often

express a recurrent mood, a revived set of associations, which for the

moment destroys the habitual balance of feeling. The same effect is

sometimes produced in personal intercourse; and the more varied the

life, the more versatile the nature, the more readily in either case

will a lately unused spring of emotion well up at the passing touch.

We may even fancy we read into the letters of 1870 that eerie, haunting

sadness of a cherished memory from which, in spite of ourselves, life

is bearing us away. We may also err in so doing. But literary creation,

patiently carried on through a given period, is usually a fair

reflection of the general moral and mental conditions under which it has

taken place; and it would be hard to imagine from Mr. Browning's work

during these last ten years that any but gracious influences had been

operating upon his genius, any more disturbing element than the sense of

privation and loss had entered into his inner life.

Some leaven of bitterness must, nevertheless, have been working within

him, or he could never have produced that piece of perplexing cynicism,

'Fifine at the Fair'--the poem referred to as in progress in a letter to

Miss Blagden, and which appeared in the spring of 1872. The disturbing

cause had been also of long standing; for the deeper reactive processes

of Mr. Browning's nature were as slow as its more superficial response

was swift; and while 'Dramatis Personae', 'The Ring and the Book',

and even 'Balaustion's Adventure', represented the gradually perfected

substance of his poetic imagination, 'Fifine at the Fair' was as the

froth thrown up by it during the prolonged simmering which was to leave

it clear. The work displays the iridescent brightness as well as the

occasional impurity of this froth-like character. Beauty and ugliness

are, indeed, almost inseparable in the moral impression which it leaves

upon us. The author has put forth a plea for self-indulgence with a

much slighter attempt at dramatic disguise than his special pleadings

generally assume; and while allowing circumstances to expose the

sophistry of the position, and punish its attendant act, he does not

sufficiently condemn it. But, in identifying himself for the moment with

the conception of a Don Juan, he has infused into it a tenderness and

a poetry with which the true type had very little in common, and which

retard its dramatic development. Those who knew Mr. Browning, or who

thoroughly know his work, may censure, regret, fail to understand

'Fifine at the Fair'; they will never in any important sense misconstrue

it.

But it has been so misconstrued by an intelligent and not unsympathetic

critic; and his construction may be endorsed by other persons in the

present, and still more in the future, in whom the elements of a truer

judgment are wanting. It seems, therefore, best to protest at once

against the misjudgment, though in so doing I am claiming for it an

attention which it may not seem to deserve. I allude to Mr. Mortimer's

'Note on Browning' in the 'Scottish Art Review' for December 1889. This

note contains a summary of Mr. Browning's teaching, which it resolves

into the moral equivalent of the doctrine of the conservation of force.

Mr. Mortimer assumes for the purpose of his comparison that the exercise

of force means necessarily moving on; and according to him Mr. Browning

prescribes action at any price, even that of defying the restrictions

of moral law. He thus, we are told, blames the lovers in 'The Statue and

the Bust' for their failure to carry out what was an immoral intention;

and, in the person of his 'Don Juan', defends a husband's claim to

relieve the fixity of conjugal affection by varied adventure in the

world of temporary loves: the result being 'the negation of that

convention under which we habitually view life, but which for some

reason or other breaks down when we have to face the problems of a

Goethe, a Shelley, a Byron, or a Browning.'

Mr. Mortimer's generalization does not apply to 'The Statue and the

Bust', since Mr. Browning has made it perfectly clear that, in this

case, the intended act is postponed without reference to its morality,

and simply in consequence of a weakness of will, which would have been

as paralyzing to a good purpose as it was to the bad one; but it is not

without superficial sanction in 'Fifine at the Fair'; and the part which

the author allowed himself to play in it did him an injustice only to be

measured by the inference which it has been made to support. There could

be no mistake more ludicrous, were it less regrettable, than that of

classing Mr. Browning, on moral grounds, with Byron or Shelley; even

in the case of Goethe the analogy breaks down. The evidence of the

foregoing pages has rendered all protest superfluous. But the suggested

moral resemblance to the two English poets receives a striking comment

in a fact of Mr. Browning's life which falls practically into the

present period of our history: his withdrawal from Shelley of the

devotion of more than forty years on account of an act of heartlessness

towards his first wife which he held to have been proved against him.

The sweet and the bitter lay, indeed, very close to each other at the

sources of Mr. Browning's inspiration. Both proceeded, in great measure,

from his spiritual allegiance to the past--that past by which it was

impossible that he should linger, but which he could not yet leave

behind. The present came to him with friendly greeting. He was

unconsciously, perhaps inevitably, unjust to what it brought. The

injustice reacted upon himself, and developed by degrees into the

cynical mood of fancy which became manifest in 'Fifine at the Fair'.

It is true that, in the light of this explanation, we see an effect very

unlike its cause; but the chemistry of human emotion is like that of

natural life. It will often form a compound in which neither of its

constituents can be recognized. This perverse poem was the last as well

as the first manifestation of an ungenial mood of Mr. Browning's mind.

A slight exception may be made for some passages in 'Red Cotton Nightcap

Country', and for one of the poems of the 'Pacchiarotto' volume; but

otherwise no sign of moral or mental disturbance betrays itself in his

subsequent work. The past and the present gradually assumed for him a

more just relation to each other. He learned to meet life as it offered

itself to him with a more frank recognition of its good gifts, a more

grateful response to them. He grew happier, hence more genial, as the

years advanced.

It was not without misgiving that Mr. Browning published 'Fifine at

the Fair'; but many years were to pass before he realized the kind of

criticism to which it had exposed him. The belief conveyed in the

letter to Miss Blagden that what proceeds from a genuine inspiration is

justified by it, combined with the indifference to public opinion

which had been engendered in him by its long neglect, made him slow to

anticipate the results of external judgment, even where he was in some

degree prepared to endorse them. For his value as a poet, it was best

so.

The August of 1872 and of 1873 again found him with his sister at

St.-Aubin, and the earlier visit was an important one: since it supplied

him with the materials of his next work, of which Miss Annie Thackeray,

there also for a few days, suggested the title. The tragic drama which

forms the subject of Mr. Browning's poem had been in great part enacted

in the vicinity of St.-Aubin; and the case of disputed inheritance to

which it had given rise was pending at that moment in the tribunals of

Caen. The prevailing impression left on Miss Thackeray's mind by this

primitive district was, she declared, that of white cotton nightcaps

(the habitual headgear of the Normandy peasants). She engaged to write

a story called 'White Cotton Nightcap Country'; and Mr. Browning's quick

sense of both contrast and analogy inspired the introduction of

this emblem of repose into his own picture of that peaceful, prosaic

existence, and of the ghastly spiritual conflict to which it had served

as background. He employed a good deal of perhaps strained ingenuity in

the opening pages of the work, in making the white cap foreshadow the

red, itself the symbol of liberty, and only indirectly connected with

tragic events; and he would, I think, have emphasized the irony of

circumstance in a manner more characteristic of himself, if he had laid

his stress on the remoteness from 'the madding crowd', and repeated

Miss Thackeray's title. There can, however, be no doubt that his poetic

imagination, no less than his human insight, was amply vindicated by his

treatment of the story.

On leaving St.-Aubin he spent a month at Fontainebleau, in a house

situated on the outskirts of the forest; and here his principal indoor

occupation was reading the Greek dramatists, especially Aeschylus, to

whom he had returned with revived interest and curiosity. 'Red Cotton

Nightcap Country' was not begun till his return to London in the later

autumn. It was published in the early summer of 1873.

Chapter 17

1873-1878

London Life--Love of Music--Miss Egerton-Smith--Periodical Nervous

Exhaustion--Mers; 'Aristophanes' Apology'--'Agamemnon'--'The

Inn Album'--'Pacchiarotto and other Poems'--Visits to Oxford and

Cambridge--Letters to Mrs. Fitz-Gerald--St. Andrews; Letter

from Professor Knight--In the Savoyard Mountains--Death of Miss

Egerton-Smith--'La Saisiaz'; 'The Two Poets of Croisic'--Selections from

his Works.

The period on which we have now entered, covering roughly the ten or

twelve years which followed the publication of 'The Ring and the Book',

was the fullest in Mr. Browning's life; it was that in which the varied

claims made by it on his moral, and above all his physical energies,

found in him the fullest power of response. He could rise early and go

to bed late--this, however, never from choice; and occupy every hour of

the day with work or pleasure, in a manner which his friends recalled

regretfully in later years, when of two or three engagements which

ought to have divided his afternoon, a single one--perhaps only the most

formally pressing--could be fulfilled. Soon after his final return to

England, while he still lived in comparative seclusion, certain habits

of friendly intercourse, often superficial, but always binding, had

rooted themselves in his life. London society, as I have also implied,

opened itself to him in ever-widening circles, or, as it would be truer

to say, drew him more and more deeply into its whirl; and even before

the mellowing kindness of his nature had infused warmth into the least

substantial of his social relations, the imaginative curiosity of the

poet--for a while the natural ambition of the man--found satisfaction in

it. For a short time, indeed, he entered into the fashionable routine of

country-house visiting. Besides the instances I have already given,

and many others which I may have forgotten, he was heard of, during the

earlier part of this decade, as the guest of Lord Carnarvon at Highclere

Castle, of Lord Shrewsbury at Alton Towers, of Lord Brownlow and his

mother, Lady Marian Alford, at Belton and Ashridge. Somewhat later,

he stayed with Mr. and Lady Alice Gaisford at a house they temporarily

occupied on the Sussex downs; with Mr. Cholmondeley at Condover, and,

much more recently, at Aynhoe Park with Mr. and Mrs. Cartwright. Kind

and pressing, and in themselves very tempting invitations of this nature

came to him until the end of his life; but he very soon made a practice

of declining them, because their acceptance could only renew for him the

fatigues of the London season, while the tantalizing beauty and

repose of the country lay before his eyes; but such visits, while they

continued, were one of the necessary social experiences which brought

their grist to his mill.

And now, in addition to the large social tribute which he received, and

had to pay, he was drinking in all the enjoyment, and incurring all the

fatigue which the London musical world could create for him. In Italy

he had found the natural home of the other arts. The one poem, 'Old

Pictures in Florence', is sufficiently eloquent of long communion with

the old masters and their works; and if his history in Florence and Rome

had been written in his own letters instead of those of his wife, they

must have held many reminiscences of galleries and studios, and of the

places in which pictures are bought and sold. But his love for music

was as certainly starved as the delight in painting and sculpture was

nourished; and it had now grown into a passion, from the indulgence of

which he derived, as he always declared, some of the most beneficent

influences of his life. It would be scarcely an exaggeration to say that

he attended every important concert of the season, whether isolated or

given in a course. There was no engagement possible or actual, which did

not yield to the discovery of its clashing with the day and hour fixed

for one of these. His frequent companion on such occasions was Miss

Egerton-Smith.

Miss Smith became only known to Mr. Browning's general acquaintance

through the dedicatory 'A. E. S.' of 'La Saisiaz'; but she was, at the

time of her death, one of his oldest women friends. He first met her as

a young woman in Florence when she was visiting there; and the love

for and proficiency in music soon asserted itself as a bond of sympathy

between them. They did not, however, see much of each other till he had

finally left Italy, and she also had made her home in London. She there

led a secluded life, although free from family ties, and enjoying a

large income derived from the ownership of an important provincial

paper. Mr. Browning was one of the very few persons whose society she

cared to cultivate; and for many years the common musical interest took

the practical, and for both of them convenient form, of their going to

concerts together. After her death, in the autumn of 1877, he almost

mechanically renounced all the musical entertainments to which she had

so regularly accompanied him. The special motive and special facility

were gone--she had been wont to call for him in her carriage; the

habit was broken; there would have been first pain, and afterwards an

unwelcome exertion in renewing it. Time was also beginning to sap his

strength, while society, and perhaps friendship, were making increasing

claims upon it. It may have been for this same reason that music after

a time seemed to pass out of his life altogether. Yet its almost sudden

eclipse was striking in the case of one who not only had been so

deeply susceptible to its emotional influences, so conversant with

its scientific construction and its multitudinous forms, but who was

acknowledged as 'musical' by those who best knew the subtle and complex

meaning of that often misused term.

Mr. Browning could do all that I have said during the period through

which we are now following him; but he could not quite do it with

impunity. Each winter brought its searching attack of cold and cough;

each summer reduced him to the state of nervous prostration or physical

apathy of which I have already spoken, and which at once rendered change

imperative, and the exertion of seeking it almost intolerable. His

health and spirits rebounded at the first draught of foreign air; the

first breath from an English cliff or moor might have had the same

result. But the remembrance of this fact never nerved him to the

preliminary effort. The conviction renewed itself with the close of

every season, that the best thing which could happen to him would be to

be left quiet at home; and his disinclination to face even the idea

of moving equally hampered his sister in her endeavour to make timely

arrangements for their change of abode.

This special craving for rest helped to limit the area from which their

summer resort could be chosen. It precluded all idea of 'pension'-life,

hence of any much-frequented spot in Switzerland or Germany. It was

tacitly understood that the shortening days were not to be passed in

England. Italy did not yet associate itself with the possibilities of

a moderately short absence; the resources of the northern French coast

were becoming exhausted; and as the August of 1874 approached, the

question of how and where this and the following months were to be spent

was, perhaps, more than ever a perplexing one. It was now Miss Smith who

became the means of its solution. She had more than once joined Mr. and

Miss Browning at the seaside. She was anxious this year to do so again,

and she suggested for their meeting a quiet spot called Mers, almost

adjoining the fashionable Treport, but distinct from it. It was agreed

that they should try it; and the experiment, which they had no reason

to regret, opened also in some degree a way out of future difficulties.

Mers was young, and had the defect of its quality. Only one desirable

house was to be found there; and the plan of joint residence became

converted into one of joint housekeeping, in which Mr. and Miss Browning

at first refused to concur, but which worked so well that it was renewed

in the three ensuing summers: Miss Smith retaining the initiative in

the choice of place, her friends the right of veto upon it. They stayed

again together in 1875 at Villers, on the coast of Normandy; in 1876 at

the Isle of Arran; in 1877 at a house called La Saisiaz--Savoyard for

the sun--in the Saleve district near Geneva.

The autumn months of 1874 were marked for Mr. Browning by an important

piece of work: the production of 'Aristophanes' Apology'. It was far

advanced when he returned to London in November, after a visit to

Antwerp, where his son was studying art under M. Heyermans; and its much

later appearance must have been intended to give breathing time to the

readers of 'Red Cotton Nightcap Country'. Mr. Browning subsequently

admitted that he sometimes, during these years, allowed active literary

occupation to interfere too much with the good which his holiday might

have done him; but the temptations to literary activity were this time

too great to be withstood. The house occupied by him at Mers (Maison

Robert) was the last of the straggling village, and stood on a rising

cliff. In front was the open sea; beyond it a long stretch of down;

everywhere comparative solitude. Here, in uninterrupted quiet, and in a

room devoted to his use, Mr. Browning would work till the afternoon was

advanced, and then set forth on a long walk over the cliffs, often in

the face of a wind which, as he wrote of it at the time, he could lean

against as if it were a wall. And during this time he was living, not

only in his work, but with the man who had inspired it. The image of

Aristophanes, in the half-shamed insolence, the disordered majesty, in

which he is placed before the reader's mind, was present to him from

the first moment in which the Defence was conceived. What was still more

interesting, he could see him, hear him, think with him, speak for him,

and still inevitably condemn him. No such instance of always ingenious,

and sometimes earnest pleading foredoomed to complete discomfiture,

occurs in Mr. Browning's works.

To Aristophanes he gave the dramatic sympathy which one lover of life

can extend to another, though that other unduly extol its lower forms.

To Euripides he brought the palm of the higher truth, to his work the

tribute of the more pathetic human emotion. Even these for a moment

ministered to the greatness of Aristophanes, in the tear shed by him to

the memory of his rival, in the hour of his own triumph; and we may be

quite sure that when Mr. Browning depicted that scene, and again when he

translated the great tragedian's words, his own eyes were dimmed. Large

tears fell from them, and emotion choked his voice, when he first

read aloud the transcript of the 'Herakles' to a friend, who was often

privileged to hear him.

Mr. Browning's deep feeling for the humanities of Greek literature, and

his almost passionate love for the language, contrasted strongly with

his refusal to regard even the first of Greek writers as models of

literary style. The pretensions raised for them on this ground were

inconceivable to him; and his translation of the 'Agamemnon', published

1877, was partly made, I am convinced, for the pleasure of exposing

these claims, and of rebuking them. His preface to the transcript gives

evidence of this. The glee with which he pointed to it when it first

appeared was no less significant.

At Villers, in 1875, he only corrected the proofs of 'The Inn Album' for

publication in November. When the party started for the Isle of Arran,

in the autumn of 1876, the 'Pacchiarotto' volume had already appeared.

When Mr. Browning discontinued his short-lived habit of visiting away

from home, he made an exception in favour of the Universities. His

occasional visits to Oxford and Cambridge were maintained till the very

end of his life, with increasing frequency in the former case; and the

days spent at Balliol and Trinity afforded him as unmixed a pleasure

as was compatible with the interruption of his daily habits, and with a

system of hospitality which would detain him for many hours at table.

A vivid picture of them is given in two letters, dated January 20 and

March 10, 1877, and addressed to one of his constant correspondents,

Mrs. Fitz-Gerald, of Shalstone Manor, Buckingham.

Dear Friend, I have your letter of yesterday, and thank you all I can

for its goodness and graciousness to me unworthy . . . I returned on

Thursday--the hospitality of our Master being not easy to set aside.

But to begin with the beginning: the passage from London to Oxford was

exceptionally prosperous--the train was full of men my friends. I was

welcomed on arriving by a Fellow who installed me in my rooms,--then

came the pleasant meeting with Jowett who at once took me to tea with

his other guests, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Bishop of London, Dean

of Westminster, the Airlies, Cardwells, male and female. Then came the

banquet--(I enclose you the plan having no doubt that you will recognise

the name of many an acquaintance: please return it)--and, the dinner

done, speechifying set in vigorously. The Archbishop proposed the

standing 'Floreat domus de Balliolo'--to which the Master made due

and amusing answer, himself giving the health of the Primate. Lord

Coleridge, in a silvery speech, drank to the University, responded to by

the Vice-Chancellor. I forget who proposed the visitors--the Bishop of

London, perhaps Lord Cardwell. Professor Smith gave the two Houses

of Parliament,--Jowett, the Clergy, coupling with it the name of your

friend Mr. Rogers--on whom he showered every kind of praise, and Mr.

Rogers returned thanks very characteristically and pleasantly. Lord

Lansdowne drank to the Bar (Mr. Bowen), Lord Camperdown to--I really

forget what: Mr. Green to Literature and Science delivering a most

undeserved eulogium on myself, with a more rightly directed one on

Arnold, Swinburne, and the old pride of Balliol, Clough: this was

cleverly and almost touchingly answered by dear Mat Arnold. Then the

Dean of Westminster gave the Fellows and Scholars--and then--twelve

o'clock struck. We were, counting from the time of preliminary

assemblage, six hours and a half engaged: \_fully\_ five and a half nailed

to our chairs at the table: but the whole thing was brilliant, genial,

and suggestive of many and various thoughts to me--and there was

a warmth, earnestness, and yet refinement about it which I never

experienced in any previous public dinner. Next morning I breakfasted

with Jowett and his guests, found that return would be difficult: while

as the young men were to return on Friday there would be no opposition

to my departure on Thursday. The morning was dismal with rain, but after

luncheon there was a chance of getting a little air, and I walked for

more than two hours, then heard service in New Coll.--then dinner again:

my room had been prepared in the Master's house. So, on Thursday, after

yet another breakfast, I left by the noon-day train, after all sorts of

kindly offices from the Master. . . . No reporters were suffered to be

present--the account in yesterday's Times was furnished by one or more

of the guests; it is quite correct as far as it goes. There were,

I find, certain little paragraphs which must have been furnished by

'guessers': Swinburne, set down as present--was absent through his

Father's illness: the Cardinal also excused himself as did the Bishop of

Salisbury and others. . . . Ever yours R. Browning.

The second letter, from Cambridge, was short and written in haste, at

the moment of Mr. Browning's departure; but it tells the same tale of

general kindness and attention. Engagements for no less than six meals

had absorbed the first day of the visit. The occasion was that of

Professor Joachim's investiture with his Doctor's degree; and Mr.

Browning declares that this ceremony, the concert given by the great

violinist, and his society, were 'each and all' worth the trouble of

the journey. He himself was to receive the Cambridge degree of LL.D. in

1879, the Oxford D.C.L. in 1882. A passage in another letter addressed

to the same friend, refers probably to a practical reminiscence of 'Red

Cotton Nightcap Country', which enlivened the latter experience, and

which Mrs. Fitz-Gerald had witnessed with disapprobation.\*

\* An actual red cotton nightcap had been made to flutter

down on to the Poet's head.

. . . You are far too hard on the very harmless drolleries of the young

men, licensed as they are moreover by immemorial usage. Indeed there

used to be a regularly appointed jester, 'Filius Terrae' he was called,

whose business it was to jibe and jeer at the honoured ones, by way of

reminder that all human glories are merely gilded bubbles and must not

be fancied metal. You saw that the Reverend Dons escaped no more than

the poor Poet--or rather I should say than myself the poor Poet--for

I was pleased to observe with what attention they listened to the

Newdigate. . . . Ever affectionately yours, R. Browning.

In 1875 he was unanimously nominated by its Independent Club, to the

office of Lord Rector of the University of Glasgow; and in 1877 he again

received the offer of the Rectorship of St. Andrews, couched in very

urgent and flattering terms. A letter addressed to him from this

University by Dr. William Knight, Professor of Moral Philosophy there,

which I have his permission to publish, bears witness to what had

long been and was always to remain a prominent fact of Mr. Browning's

literary career: his great influence on the minds of the rising

generation of his countrymen.

The University, St. Andrews N.B.: Nov. 17, 1877.

My dear Sir,--. . . The students of this University, in which I have

the honour to hold office, have nominated you as their Lord Rector; and

intend unanimously, I am told, to elect you to that office on Thursday.

I believe that hitherto no Rector has been chosen by the undivided

suffrage of any Scottish University. They have heard however that you

are unable to accept the office: and your committee, who were deeply

disappointed to learn this afternoon of the way in which you have been

informed of their intentions, are, I believe, writing to you on the

subject. So keen is their regret that they intend respectfully to wait

upon you on Tuesday morning by deputation, and ask if you cannot waive

your difficulties in deference to their enthusiasm, and allow them to

proceed with your election.

Their suffrage may, I think, be regarded as one sign of how the

thoughtful youth of Scotland estimate the work you have done in the

world of letters.

And permit me to say that while these Rectorial elections in the other

Universities have frequently turned on local questions, or been inspired

by political partisanship, St. Andrews has honourably sought to choose

men distinguished for literary eminence, and to make the Rectorship a

tribute at once of intellectual and moral esteem.

May I add that when the 'perfervidum ingenium' of our northern race

takes the form not of youthful hero-worship, but of loyal admiration and

respectful homage, it is a very genuine affair. In the present instance

I may say it is no mere outburst of young undisciplined enthusiasm, but

an honest expression of intellectual and moral indebtedness, the genuine

and distinct tribute of many minds that have been touched to some higher

issues by what you have taught them. They do not presume to speak of

your place in English literature. They merely tell you by this proffered

honour (the highest in their power to bestow), how they have felt your

influence over them.

My own obligations to you, and to the author of Aurora Leigh, are such,

that of them 'silence is golden'. Yours ever gratefully. William Knight.

Mr. Browning was deeply touched and gratified by these professions of

esteem. He persisted nevertheless in his refusal. The Glasgow nomination

had also been declined by him.

On August 17, 1877, he wrote to Mrs. Fitz-Gerald from La Saisiaz:

'How lovely is this place in its solitude and seclusion, with its trees

and shrubs and flowers, and above all its live mountain stream which

supplies three fountains, and two delightful baths, a marvel of delicate

delight framed in with trees--I bathe there twice a day--and then what

wonderful views from the chalet on every side! Geneva lying under

us, with the lake and the whole plain bounded by the Jura and our own

Saleve, which latter seems rather close behind our house, and yet takes

a hard hour and a half to ascend--all this you can imagine since you

know the environs of the town; the peace and quiet move me the most--And

I fancy I shall drowse out the two months or more, doing no more of

serious work than reading--and that is virtuous renunciation of the

glorious view to my right here--as I sit aerially like Euripides, and

see the clouds come and go and the view change in correspondence with

them. It will help me to get rid of the pain which attaches itself to

the recollections of Lucerne and Berne "in the old days when the Greeks

suffered so much," as Homer says. But a very real and sharp pain touched

me here when I heard of the death of poor Virginia March whom I knew

particularly, and parted with hardly a fortnight ago, leaving her

affectionate and happy as ever. The tones of her voice as on one

memorable occasion she ejaculated repeatedly 'Good friend!' are fresh

still. Poor Virginia! . . .'

Mr. Browning was more than quiescent during this stay in the Savoyard

mountains. He was unusually depressed, and unusually disposed to regard

the absence from home as a banishment; and he tried subsequently to

account for this condition by the shadow which coming trouble sometimes

casts before it. It was more probably due to the want of the sea air

which he had enjoyed for so many years, and to that special oppressive

heat of the Swiss valleys which ascends with them to almost their

highest level. When he said that the Saleve seemed close behind the

house, he was saying in other words that the sun beat back from, and the

air was intercepted by it. We see, nevertheless, in his description

of the surrounding scenery, a promise of the contemplative delight in

natural beauty to be henceforth so conspicuous in his experience, and

which seemed a new feature in it. He had hitherto approached every

living thing with curious and sympathetic observation--this hardly

requires saying of one who had animals for his first and always familiar

friends. Flowers also attracted him by their perfume. But what he loved

in nature was essentially its prefiguring of human existence, or

its echo of it; and it never appeared, in either his works or his

conversation, that he was much impressed by its inanimate forms--by even

those larger phenomena of mountain and cloud-land on which the latter

dwells. Such beauty as most appealed to him he had left behind with

the joys and sorrows of his Italian life, and it had almost inevitably

passed out of his consideration. During years of his residence in London

he never thought of the country as a source of pleasurable emotions,

other than those contingent on renewed health; and the places to which

he resorted had often not much beyond their health-giving qualities to

recommend them; his appetite for the beautiful had probably dwindled for

lack of food. But when a friend once said to him: 'You have not a great

love for nature, have you?' he had replied: 'Yes, I have, but I love

men and women better;' and the admission, which conveyed more than it

literally expressed, would have been true I believe at any, up to the

present, period of his history. Even now he did not cease to love men

and women best; but he found increasing enjoyment in the beauties of

nature, above all as they opened upon him on the southern slopes of the

Alps; and the delight of the aesthetic sense merged gradually in the

satisfied craving for pure air and brilliant sunshine which marked his

final struggle for physical life. A ring of enthusiasm comes into his

letters from the mountains, and deepens as the years advance; doubtless

enhanced by the great--perhaps too great--exhilaration which the Alpine

atmosphere produced, but also in large measure independent of it. Each

new place into which the summer carries him he declares more beautiful

than the last. It possibly was so.

A touch of autumnal freshness had barely crept into the atmosphere of

the Saleve, when a moral thunderbolt fell on the little group of persons

domiciled at its base: Miss Egerton-Smith died, in what had seemed

for her unusually good health, in the act of preparing for a mountain

excursion with her friends--the words still almost on her lips in

which she had given some directions for their comfort. Mr. Browning's

impressionable nervous system was for a moment paralyzed by the shock.

It revived in all the emotional and intellectual impulses which gave

birth to 'La Saisiaz'.

This poem contains, besides its personal reference and association,

elements of distinctive biographical interest. It is the author's

first--as also last--attempt to reconstruct his hope of immortality by

a rational process based entirely on the fundamental facts of his own

knowledge and consciousness--God and the human soul; and while the very

assumption of these facts, as basis for reasoning, places him at issue

with scientific thought, there is in his way of handling them a tribute

to the scientific spirit, perhaps foreshadowed in the beautiful epilogue

to 'Dramatis Personae', but of which there is no trace in his earlier

religious works. It is conclusive both in form and matter as to his

heterodox attitude towards Christianity. He was no less, in his way, a

Christian when he wrote 'La Saisiaz' than when he published 'A Death

in the Desert' and 'Christmas Eve and Easter Day'; or at any period

subsequent to that in which he accepted without questioning what he had

learned at his mother's knee. He has repeatedly written or declared in

the words of Charles Lamb:\* 'If Christ entered the room I should fall

on my knees;' and again, in those of Napoleon: 'I am an understander of

men, and \_he\_ was no man.' He has even added: 'If he had been, he would

have been an impostor.' But the arguments, in great part negative, set

forth in 'La Saisiaz' for the immortality of the soul, leave no place

for the idea, however indefinite, of a Christian revelation on the

subject. Christ remained for Mr. Browning a mystery and a message of

Divine Love, but no messenger of Divine intention towards mankind.

\* These words have more significance when taken with their

context. 'If Shakespeare was to come into the room, we

should all rise up to meet him; but if that Person [meaning

Christ] was to come into the room, we should all fall down

and try to kiss the hem of his garment.'

The dialogue between Fancy and Reason is not only an admission of

uncertainty as to the future of the Soul: it is a plea for it; and as

such it gathers up into its few words of direct statement, threads of

reasoning which have been traceable throughout Mr. Browning's work. In

this plea for uncertainty lies also a full and frank acknowledgment of

the value of the earthly life; and as interpreted by his general views,

that value asserts itself, not only in the means of probation which

life affords, but in its existing conditions of happiness. No one, he

declares, possessing the certainty of a future state would patiently and

fully live out the present; and since the future can be only the ripened

fruit of the present, its promise would be neutralized, as well as

actual experience dwarfed, by a definite revelation. Nor, conversely,

need the want of a certified future depress the present spiritual and

moral life. It is in the nature of the Soul that it would suffer from

the promise. The existence of God is a justification for hope. And

since the certainty would be injurious to the Soul, hence destructive

to itself, the doubt--in other words, the hope--becomes a sufficient

approach to, a working substitute for it. It is pathetic to see how

in spite of the convictions thus rooted in Mr. Browning's mind, the

expressed craving for more knowledge, for more light, will now and then

escape him.

Even orthodox Christianity gives no assurance of reunion to those whom

death has separated. It is obvious that Mr. Browning's poetic creed

could hold no conviction regarding it. He hoped for such reunion in

proportion as he wished. There must have been moments in his life when

the wish in its passion overleapt the bounds of hope. 'Prospice' appears

to prove this. But the wide range of imagination, no less than the lack

of knowledge, forbade in him any forecast of the possibilities of the

life to come. He believed that if granted, it would be an advance on the

present--an accession of knowledge if not an increase of happiness. He

was satisfied that whatever it gave, and whatever it withheld, it would

be good. In his normal condition this sufficed to him.

'La Saisiaz' appeared in the early summer of 1878, and with it 'The

Two Poets of Croisic', which had been written immediately after it. The

various incidents of this poem are strictly historical; they lead the

way to a characteristic utterance of Mr. Browning's philosophy of life

to which I shall recur later.

In 1872 Mr. Browning had published a first series of selections from his

works; it was to be followed by a second in 1880. In a preface to the

earlier volume, he indicates the plan which he has followed in the

choice and arrangement of poems; and some such intention runs also

through the second; since he declined a suggestion made to him for the

introduction or placing of a special poem, on the ground of its not

conforming to the end he had in view. It is difficult, in the one case

as in the other, to reconstruct the imagined personality to which his

preface refers; and his words on the later occasion pointed rather to

that idea of a chord of feeling which is raised by the correspondence of

the first and last poems of the respective groups. But either clue may

be followed with interest.

Chapter 18

1878-1884

He revisits Italy; Asolo; Letters to Mrs. Fitz-Gerald--Venice--Favourite

Alpine Retreats--Mrs. Arthur Bronson--Life in Venice--A Tragedy at

Saint-Pierre--Mr. Cholmondeley--Mr. Browning's Patriotic

Feeling; Extract from Letter to Mrs. Charles Skirrow--'Dramatic

Idyls'--'Jocoseria'--'Ferishtah's Fancies'.

The catastrophe of La Saisiaz closed a comprehensive chapter in Mr.

Browning's habits and experience. It impelled him finally to break with

the associations of the last seventeen autumns, which he remembered

more in their tedious or painful circumstances than in the unexciting

pleasure and renewed physical health which he had derived from them. He

was weary of the ever-recurring effort to uproot himself from his home

life, only to become stationary in some more or less uninteresting

northern spot. The always latent desire for Italy sprang up in him,

and with it the often present thought and wish to give his sister the

opportunity of seeing it.

Florence and Rome were not included in his scheme; he knew them both

too well; but he hankered for Asolo and Venice. He determined, though as

usual reluctantly, and not till the last moment, that they should move

southwards in the August of 1878. Their route lay over the Spluegen; and

having heard of a comfortable hotel near the summit of the Pass, they

agreed to remain there till the heat had sufficiently abated to allow

of the descent into Lombardy. The advantages of this first arrangement

exceeded their expectations. It gave them solitude without the sense

of loneliness. A little stream of travellers passed constantly over the

mountain, and they could shake hands with acquaintances at night, and

know them gone in the morning. They dined at the table d'hote, but took

all other meals alone, and slept in a detached wing or 'dependance'

of the hotel. Their daily walks sometimes carried them down to the Via

Mala; often to the top of the ascent, where they could rest, looking

down into Italy; and would even be prolonged over a period of five

hours and an extent of seventeen miles. Now, as always, the mountain air

stimulated Mr. Browning's physical energy; and on this occasion it also

especially quickened his imaginative powers. He was preparing the first

series of 'Dramatic Idylls'; and several of these, including 'Ivan

Ivanovitch', were produced with such rapidity that Miss Browning refused

to countenance a prolonged stay on the mountain, unless he worked at a

more reasonable rate.

They did not linger on their way to Asolo and Venice, except for a

night's rest on the Lake of Como and two days at Verona. In their

successive journeys through Northern Italy they visited by degrees all

its notable cities, and it would be easy to recall, in order and detail,

most of these yearly expeditions. But the account of them would chiefly

resolve itself into a list of names and dates; for Mr. Browning had

seldom a new impression to receive, even from localities which he had

not seen before. I know that he and his sister were deeply struck by

the deserted grandeurs of Ravenna; and that it stirred in both of them

a memorable sensation to wander as they did for a whole day through the

pinewoods consecrated by Dante. I am nevertheless not sure that when

they performed the repeated round of picture-galleries and palaces, they

were not sometimes simply paying their debt to opportunity, and as much

for each other's sake as for their own. Where all was Italy, there

was little to gain or lose in one memorial of greatness, one object

of beauty, visited or left unseen. But in Asolo, even in Venice, Mr.

Browning was seeking something more: the remembrance of his own actual

and poetic youth. How far he found it in the former place we may infer

from a letter to Mrs. Fitz-Gerald.

Sept. 28, 1878.

And from 'Asolo', at last, dear friend! So can dreams come \_false\_.--S.,

who has been writing at the opposite side of the table, has told you

about our journey and adventures, such as they were: but she cannot

tell you the feelings with which I revisit this--to me--memorable place

after above forty years' absence,--such things have begun and ended with

me in the interval! It was \_too\_ strange when we reached the ruined tower

on the hill-top yesterday, and I said 'Let me try if the echo still

exists which I discovered here,' (you can produce it from only \_one\_

particular spot on a remainder of brickwork--) and thereupon it answered

me plainly as ever, after all the silence: for some children from the

adjoining 'podere', happening to be outside, heard my voice and its

result--and began trying to perform the feat--calling 'Yes, yes'--all in

vain: so, perhaps, the mighty secret will die with me! We shall probably

stay here a day or two longer,--the air is so pure, the country so

attractive: but we must go soon to Venice, stay our allotted time there,

and then go homeward: you will of course address letters to Venice, not

this place: it is a pleasure I promise myself that, on arriving I shall

certainly hear you speak in a letter which I count upon finding.

The old inn here, to which I would fain have betaken myself, is

gone--levelled to the ground: I remember it was much damaged by a recent

earthquake, and the cracks and chasms may have threatened a downfall.

This Stella d'Oro is, however, much such an unperverted 'locanda' as its

predecessor--primitive indeed are the arrangements and unsophisticate

the ways: but there is cleanliness, abundance of goodwill, and the sweet

Italian smile at every mistake: we get on excellently. To be sure never

was such a perfect fellow-traveller, for my purposes, as S., so that

I have no subject of concern--if things suit me they suit her--and

vice-versa. I daresay she will have told you how we trudged together,

this morning to Possagno--through a lovely country: how we saw all the

wonders--and a wonder of detestability is the paint-performance of the

great man!--and how, on our return, we found the little town enjoying

high market day, and its privilege of roaring and screaming over a

bargain. It confuses me altogether,--but at Venice I may write more

comfortably. You will till then, Dear Friend, remember me ever as yours

affectionately, Robert Browning.

If the tone of this does not express disappointment, it has none of the

rapture which his last visit was to inspire. The charm which forty years

of remembrance had cast around the little city on the hill was dispelled

for, at all events, the time being. The hot weather and dust-covered

landscape, with the more than primitive accommodation of which he spoke

in a letter to another friend, may have contributed something to this

result.

At Venice the travellers fared better in some essential respects.

A London acquaintance, who passed them on their way to Italy, had

recommended a cool and quiet hotel there, the Albergo dell' Universo.

The house, Palazzo Brandolin-Rota, was situated on the shady side of

the Grand Canal, just below the Accademia and the Suspension Bridge. The

open stretches of the Giudecca lay not far behind; and a scrap of garden

and a clean and open little street made pleasant the approach from back

and side. It accommodated few persons in proportion to its size, and

fewer still took up their abode there; for it was managed by a lady of

good birth and fallen fortunes whose home and patrimony it had been; and

her husband, a retired Austrian officer, and two grown-up daughters

did not lighten her task. Every year the fortunes sank lower; the upper

storey of the house was already falling into decay, and the fine old

furniture passing into the brokers' or private buyers' hands. It still,

however, afforded sufficiently comfortable, and, by reason of its very

drawbacks, desirable quarters to Mr. Browning. It perhaps turned the

scale in favour of his return to Venice; for the lady whose hospitality

he was to enjoy there was as yet unknown to him; and nothing would have

induced him to enter, with his eyes open, one of the English-haunted

hotels, in which acquaintance, old and new, would daily greet him in the

public rooms or jostle him in the corridors.

He and his sister remained at the Universo for a fortnight; their

programme did not this year include a longer stay; but it gave them time

to decide that no place could better suit them for an autumn holiday

than Venice, or better lend itself to a preparatory sojourn among the

Alps; and the plan of their next, and, though they did not know it, many

a following summer, was thus sketched out before the homeward journey

had begun.

Mr. Browning did not forget his work, even while resting from it; if

indeed he did rest entirely on this occasion. He consulted a Russian

lady whom he met at the hotel, on the names he was introducing in

'Ivan Ivanovitch'. It would be interesting to know what suggestions or

corrections she made, and how far they adapted themselves to the rhythm

already established, or compelled changes in it; but the one alternative

would as little have troubled him as the other. Mrs. Browning told Mr.

Prinsep that her husband could never alter the wording of a poem without

rewriting it, indeed, practically converting it into another; though he

more than once tried to do so at her instigation. But to the end of his

life he could at any moment recast a line or passage for the sake of

greater correctness, and leave all that was essential in it untouched.

Seven times more in the eleven years which remained to him, Mr. Browning

spent the autumn in Venice. Once also, in 1882, he had proceeded towards

it as far as Verona, when the floods which marked the autumn of that

year arrested his farther course. Each time he had halted first in some

more or less elevated spot, generally suggested by his French friend,

Monsieur Dourlans, himself an inveterate wanderer, whose inclinations

also tempted him off the beaten track. The places he most enjoyed were

Saint-Pierre la Chartreuse, and Gressoney Saint-Jean, where he stayed

respectively in 1881 and 1882, 1883 and 1885. Both of these had the

drawbacks, and what might easily have been the dangers, of remoteness

from the civilized world. But this weighed with him so little, that he

remained there in each case till the weather had broken, though there

was no sheltered conveyance in which he and his sister could travel

down; and on the later occasions at least, circumstances might easily

have combined to prevent their departure for an indefinite time. He

became, indeed, so attached to Gressoney, with its beautiful outlook

upon Monte Rosa, that nothing I believe would have hindered his

returning, or at least contemplating a return to it, but the great

fatigue to his sister of the mule ride up the mountain, by a path which

made walking, wherever possible, the easier course. They did walk \_down\_

it in the early October of 1885, and completed the hard seven hours'

trudge to San Martino d'Aosta, without an atom of refreshment or a

minute's rest.

One of the great attractions of Saint-Pierre was the vicinity of the

Grande Chartreuse, to which Mr. Browning made frequent expeditions,

staying there through the night in order to hear the midnight mass. Miss

Browning also once attempted the visit, but was not allowed to enter the

monastery. She slept in the adjoining convent.

The brother and sister were again at the Universo in 1879, 1880, and

1881; but the crash was rapidly approaching, and soon afterwards it

came. The old Palazzo passed into other hands, and after a short period

of private ownership was consigned to the purposes of an Art Gallery.

In 1880, however, they had been introduced by Mrs. Story to an American

resident, Mrs. Arthur Bronson, and entered into most friendly

relations with her; and when, after a year's interval, they were again

contemplating an autumn in Venice, she placed at their disposal a suite

of rooms in the Palazzo Giustiniani Recanati, which formed a supplement

to her own house--making the offer with a kindly urgency which forbade

all thought of declining it. They inhabited these for a second time in

1885, keeping house for themselves in the simple but comfortable foreign

manner they both so well enjoyed, only dining and spending the evening

with their friend. But when, in 1888, they were going, as they thought,

to repeat the arrangement, they found, to their surprise, a little

apartment prepared for them under Mrs. Bronson's own roof. This act

of hospitality involved a special kindness on her part, of which Mr.

Browning only became aware at the close of a prolonged stay; and a sense

of increased gratitude added itself to the affectionate regard with

which his hostess had already inspired both his sister and him. So

far as he is concerned, the fact need only be indicated. It is fully

expressed in the preface to 'Asolando'.

During the first and fresher period of Mr. Browning's visits to Venice,

he found a passing attraction in its society. It held an historical

element which harmonized well with the decayed magnificence of the city,

its old-world repose, and the comparatively simple modes of intercourse

still prevailing there. Mrs. Bronson's 'salon' was hospitably open

whenever her health allowed; but her natural refinement, and the

conservatism which so strongly marks the higher class of Americans,

preserved it from the heterogeneous character which Anglo-foreign

sociability so often assumes. Very interesting, even important names

lent their prestige to her circle; and those of Don Carlos and his

family, of Prince and Princess Iturbide, of Prince and Princess

Metternich, and of Princess Montenegro, were on the list of her

'habitues', and, in the case of the royal Spaniards, of her friends. It

need hardly be said that the great English poet, with his fast spreading

reputation and his infinite social charm, was kindly welcomed and warmly

appreciated amongst them.

English and American acquaintances also congregated in Venice, or passed

through it from London, Florence, and Rome. Those resident in Italy

could make their visits coincide with those of Mr. Browning and his

sister, or undertake the journey for the sake of seeing them; while the

outward conditions of life were such as to render friendly intercourse

more satisfactory, and common social civilities less irksome than they

could be at home. Mr. Browning was, however, already too advanced in

years, too familiar with everything which the world can give, to be long

affected by the novelty of these experiences. It was inevitable that

the need of rest, though often for the moment forgotten, should assert

itself more and more. He gradually declined on the society of a small

number of resident or semi-resident friends; and, due exception being

made for the hospitalities of his temporary home, became indebted to the

kindness of Sir Henry and Lady Layard, of Mr. and Mrs. Curtis of Palazzo

Barbaro, and of Mr. and Mrs. Frederic Eden, for most of the social

pleasure and comfort of his later residences in Venice.

Part of a letter to Mrs. Fitz-Gerald gives an insight into the character

of his life there: all the stronger that it was written under a

temporary depression which it partly serves to explain.

Albergo dell' Universo, Venezia, Italia: Sept. 24, '81.

'Dear Friend,--On arriving here I found your letter to my great

satisfaction--and yesterday brought the 'Saturday Review'--for which,

many thanks.

'We left our strange but lovely place on the 18th, reaching Chambery at

evening,--stayed the next day there,--walking, among other diversions

to "Les Charmettes", the famous abode of Rousseau--kept much as when he

left it: I visited it with my wife perhaps twenty-five years ago, and

played so much of "Rousseau's Dream" as could be effected on his antique

harpsichord: this time I attempted the same feat, but only two notes or

thereabouts out of the octave would answer the touch. Next morning we

proceeded to Turin, and on Wednesday got here, in the middle of the

last night of the Congress Carnival--rowing up the Canal to our Albergo

through a dazzling blaze of lights and throng of boats,--there being, if

we are told truly, 50,000 strangers in the city. Rooms had been

secured for us, however: and the festivities are at an end, to my great

joy,--for Venice is resuming its old quiet aspect--the only one I value

at all. Our American friends wanted to take us in their gondola to see

the principal illuminations \_after\_ the "Serenade", which was not

over before midnight--but I was contented with \_that\_--being tired and

indisposed for talking, and, having seen and heard quite enough from

our own balcony, went to bed: S. having betaken her to her own room long

before.

'Next day we took stock of our acquaintances,--found that the Storys,

on whom we had counted for company, were at Vallombrosa, though the

two sons have a studio here--other friends are in sufficient number

however--and last evening we began our visits by a very classical

one--to the Countess Mocenigo, in her palace which Byron occupied: she

is a charming widow since two years,--young, pretty and of the prettiest

manners: she showed us all the rooms Byron had lived in,--and I wrote

my name in her album \_on\_ the desk himself wrote the last canto of 'Ch.

Harold' and 'Beppo' upon. There was a small party: we were taken

and introduced by the Layards who are kind as ever, and I met old

friends--Lord Aberdare, Charles Bowen, and others. While I write comes

a deliciously fresh 'bouquet' from Mrs. Bronson, an American lady,--in

short we shall find a week or two amusing enough; though--where are the

pinewoods, mountains and torrents, and wonderful air? Venice is under

a cloud,--dull and threatening,--though we were apprehensive of heat,

arriving, as we did, ten days earlier than last year. . . .'

The evening's programme was occasionally varied by a visit to one of

the theatres. The plays given were chiefly in the Venetian dialect, and

needed previous study for their enjoyment; but Mr. Browning assisted at

one musical performance which strongly appealed to his historical and

artistic sensibilities: that of the 'Barbiere' of Paisiello in the

Rossini theatre and in the presence of Wagner, which took place in the

autumn of 1880.

Although the manner of his sojourn in the Italian city placed all the

resources of resident life at his command, Mr. Browning never abjured

the active habits of the English traveller. He daily walked with his

sister, as he did in the mountains, for walking's sake, as well as for

the delight of what his expeditions showed him; and the facilities which

they supplied for this healthful pleasurable exercise were to his mind

one of the great merits of his autumn residences in Italy. He explored

Venice in all directions, and learned to know its many points of beauty

and interest, as those cannot who believe it is only to be seen from

a gondola; and when he had visited its every corner, he fell back on

a favourite stroll along the Riva to the public garden and back again;

never failing to leave the house at about the same hour of the day.

Later still, when a friend's gondola was always at hand, and air and

sunshine were the one thing needful, he would be carried to the Lido,

and take a long stretch on its farther shore.

The letter to Mrs. Fitz-Gerald, from which I have already quoted,

concludes with the account of a tragic occurrence which took place at

Saint-Pierre just before his departure, and in which Mr. Browning's

intuitions had played a striking part.

'And what do you think befell us in this abode of peace and innocence?

Our journey was delayed for three hours in consequence of the one mule

of the village being requisitioned by the 'Juge d'Instruction' from

Grenoble, come to enquire into a murder committed two days before.

My sister and I used once a day to walk for a couple of hours up a

mountain-road of the most lovely description, and stop at the

summit whence we looked down upon the minute hamlet of St.-Pierre

d'Entremont,--even more secluded than our own: then we got back to our

own aforesaid. And in this Paradisial place, they found, yesterday week,

a murdered man--frightfully mutilated--who had been caught apparently in

the act of stealing potatoes in a field: such a crime had never occurred

in the memory of the oldest of our folk. Who was the murderer is the

mystery--whether the field's owner--in his irritation at discovering

the robber,--or one of a band of similar 'charbonniers' (for they

suppose the man to be a Piedmontese of that occupation) remains to

be proved: they began by imprisoning the owner, who denies his guilt

energetically. Now the odd thing is, that, either the day of, or after

the murder,--as I and S. were looking at the utter solitude, I had the

fancy "What should I do if I suddenly came upon a dead body in this

field? Go and proclaim it--and subject myself to all the vexations

inflicted by the French way of procedure (which begins by assuming

that you may be the criminal)--or neglect an obvious duty, and return

silently." I, of course, saw that the former was the only proper course,

whatever the annoyance involved. And, all the while, there was just

about to be the very same incident for the trouble of somebody.'

Here the account breaks off; but writing again from the same place,

August 16, 1882, he takes up the suspended narrative with this question:

'Did I tell you of what happened to me on the last day of my stay here

last year?' And after repeating the main facts continues as follows:

'This morning, in the course of my walk, I entered into conversation

with two persons of whom I made enquiry myself. They said the accused

man, a simple person, had been locked up in a high chamber,--protesting

his innocence strongly,--and troubled in his mind by the affair

altogether and the turn it was taking, had profited by the gendarme's

negligence, and thrown himself out of the window--and so died,

continuing to the last to protest as before. My presentiment of what

such a person might have to undergo was justified you see--though

I should not in any case have taken \_that\_ way of getting out of the

difficulty. The man added, "it was not he who committed the murder, but

the companions of the man, an Italian charcoal-burner, who owed him a

grudge, killed him, and dragged him to the field--filling his sack with

potatoes as if stolen, to give a likelihood that the field's owner had

caught him stealing and killed him,--so M. Perrier the greffier told

me." Enough of this grim story.

. . . . .

'My sister was anxious to know exactly where the body was found: "Vouz

savez la croix au sommet de la colline? A cette distance de cela!" That

is precisely where I was standing when the thought came over me.'

A passage in a subsequent letter of September 3 clearly refers to

some comment of Mrs. Fitz-Gerald's on the peculiar nature of this

presentiment:

'No--I attribute no sort of supernaturalism to my fancy about the thing

that was really about to take place. By a law of the association of

ideas--\_contraries\_ come into the mind as often as \_similarities\_--and the

peace and solitude readily called up the notion of what would most jar

with them. I have often thought of the trouble that might have befallen

me if poor Miss Smith's death had happened the night before, when we

were on the mountain alone together--or next morning when we were on the

proposed excursion--only \_then\_ we should have had companions.'

The letter then passes to other subjects.

'This is the fifth magnificent day--like magnificence, unfit for turning

to much account--for we cannot walk till sunset. I had two hours' walk,

or nearly, before breakfast, however: It is the loveliest country I ever

had experience of, and we shall prolong our stay perhaps--apart from

the concern for poor Cholmondeley and his friends, I should be glad

to apprehend no long journey--besides the annoyance of having to pass

Florence and Rome unvisited, for S.'s sake, I mean: even Naples would

have been with its wonderful environs a tantalizing impracticability.

'Your "Academy" came and was welcomed. The newspaper is like an electric

eel, as one touches it and expects a shock. I am very anxious about the

Archbishop who has always been strangely kind to me.'

He and his sister had accepted an invitation to spend the month of

October with Mr. Cholmondeley at his villa in Ischia; but the party

assembled there was broken up by the death of one of Mr. Cholmondeley's

guests, a young lady who had imprudently attempted the ascent of

a dangerous mountain without a guide, and who lost her life in the

experiment.

A short extract from a letter to Mrs. Charles Skirrow will show that

even in this complete seclusion Mr. Browning's patriotism did not go to

sleep. There had been already sufficient evidence that his friendship

did not; but it was not in the nature of his mental activities that they

should be largely absorbed by politics, though he followed the course of

his country's history as a necessary part of his own life. It needed

a crisis like that of our Egyptian campaign, or the subsequent Irish

struggle, to arouse him to a full emotional participation in current

events. How deeply he could be thus aroused remained yet to be seen.

'If the George Smiths are still with you, give them my love, and tell

them we shall expect to see them at Venice,--which was not so likely

to be the case when we were bound for Ischia. As for Lady Wolseley--one

dares not pretend to vie with her in anxiety just now; but my own pulses

beat pretty strongly when I open the day's newspaper--which, by some new

arrangement, reaches us, oftener than not, on the day after publication.

Where is your Bertie? I had an impassioned letter, a fortnight ago,

from a nephew of mine, who is in the second division [battalion?] of

the Black Watch; he was ordered to Edinburgh, and the regiment not

dispatched, after all,--it having just returned from India; the poor

fellow wrote in his despair "to know if I could do anything!" He may be

wanted yet: though nothing seems wanted in Egypt, so capital appears to

be the management.'

In 1879 Mr. Browning published the first series of his 'Dramatic Idyls';

and their appearance sent a thrill of surprised admiration through

the public mind. In 'La Saisiaz' and the accompanying poems he had

accomplished what was virtually a life's work. For he was approaching

the appointed limit of man's existence; and the poetic, which had been

nourished in him by the natural life--which had once outstripped its

developments, but on the whole remained subject to them--had therefore,

also, passed through the successive phases of individual growth. He had

been inspired as dramatic poet by the one avowed conviction that little

else is worth study but the history of a soul; and outward act or

circumstance had only entered into his creations as condition or

incident of the given psychological state. His dramatic imagination

had first, however unconsciously, sought its materials in himself; then

gradually been projected into the world of men and women, which his

widening knowledge laid open to him; it is scarcely necessary to say

that its power was only fully revealed when it left the remote regions

of poetical and metaphysical self-consciousness, to invoke the not less

mysterious and far more searching utterance of the general human heart.

It was a matter of course that in this expression of his dramatic

genius, the intellectual and emotional should exhibit the varying

relations which are developed by the natural life: that feeling should

begin by doing the work of thought, as in 'Saul', and thought end by

doing the work of feeling, as in 'Fifine at the Fair'; and that the two

should alternate or combine in proportioned intensity in such works of

an intermediate period as 'Cleon', 'A Death in the Desert', the 'Epistle

of Karshish', and 'James Lee's Wife'; the sophistical ingenuities of

'Bishop Blougram', and 'Sludge'; and the sad, appealing tenderness of

'Andrea del Sarto' and 'The Worst of It'.

It was also almost inevitable that so vigorous a genius should sometimes

falsify calculations based on the normal life. The long-continued

force and freshness of Mr. Browning's general faculties was in itself

a protest against them. We saw without surprise that during the decade

which produced 'Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau', 'Fifine at the Fair', and

'Red Cotton Nightcap Country', he could give us 'The Inn Album', with

its expression of the higher sexual love unsurpassed, rarely equalled,

in the whole range of his work: or those two unique creations of airy

fancy and passionate symbolic romance, 'Saint Martin's Summer', and

'Numpholeptos'. It was no ground for astonishment that the creative

power in him should even ignore the usual period of decline, and defy,

so far as is humanly possible, its natural laws of modification. But in

the 'Dramatic Idyls' he did more than proceed with unflagging powers on

a long-trodden, distinctive course; he took a new departure.

Mr. Browning did not forsake the drama of motive when he imagined and

worked out his new group of poems; he presented it in a no less

subtle and complex form. But he gave it the added force of picturesque

realization; and this by means of incidents both powerful in themselves,

and especially suited for its development. It was only in proportion to

this higher suggestiveness that a startling situation ever seemed to

him fit subject for poetry. Where its interest and excitement exhausted

themselves in the external facts, it became, he thought, the property

of the chronicler, but supplied no material for the poet; and he often

declined matter which had been offered him for dramatic treatment

because it belonged to the more sensational category.

It is part of the vital quality of the 'Dramatic Idyls' that, in them,

the act and the motive are not yet finally identified with each other.

We see the act still palpitating with the motive; the motive dimly

striving to recognize or disclaim itself in the act. It is in this that

the psychological poet stands more than ever strongly revealed. Such at

least is the case in 'Martin Relph', and the idealized Russian legend,

'Ivan Ivanovitch'. The grotesque tragedy of 'Ned Bratts' has also its

marked psychological aspects, but they are of a simpler and broader

kind.

The new inspiration slowly subsided through the second series of

'Idyls', 1880, and 'Jocoseria', 1883. In 'Ferishtah's Fancies', 1884,

Mr. Browning returned to his original manner, though carrying into it

something of the renewed vigour which had marked the intervening change.

The lyrics which alternate with its parables include some of the most

tender, most impassioned, and most musical of his love-poems.

The moral and religious opinions conveyed in this later volume may be

accepted without reserve as Mr. Browning's own, if we subtract from them

the exaggerations of the figurative and dramatic form. It is indeed

easy to recognize in them the under currents of his whole real and

imaginative life. They have also on one or two points an intrinsic value

which will justify a later allusion.

Chapter 19

1881-1887

The Browning Society; Mr. Furnivall; Miss E. H. Hickey--His Attitude

towards the Society; Letter to Mrs. Fitz-Gerald--Mr. Thaxter, Mrs. Celia

Thaxter--Letter to Miss Hickey; 'Strafford'--Shakspere and Wordsworth

Societies--Letters to Professor Knight--Appreciation in Italy;

Professor Nencioni--The Goldoni Sonnet--Mr. Barrett Browning;

Palazzo Manzoni--Letters to Mrs. Charles Skirrow--Mrs. Bloomfield

Moore--Llangollen; Sir Theodore and Lady Martin--Loss of old

Friends--Foreign Correspondent of the Royal Academy--'Parleyings with

certain People of Importance in their Day'.

This Indian summer of Mr. Browning's genius coincided with the highest

manifestation of public interest, which he, or with one exception, any

living writer, had probably yet received: the establishment of a Society

bearing his name, and devoted to the study of his poetry. The idea arose

almost simultaneously in the mind of Dr., then Mr. Furnivall, and of

Miss E. H. Hickey. One day, in the July of 1881, as they were on their

way to Warwick Crescent to pay an appointed visit there, Miss Hickey

strongly expressed her opinion of the power and breadth of Mr.

Browning's work; and concluded by saying that much as she loved

Shakespeare, she found in certain aspects of Browning what even

Shakespeare could not give her. Mr. Furnivall replied to this by asking

what she would say to helping him to found a Browning Society; and it

then appeared that Miss Hickey had recently written to him a letter,

suggesting that he should found one; but that it had miscarried, or, as

she was disposed to think, not been posted. Being thus, at all events,

agreed as to the fitness of the undertaking, they immediately spoke of

it to Mr. Browning, who at first treated the project as a joke; but did

not oppose it when once he understood it to be serious. His only proviso

was that he should remain neutral in respect to its fulfilment. He

refused even to give Mr. Furnivall the name or address of any friends,

whose interest in himself or his work might render their co-operation

probable.

This passive assent sufficed. A printed prospectus was now issued. About

two hundred members were soon secured. A committee was elected, of which

Mr. J. T. Nettleship, already well known as a Browning student, was

one of the most conspicuous members; and by the end of October a small

Society had come into existence, which held its inaugural meeting in

the Botanic Theatre of University College. Mr. Furnivall, its principal

founder, and responsible organizer, was Chairman of the Committee, and

Miss E. H. Hickey, the co-founder, was Honorary Secretary. When, two or

three years afterwards, illness compelled her to resign this position,

it was assumed by Mr. J. Dykes Campbell.

Although nothing could be more unpretending than the action of this

Browning Society, or in the main more genuine than its motive, it did

not begin life without encountering ridicule and mistrust. The formation

of a Ruskin Society in the previous year had already established a

precedent for allowing a still living worker to enjoy the fruits of his

work, or, as some one termed it, for making a man a classic during his

lifetime. But this fact was not yet generally known; and meanwhile a

curious contradiction developed itself in the public mind. The outer

world of Mr. Browning's acquaintance continued to condemn the too great

honour which was being done to him; from those of the inner circle he

constantly received condolences on being made the subject of proceedings

which, according to them, he must somehow regard as an offence.

This was the last view of the case which he was prepared to take. At

the beginning, as at the end, he felt honoured by the intentions of the

Society. He probably, it is true, had occasional misgivings as to its

future. He could not be sure that its action would always be judicious,

still less that it would be always successful. He was prepared for its

being laughed at, and for himself being included in the laughter.

He consented to its establishment for what seemed to him the one

unanswerable reason, that he had, even on the ground of taste, no just

cause for forbidding it. No line, he considered, could be drawn between

the kind of publicity which every writer seeks, which, for good or

evil, he had already obtained, and that which the Browning Society was

conferring on him. His works would still, as before, be read, analyzed,

and discussed 'viva voce' and in print. That these proceedings would

now take place in other localities than drawing-rooms or clubs, through

other organs than newspapers or magazines, by other and larger groups

of persons than those usually gathered round a dinner-or a tea-table,

involved no real change in the situation. In any case, he had made

himself public property; and those who thus organized their study of him

were exercising an individual right. If his own rights had been assailed

he would have guarded them also; but the circumstances of the case

precluded such a contingency. And he had his reward. How he felt towards

the Society at the close of its first session is better indicated in the

following letter to Mrs. Fitz-Gerald than in the note to Mr. Yates which

Mr. Sharp has published, and which was written with more reserve and, I

believe, at a rather earlier date. Even the shade of condescension which

lingers about his words will have been effaced by subsequent experience;

and many letters written to Dr. Furnivall must, since then, have

attested his grateful and affectionate appreciation of kindness intended

and service done to him.

. . . They always treat me gently in 'Punch'--why don't you do the

same by the Browning Society? I see you emphasize Miss Hickey's

acknowledgement of defects in time and want of rehearsal: but I look

for no great perfection in a number of kindly disposed strangers to

me personally, who try to interest people in my poems by singing and

reading them. They give their time for nothing, offer their little

entertainment for nothing, and certainly get next to nothing in the way

of thanks--unless from myself who feel grateful to the faces I shall

never see, the voices I shall never hear. The kindest notices I have

had, or at all events those that have given me most pleasure, have been

educed by this Society--A. Sidgwick's paper, that of Professor Corson,

Miss Lewis' article in this month's 'Macmillan'--and I feel grateful for

it all, for my part,--and none the less for a little amusement at the

wonder of some of my friends that I do not jump up and denounce the

practices which must annoy me so much. Oh! my 'gentle Shakespeare', how

well you felt and said--'never anything can be amiss when simpleness and

duty tender it.' So, dear Lady, here is my duty and simplicity tendering

itself to you, with all affection besides, and I being ever yours, R.

Browning.

That general disposition of the London world which left the ranks of the

little Society to be three-fourths recruited among persons, many living

at a distance, whom the poet did not know, became also in its way

a satisfaction. It was with him a matter of course, though never of

indifference, that his closer friends of both sexes were among its

members; it was one of real gratification that they included from

the beginning such men as Dean Boyle of Salisbury, the Rev. Llewellyn

Davies, George Meredith, and James Cotter Morison--that they enjoyed the

sympathy and co-operation of such a one as Archdeacon Farrar. But he had

an ingenuous pride in reading the large remainder of the Society's lists

of names, and pointing out the fact that there was not one among them

which he had ever heard. It was equivalent to saying, 'All these people

care for me as a poet. No social interest, no personal prepossession,

has attracted them to my work.' And when the unknown name was not only

appended to a list; when it formed the signature of a paper--excellent

or indifferent as might be--but in either case bearing witness to

a careful and unobtrusive study of his poems, by so much was the

gratification increased. He seldom weighed the intrinsic merit of such

productions; he did not read them critically. No man was ever more

adverse to the seeming ungraciousness of analyzing the quality of a

gift. In real life indeed this power of gratitude sometimes defeated its

own end, by neutralizing his insight into the motive or effort involved

in different acts of kindness, and placing them all successively on the

same plane.

In the present case, however, an ungraduated acceptance of the labour

bestowed on him was part of the neutral attitude which it was his

constant endeavour to maintain. He always refrained from noticing any

erroneous statement concerning himself or his works which might appear

in the Papers of the Society: since, as he alleged, if he once began to

correct, he would appear to endorse whatever he left uncorrected, and

thus make himself responsible, not only for any interpretation that

might be placed on his poems, but, what was far more serious, for

every eulogium that was bestowed upon them. He could not stand aloof as

entirely as he or even his friends desired, since it was usual with some

members of the Society to seek from him elucidations of obscure passages

which, without these, it was declared, would be a stumbling-block to

future readers. But he disliked being even to this extent drawn into

its operation; and his help was, I believe, less and less frequently

invoked. Nothing could be more false than the rumour which once arose

that he superintended those performances of his plays which took place

under the direction of the Society. Once only, and by the urgent desire

of some of the actors, did he witness a last rehearsal of one of them.

It was also a matter of course that men and women brought together by

a pre-existing interest in Mr. Browning's work should often ignore its

authorized explanations, and should read and discuss it in the light of

personal impressions more congenial to their own mind; and the various

and circumstantial views sometimes elicited by a given poem did not

serve to render it more intelligible. But the merit of true poetry lies

so largely in its suggestiveness, that even mistaken impressions of

it have their positive value and also their relative truth; and the

intellectual friction which was thus created, not only in the parent

society, but in its offshoots in England and America, was not their

least important result.

These Societies conferred, it need hardly be said, no less real benefits

on the public at large. They extended the sale of Mr. Browning's works,

and with it their distinct influence for intellectual and moral good.

They not only created in many minds an interest in these works, but

aroused the interest where it was latent, and gave it expression where

it had hitherto found no voice. One fault, alone, could be charged

against them; and this lay partly in the nature of all friendly

concerted action: they stirred a spirit of enthusiasm in which it

was not easy, under conditions equally genuine, to distinguish the

individual element from that which was due to contagion; while the

presence among us of the still living poet often infused into that

enthusiasm a vaguely emotional element, which otherwise detracted from

its intellectual worth. But in so far as this was a drawback to the

intended action of the Societies, it was one only in the most negative

sense; nor can we doubt, that, to a certain extent, Mr. Browning's best

influence was promoted by it. The hysterical sensibilities which, for

some years past, he had unconsciously but not unfrequently aroused in

the minds of women, and even of men, were a morbid development of that

influence, which its open and systematic extension tended rather to

diminish than to increase.

It is also a matter of history that Robert Browning had many deep and

constant admirers in England, and still more in America,\* long before

this organized interest had developed itself. Letters received from

often remote parts of the United States had been for many years a detail

of his daily experience; and even when they consisted of the request for

an autograph, an application to print selections from his works, or a

mere expression of schoolboy pertness or schoolgirl sentimentality, they

bore witness to his wide reputation in that country, and the high esteem

in which he was held there.\*\* The names of Levi and Celia Thaxter of

Boston had long, I believe, been conspicuous in the higher ranks of his

disciples, though they first occur in his correspondence at about

this date. I trust I may take for granted Mrs. Thaxter's permission to

publish a letter from her.

\* The cheapening of his works in America, induced by the

absence of international copyright, accounts of course in

some degree for their wider diffusion, and hence earlier

appreciation there.

\*\* One of the most curious proofs of this was the

Californian Railway time-table edition of his poems.

Newtonville, Massachusetts: March 14, 1880.

My dear Mr. Browning:

Your note reached me this morning, but it belonged to my husband, for it

was he who wrote to you; so I gave it to him, glad to put into his hands

so precious a piece of manuscript, for he has for you and all your work

an enthusiastic appreciation such as is seldom found on this planet: it

is not possible that the admiration of one mortal for another can exceed

his feeling for you. You might have written for him,

I've a friend over the sea,

. . . .

It all grew out of the books I write, &c.

You should see his fine wrath and scorn for the idiocy that doesn't at

once comprehend you!

He knows every word you have ever written; long ago 'Sordello' was

an open book to him from title-page to closing line, and \_all\_ you have

printed since has been as eagerly and studiously devoured. He reads you

aloud (and his reading is a fine art) to crowds of astonished people,

he swears by you, he thinks no one save Shakspere has a right to be

mentioned in the same century with you. You are the great enthusiasm of

his life.

Pardon me, you are smiling, I dare say. You hear any amount of such

things, doubtless. But a genuine living appreciation is always worth

having in this old world, it is like a strong fresh breeze from off the

brine, that puts a sense of life and power into a man. You cannot be the

worse for it. Yours very sincerely, Celia Thaxter.

When Mr. Thaxter died, in February 1885, his son wrote to Mr. Browning

to beg of him a few lines to be inscribed on his father's tombstone. The

little poem by which the request was answered has not yet, I believe,

been published.

'Written to be inscribed on the gravestone of Levi Thaxter.'

Thou, whom these eyes saw never,--say friends true Who say my soul,

helped onward by my song, Though all unwittingly, has helped thee too?

I gave but of the little that I knew: How were the gift requited, while

along Life's path I pace, could'st thou make weakness strong, Help me

with knowledge--for Life's old, Death's new! R. B. April 19, '85.

A publication which connected itself with the labours of the Society,

without being directly inspired by it, was the annotated 'Strafford'

prepared by Miss Hickey for the use of students. It may be agreeable to

those who use the little work to know the estimate in which Mr. Browning

held it. He wrote as follows:

19, Warwick Crescent, W.: February 15, 1884.

Dear Miss Hickey,--I have returned the Proofs by post,--nothing can be

better than your notes--and with a real wish to be of use, I read

them carefully that I might detect never so tiny a fault,--but I found

none--unless (to show you how minutely I searched,) it should be one

that by 'thriving in your contempt,' I meant simply 'while you despise

them, and for all that, they thrive and are powerful to do you harm.'

The idiom you prefer--quite an authorized one--comes to much the same

thing after all.

You must know how much I grieve at your illness--temporary as I will

trust it to be--I feel all your goodness to me--or whatever in my books

may be taken for me--well, I wish you knew how thoroughly I feel it--and

how truly I am and shall ever be Yours affectionately, Robert Browning.

From the time of the foundation of the New Shakspere Society, Mr.

Browning was its president. In 1880 he became a member of the Wordsworth

Society. Two interesting letters to Professor Knight, dated respectively

1880 and 1887, connect themselves with the working of the latter; and,

in spite of their distance in time, may therefore be given together.

The poem which formed the subject of the first was 'The Daisy';\* the

selection referred to in the second was that made in 1888 by Professor

Knight for the Wordsworth Society, with the co-operation of Mr. Browning

and other eminent literary men.

\* That beginning 'In youth from rock to rock, I went.'

19, Warwick Crescent, W.: July 9, '80.

My dear Sir,--You pay me a compliment in caring for my opinion--but,

such as it is, a very decided one it must be. On every account, your

method of giving the original text, and subjoining in a note the

variations, each with its proper date, is incontestably preferable

to any other. It would be so, if the variations were even

improvements--there would be pleasure as well as profit in seeing what

was good grow visibly better. But--to confine ourselves to the single

'proof' you have sent me--in every case the change is sadly for the

worse: I am quite troubled by such spoilings of passage after passage

as I should have chuckled at had I chanced upon them in some copy

pencil-marked with corrections by Jeffrey or Gifford: indeed, they are

nearly as wretched as the touchings-up of the 'Siege of Corinth' by the

latter. If ever diabolic agency was caught at tricks with 'apostolic'

achievement (see page 9)--and 'apostolic', with no 'profanity' at all, I

esteem these poems to be--surely you may bid it 'aroint' 'about and all

about' these desecrated stanzas--each of which, however, thanks to your

piety, we may hail, I trust, with a hearty

Thy long-lost praise thou shalt regain

Nor be less dear to future men

Than in old time!

Believe me, my dear Sir, Yours very sincerely, Robert Browning.

19, Warwick Crescent, W.: March 23, '87.

Dear Professor Knight,--I have seemed to neglect your commission

shamefully enough: but I confess to a sort of repugnance to classifying

the poems as even good and less good: because in my heart I fear I

should do it almost chronologically--so immeasureably superior seem to

me the 'first sprightly runnings'. Your selection would appear to be

excellent; and the partial admittance of the later work prevents one

from observing the too definitely distinguishing black line between

supremely good and--well, what is fairly tolerable--from Wordsworth,

always understand! I have marked a few of the early poems, not included

in your list--I could do no other when my conscience tells me that I

never can be tired of loving them: while, with the best will in the

world, I could never do more than try hard to like them.\*

\* By 'them' Mr. Browning clearly means the later poems, and

probably has omitted a few words which would have shown

this.

You see, I go wholly upon my individual likings and distastes: that

other considerations should have their weight with other people is

natural and inevitable. Ever truly yours, Robert Browning.

Many thanks for the volume just received--that with the correspondence.

I hope that you restore the swan simile so ruthlessly cut away from

'Dion'.

In 1884 he was again invited, and again declined, to stand for the

Lord Rectorship of the University of St. Andrews. In the same year he

received the LL.D. degree of the University of Edinburgh; and in the

following was made Honorary President of the Associated Societies of

that city.\* During the few days spent there on the occasion of his

investiture, he was the guest of Professor Masson, whose solicitous

kindness to him is still warmly remembered in the family.

\* This Association was instituted in 1833, and is a union of

literary and debating societies. It is at present composed

of five: the Dialectic, Scots Law, Diagnostic,

Philosophical, and Philomathic.

The interest in Mr. Browning as a poet is beginning to spread in

Germany. There is room for wonder that it should not have done so

before, though the affinities of his genius are rather with the older

than with the more modern German mind. It is much more remarkable that,

many years ago, his work had already a sympathetic exponent in Italy.

Signor Nencioni, Professor of Literature in Florence, had made his

acquaintance at Siena, and was possibly first attracted to him through

his wife, although I never heard that it was so. He was soon, however,

fascinated by Mr. Browning's poetry, and made it an object of serious

study; he largely quoted from, and wrote on it, in the Roman paper

'Fanfulla della Domenica', in 1881 and 1882; and published last winter

what is, I am told, an excellent article on the same subject, in the

'Nuova Antologia'. Two years ago he travelled from Rome to Venice

(accompanied by Signor Placci), for the purpose of seeing him. He is

fond of reciting passages from the works, and has even made attempts at

translation: though he understands them too well not to pronounce them,

what they are for every Latin language, untranslatable.

In 1883 Mr. Browning added another link to the 'golden' chain of verse

which united England and Italy. A statue of Goldoni was about to be

erected in Venice. The ceremonies of the occasion were to include the

appearance of a volume--or album--of appropriate poems; and Cavaliere

Molmenti, its intending editor, a leading member of the 'Erection

Committee', begged Mr. Browning to contribute to it. It was also desired

that he should be present at the unveiling.\* He was unable to grant

this request, but consented to write a poem. This sonnet to Goldoni also

deserves to be more widely known, both for itself and for the manner of

its production. Mr. Browning had forgotten, or not understood, how

soon the promise concerning it must be fulfilled, and it was actually

scribbled off while a messenger, sent by Signor Molmenti, waited for it.

\* It was, I think, during this visit to Venice that he

assisted at a no less interesting ceremony: the unveiling

of a commemorative tablet to Baldassaro Galuppi, in his

native island of Burano.

Goldoni,--good, gay, sunniest of souls,--Glassing half Venice in that

verse of thine,--What though it just reflect the shade and shine Of

common life, nor render, as it rolls Grandeur and gloom? Sufficient for

thy shoals Was Carnival: Parini's depths enshrine Secrets unsuited to

that opaline Surface of things which laughs along thy scrolls. There

throng the people: how they come and go Lisp the soft language, flaunt

the bright garb,--see,--On Piazza, Calle, under Portico And over Bridge!

Dear king of Comedy, Be honoured! Thou that didst love Venice so,

Venice, and we who love her, all love thee!

Venice, Nov. 27, 1883.

A complete bibliography would take account of three other sonnets,

'The Founder of the Feast', 1884, 'The Names', 1884, and 'Why I am a

Liberal', 1886, to which I shall have occasion to refer; but we

decline insensibly from these on to the less important or more

fugitive productions which such lists also include, and on which it is

unnecessary or undesirable that any stress should be laid.

In 1885 he was joined in Venice by his son. It was 'Penini's' first

return to the country of his birth, his first experience of the city

which he had only visited in his nurse's arms; and his delight in it was

so great that the plan shaped itself in his father's mind of buying a

house there, which should serve as 'pied-a-terre' for the family, but

more especially as a home for him. Neither the health nor the energies

of the younger Mr. Browning had ever withstood the influence of the

London climate; a foreign element was undoubtedly present in his

otherwise thoroughly English constitution. Everything now pointed to his

settling in Italy, and pursuing his artist life there, only interrupting

it by occasional visits to London and Paris. His father entered into

negotiations for the Palazzo Manzoni, next door to the former Hotel de

l'Univers; and the purchase was completed, so far as he was concerned,

before he returned to England. The fact is related, and his own position

towards it described in a letter to Mrs. Charles Skirrow, written from

Venice.

Palazzo Giustiniani Recanati, S. Moise: Nov. 15, '85.

My two dear friends will have supposed, with plenty of reason, that I

never got the kind letter some weeks ago. When it came, I was in the

middle of an affair, conducted by letters of quite another kind, with

people abroad: and as I fancied that every next day might bring me

news very interesting to me and likely to be worth telling to the dear

friends, I waited and waited--and only two days since did the matter

come to a satisfactory conclusion--so, as the Irish song has it, 'Open

your eyes and die with surprise' when I inform you that I have purchased

the Manzoni Palace here, on the Canal Grande, of its owner, Marchese

Montecucculi, an Austrian and an absentee--hence the delay of

communication. I did this purely for Pen--who became at once simply

infatuated with the city which won my whole heart long before he was

born or thought of. I secure him a perfect domicile, every facility for

his painting and sculpture, and a property fairly worth, even here and

now, double what I gave for it--such is the virtue in these parts of

ready money! I myself shall stick to London--which has been so eminently

good and gracious to me--so long as God permits; only, when the

inevitable outrage of Time gets the better of my body--(I shall not

believe in his reaching my soul and proper self)--there will be a

capital retreat provided: and meantime I shall be able to 'take mine

ease in mine own inn' whenever so minded. There, my dear friends! I

trust now to be able to leave very shortly; the main business cannot be

formally concluded before two months at least--through the absence of

the Marchese,--who left at once to return to his duties as commander

of an Austrian ship; but the necessary engagement to sell and buy at a

specified price is made in due legal form, and the papers will be sent

to me in London for signature. I hope to get away the week after next at

latest,--spite of the weather in England which to-day's letters report

as 'atrocious',--and ours, though variable, is in the main very

tolerable and sometimes perfect; for all that, I yearn to be at home in

poor Warwick Crescent, which must do its best to make me forget my new

abode. I forget you don't know Venice. Well then, the Palazzo Manzoni

is situate on the Grand Canal, and is described by Ruskin,--to give

no other authority,--as 'a perfect and very rich example of Byzantine

Renaissance: its warm yellow marbles are magnificent.' And again--'an

exquisite example (of Byzantine Renaissance) as applied to domestic

architecture.' So testify the 'Stones of Venice'. But we will talk about

the place, over a photograph, when I am happy enough to be with you

again.

Of Venetian gossip there is next to none. We had an admirable Venetian

Company,--using the dialect,--at the Goldoni Theatre. The acting

of Zago, in his various parts, and Zenon-Palladini, in her especial

character of a Venetian piece of volubility and impulsiveness in the

shape of a servant, were admirable indeed. The manager, Gallina, is a

playwright of much reputation, and gave us some dozen of his own pieces,

mostly good and clever. S. is very well,--much improved in health: we

walk sufficiently in this city where walking is accounted impossible by

those who never attempt it. Have I tired your good temper? No! you ever

wished me well, and I love you both with my whole heart. S.'s love goes

with mine--who am ever yours Robert Browning.

He never, however, owned the Manzoni Palace. The Austrian gentlemen\*

whose property it was, put forward, at the last moment, unexpected and

to his mind unreasonable claims; and he was preparing to contest

the position, when a timely warning induced him to withdraw from it

altogether. The warning proceeded from his son, who had remained on the

spot, and was now informed on competent authority that the foundations

of the house were insecure.

\* Two or three brothers.

In the early summer of 1884, and again in 1886, Miss Browning had a

serious illness; and though she recovered, in each case completely, and

in the first rapidly, it was considered desirable that she should not

travel so far as usual from home. She and her brother therefore accepted

for the August and September of 1884 the urgent invitation of an

American friend, Mrs. Bloomfield Moore, to stay with her at a villa

which she rented for some seasons at St. Moritz. Mr. Browning was

delighted with the Engadine, where the circumstances of his abode,

and the thoughtful kindness of his hostess, allowed him to enjoy the

benefits of comparative civilization together with almost perfect

repose. The weather that year was brilliant until the end of September,

if not beyond it; and his letters tell the old pleasant story of long

daily walks and a general sense of invigoration. One of these,

written to Mr. and Mrs. Skirrow, also contains some pungent remarks on

contemporary events, with an affectionate allusion to one of the chief

actors in them.

'Anyhow, I have the sincerest hope that Wolseley may get done as

soon, and kill as few people, as possible,--keeping himself safe and

sound--brave dear fellow--for the benefit of us all.'

He also speaks with great sympathy of the death of Mr. Charles Sartoris,

which had just taken place at St.-Moritz.

In 1886, Miss Browning was not allowed to leave England; and she and

Mr. Browning established themselves for the autumn at the Hand Hotel at

Llangollen, where their old friends, Sir Theodore and Lady Martin, would

be within easy reach. Mr. Browning missed the exhilarating effects of

the Alpine air; but he enjoyed the peaceful beauty of the Welsh valley,

and the quiet and comfort of the old-fashioned English inn. A new source

of interest also presented itself to him in some aspects of the life

of the English country gentleman. He was struck by the improvements

effected by its actual owner\* on a neighbouring estate, and by the

provisions contained in them for the comfort of both the men and the

animals under his care; and he afterwards made, in reference to them,

what was for a professing Liberal, a very striking remark: 'Talk of

abolishing that class of men! They are the salt of the earth!' Every

Sunday afternoon he and his sister drank tea--weather permitting--on

the lawn with their friends at Brintysilio; and he alludes gracefully

to these meetings in a letter written in the early summer of 1888, when

Lady Martin had urged him to return to Wales.

\* I believe a Captain Best.

The poet left another and more pathetic remembrance of himself in the

neighbourhood of Llangollen: his weekly presence at the afternoon Sunday

service in the parish church of Llantysilio. Churchgoing was, as I have

said, no part of his regular life. It was no part of his life in London.

But I do not think he ever failed in it at the Universities or in the

country. The assembling for prayer meant for him something deeper in

both the religious and the human sense, where ancient learning and piety

breathed through the consecrated edifice, or where only the figurative

'two or three' were 'gathered together' within it. A memorial tablet now

marks the spot at which on this occasion the sweet grave face and the

venerable head were so often seen. It has been placed by the direction

of Lady Martin on the adjoining wall.

It was in the September of this year that Mr. Browning heard of the

death of M. Joseph Milsand. This name represented for him one of the few

close friendships which were to remain until the end, unclouded in

fact and in remembrance; and although some weight may be given to those

circumstances of their lives which precluded all possibility of friction

and risk of disenchantment, I believe their rooted sympathy, and Mr.

Browning's unfailing powers of appreciation would, in all possible

cases, have maintained the bond intact. The event was at the last

sudden, but happily not quite unexpected.

Many other friends had passed by this time out of the poet's life--those

of a younger, as well as his own and an older generation. Miss Haworth

died in 1883. Charles Dickens, with whom he had remained on the most

cordial terms, had walked between him and his son at Thackeray's

funeral, to receive from him, only seven years later, the same pious

office. Lady Augusta Stanley, the daughter of his old friend, Lady

Elgin, was dead, and her husband, the Dean of Westminster. So also were

'Barry Cornwall' and John Forster, Alfred Domett, and Thomas Carlyle,

Mr. Cholmondeley and Lord Houghton; others still, both men and women,

whose love for him might entitle them to a place in his Biography, but

whom I could at most only mention by name.

For none of these can his feeling have been more constant or more

disinterested than that which bound him to Carlyle. He visited him

at Chelsea in the last weary days of his long life, as often as their

distance from each other and his own engagements allowed. Even the man's

posthumous self-disclosures scarcely availed to destroy the affectionate

reverence which he had always felt for him. He never ceased to defend

him against the charge of unkindness to his wife, or to believe that in

the matter of their domestic unhappiness she was the more responsible

of the two.\* Yet Carlyle had never rendered him that service, easy as it

appears, which one man of letters most justly values from another:

that of proclaiming the admiration which he privately expresses for his

works. The fact was incomprehensible to Mr. Browning--it was so foreign

to his own nature; and he commented on it with a touch, though merely a

touch, of bitterness, when repeating to a friend some almost extravagant

eulogium which in earlier days he had received from him tete-a-tete. 'If

only,' he said, 'those words had been ever repeated in public, what good

they might have done me!'

\* He always thought her a hard and unlovable woman, and I

believe little liking was lost between them. He told a

comical story of how he had once, unintentionally but rather

stupidly, annoyed her. She had asked him, as he was standing

by her tea-table, to put the kettle back on the fire. He

took it out of her hands, but, preoccupied by the

conversation he was carrying on, deposited it on the

hearthrug. It was some time before he could be made to see

that this was wrong; and he believed Mrs. Carlyle never

ceased to think that he had a mischievous motive for doing

it.

In the spring of 1886, he accepted the post of Foreign Correspondent to

the Royal Academy, rendered vacant by the death of Lord Houghton. He had

long been on very friendly terms with the leading Academicians, and a

constant guest at the Banquet; and his fitness for the office admitted

of no doubt. But his nomination by the President, and the manner in

which it was ratified by the Council and general body, gave him sincere

pleasure.

Early in 1887, the 'Parleyings' appeared. Their author is still the same

Robert Browning, though here and there visibly touched by the hand

of time. Passages of sweet or majestic music, or of exquisite fancy,

alternate with its long stretches of argumentative thought; and the

light of imagination still plays, however fitfully, over statements

of opinion to which constant repetition has given a suggestion of

commonplace. But the revision of the work caused him unusual trouble.

The subjects he had chosen strained his powers of exposition; and I

think he often tried to remedy by mere verbal correction, what was a

defect in the logical arrangement of his ideas. They would slide into

each other where a visible dividing line was required. The last stage of

his life was now at hand; and the vivid return of fancy to his

boyhood's literary loves was in pathetic, perhaps not quite accidental,

coincidence with the fact. It will be well to pause at this beginning

of his decline, and recall so far as possible the image of the man who

lived, and worked, and loved, and was loved among us, during that brief

old age, and the lengthened period of level strength which had preceded

it. The record already given of his life and work supplies the outline

of the picture; but a few more personal details are required for its

completion.

Chapter 20

Constancy to Habit--Optimism--Belief in Providence--Political

Opinions--His Friendships--Reverence for Genius--Attitude towards

his Public--Attitude towards his Work--Habits of Work--His

Reading--Conversational Powers--Impulsiveness and Reserve--Nervous

Peculiarities--His Benevolence--His Attitude towards Women.

When Mr. Browning wrote to Miss Haworth, in the July of 1861, he had

said: 'I shall still grow, I hope; but my root is taken, and remains.'

He was then alluding to a special offshoot of feeling and association,

on the permanence of which it is not now necessary to dwell; but it

is certain that he continued growing up to a late age, and that the

development was only limited by those general roots, those fixed

conditions of his being, which had predetermined its form. This

progressive intellectual vitality is amply represented in his works; it

also reveals itself in his letters in so far as I have been allowed to

publish them. I only refer to it to give emphasis to a contrasted or

corresponding characteristic: his aversion to every thought of change. I

have spoken of his constancy to all degrees of friendship and love. What

he loved once he loved always, from the dearest man or woman to whom his

allegiance had been given, to the humblest piece of furniture which had

served him. It was equally true that what he had done once he was wont,

for that very reason, to continue doing. The devotion to habits of

feeling extended to habits of life; and although the lower constancy

generally served the purposes of the higher, it also sometimes clashed

with them. It conspired with his ready kindness of heart to make him

subject to circumstances which at first appealed to him through that

kindness, but lay really beyond its scope. This statement, it is true,

can only fully apply to the latter part of his life. His powers of

reaction must originally have been stronger, as well as freer from the

paralysis of conflicting motive and interest. The marked shrinking from

effort in any untried direction, which was often another name for his

stability, could scarcely have coexisted with the fresher and more

curious interest in men and things; we know indeed from recorded facts

that it was a feeling of later growth; and it visibly increased with the

periodical nervous exhaustion of his advancing years. I am convinced,

nevertheless, that, when the restiveness of boyhood had passed away,

Mr. Browning's strength was always more passive than active; that he

habitually made the best of external conditions rather than tried to

change them. He was a 'fighter' only by the brain. And on this point,

though on this only, his work is misleading.

The acquiescent tendency arose in some degree from two equally prominent

characteristics of Mr. Browning's nature: his optimism, and his belief

in direct Providence; and these again represented a condition of

mind which was in certain respects a quality, but must in others be

recognized as a defect. It disposed him too much to make a virtue of

happiness. It tended also to the ignoring or denying of many incidental

possibilities, and many standing problems of human suffering. The first

part of this assertion is illustrated by 'The Two Poets of Croisic',

in which Mr. Browning declares that, other conditions being equal,

the greater poet will have been he who led the happier life, who most

completely--and we must take this in the human as well as religious

sense--triumphed over suffering. The second has its proof in the

contempt for poetic melancholy which flashes from the supposed utterance

of Shakespeare in 'At the Mermaid'; its negative justification in the

whole range of his work.

Such facts may be hard to reconcile with others already known of Mr.

Browning's nature, or already stated concerning it; but it is in the

depths of that nature that the solution of this, as of more than one

other anomaly, must be sought. It is true that remembered pain dwelt

longer with him than remembered pleasure. It is true that the last great

sorrow of his life was long felt and cherished by him as a religion, and

that it entered as such into the courage with which he first confronted

it. It is no less true that he directly and increasingly cultivated

happiness; and that because of certain sufferings which had been

connected with them, he would often have refused to live his happiest

days again.

It seems still harder to associate defective human sympathy with his

kind heart and large dramatic imagination, though that very imagination

was an important factor in the case. It forbade the collective and

mathematical estimate of human suffering, which is so much in favour

with modern philanthropy, and so untrue a measure for the individual

life; and he indirectly condemns it in 'Ferishtah's Fancies' in the

parable of 'Bean Stripes'. But his dominant individuality also barred

the recognition of any judgment or impression, any thought or feeling,

which did not justify itself from his own point of view. The barrier

would melt under the influence of a sympathetic mood, as it would

stiffen in the atmosphere of disagreement. It would yield, as did in his

case so many other things, to continued indirect pressure, whether from

his love of justice, the strength of his attachments, or his power

of imaginative absorption. But he was bound by the conditions of an

essentially creative nature. The subjectiveness, if I may for once use

that hackneyed word, had passed out of his work only to root itself more

strongly in his life. He was self-centred, as the creative nature must

inevitably be. He appeared, for this reason, more widely sympathetic in

his works than in his life, though even in the former certain grounds of

vicarious feeling remained untouched. The sympathy there displayed was

creative and obeyed its own law. That which was demanded from him by

reality was responsive, and implied submission to the law of other

minds.

Such intellectual egotism is unconnected with moral selfishness, though

it often unconsciously does its work. Were it otherwise, I should have

passed over in silence this aspect, comprehensive though it is, of Mr.

Browning's character. He was capable of the largest self-sacrifice and

of the smallest self-denial; and would exercise either whenever love

or duty clearly pointed the way. He would, he believed, cheerfully have

done so at the command, however arbitrary, of a Higher Power; he often

spoke of the absence of such injunction, whether to endurance or action,

as the great theoretical difficulty of life for those who, like himself,

rejected or questioned the dogmatic teachings of Christianity. This

does not mean that he ignored the traditional moralities which have so

largely taken their place. They coincided in great measure with his own

instincts; and few occasions could have arisen in which they would not

be to him a sufficient guide. I may add, though this is a digression,

that he never admitted the right of genius to defy them; when such a

right had once been claimed for it in his presence, he rejoined

quickly, 'That is an error! \_noblesse oblige\_.' But he had difficulty in

acknowledging any abstract law which did not derive from a Higher Power;

and this fact may have been at once cause and consequence of the special

conditions of his own mind. All human or conventional obligation appeals

finally to the individual judgment; and in his case this could easily be

obscured by the always militant imagination, in regard to any subject

in which his feelings were even indirectly concerned. No one saw

more justly than he, when the object of vision was general or remote.

Whatever entered his personal atmosphere encountered a refracting medium

in which objects were decomposed, and a succession of details, each held

as it were close to the eye, blocked out the larger view.

We have seen, on the other hand, that he accepted imperfect knowledge as

part of the discipline of experience. It detracted in no sense from his

conviction of direct relations with the Creator. This was indeed the

central fact of his theology, as the absolute individual existence had

been the central fact of his metaphysics; and when he described the

fatal leap in 'Red Cotton Nightcap Country' as a frantic appeal to the

Higher Powers for the 'sign' which the man's religion did not afford,

and his nature could not supply, a special dramatic sympathy was at

work within him. The third part of the epilogue to 'Dramatis Personae'

represented his own creed; though this was often accentuated in the

sense of a more personal privilege, and a perhaps less poetic mystery,

than the poem conveys. The Evangelical Christian and the subjective

idealist philosopher were curiously blended in his composition.

The transition seems violent from this old-world religion to any system

of politics applicable to the present day. They were, nevertheless,

closely allied in Mr. Browning's mind. His politics were, so far as they

went, the practical aspect of his religion. Their cardinal doctrine was

the liberty of individual growth; removal of every barrier of prejudice

or convention by which it might still be checked. He had been a Radical

in youth, and probably in early manhood; he remained, in the truest

sense of the word, a Liberal; and his position as such was defined in

the sonnet prefixed in 1886 to Mr. Andrew Reid's essay, 'Why I am a

Liberal', and bearing the same name. Its profession of faith did not,

however, necessarily bind him to any political party. It separated him

from all the newest developments of so-called Liberalism. He respected

the rights of property. He was a true patriot, hating to see his country

plunged into aggressive wars, but tenacious of her position among the

empires of the world. He was also a passionate Unionist; although the

question of our political relations with Ireland weighed less with him,

as it has done with so many others, than those considerations of law and

order, of honesty and humanity, which have been trampled under foot in

the name of Home Rule. It grieved and surprised him to find himself on

this subject at issue with so many valued friends; and no pain of Lost

Leadership was ever more angry or more intense, than that which came to

him through the defection of a great statesman whom he had honoured and

loved, from what he believed to be the right cause.

The character of Mr. Browning's friendships reveals itself in great

measure in even a simple outline of his life. His first friends of

his own sex were almost exclusively men of letters, by taste if not by

profession; the circumstances of his entrance into society made this a

matter of course. In later years he associated on cordial terms with

men of very various interests and professions; and only writers of

conspicuous merit, whether in prose or poetry, attracted him as such. No

intercourse was more congenial to him than that of the higher class of

English clergymen. He sympathized in their beliefs even when he did not

share them. Above all he loved their culture; and the love of culture in

general, of its old classic forms in particular, was as strong in him as

if it had been formed by all the natural and conventional associations

of a university career. He had hearty friends and appreciators among the

dignitaries of the Church--successive Archbishops and Bishops, Deans

of Westminster and St. Paul's. They all knew the value of the great

freelance who fought like the gods of old with the regular army. No

name, however, has been mentioned in the poet's family more frequently

or with more affection than that of the Rev. J. D. W. Williams, Vicar

of Bottisham in Cambridgeshire. The mutual acquaintance, which was made

through Mr. Browning's brother-in-law, Mr. George Moulton-Barrett,

was prepared by Mr. Williams' great love for his poems, of which he

translated many into Latin and Greek; but I am convinced that Mr.

Browning's delight in his friend's classical attainments was quite as

great as his gratification in the tribute he himself derived from them.

His love of genius was a worship: and in this we must include his whole

life. Nor was it, as this feeling so often is, exclusively exercised

upon the past. I do not suppose his more eminent contemporaries ever

quite knew how generous his enthusiasm for them had been, how free from

any under-current of envy, or impulse to avoidable criticism. He could

not endure even just censure of one whom he believed, or had believed

to be great. I have seen him wince under it, though no third person was

present, and heard him answer, 'Don't! don't!' as if physical pain were

being inflicted on him. In the early days he would make his friend, M.

de Monclar, draw for him from memory the likenesses of famous writers

whom he had known in Paris; the sketches thus made of George Sand and

Victor Hugo are still in the poet's family. A still more striking

and very touching incident refers to one of the winters, probably the

second, which he spent in Paris. He was one day walking with little Pen,

when Beranger came in sight, and he bade the child 'run up to' or 'run

past that gentleman, and put his hand for a moment upon him.' This was

a great man, he afterwards explained, and he wished his son to be able

by-and-by to say that if he had not known, he had at all events touched

him. Scientific genius ranked with him only second to the poetical.

Mr. Browning's delicate professional sympathies justified some

sensitiveness on his own account; but he was, I am convinced, as free

from this quality as a man with a poet-nature could possibly be. It may

seem hazardous to conjecture how serious criticism would have affected

him. Few men so much 'reviewed' have experienced so little. He was by

turns derided or ignored, enthusiastically praised, zealously analyzed

and interpreted: but the independent judgment which could embrace at

once the quality of his mind and its defects, is almost absent--has been

so at all events during later years--from the volumes which have been

written about him. I am convinced, nevertheless, that he would have

accepted serious, even adverse criticism, if it had borne the impress of

unbiassed thought and genuine sincerity. It could not be otherwise with

one in whom the power of reverence was so strongly marked.

He asked but one thing of his reviewers, as he asked but one thing of

his larger public. The first demand is indicated in a letter to Mrs.

Frank Hill, of January 31, 1884.

Dear Mrs. Hill,--Could you befriend me? The 'Century' prints a little

insignificance of mine--an impromptu sonnet--but prints it \_correctly\_.

The 'Pall Mall' pleases to extract it--and produces what I enclose:

one line left out, and a note of admiration (!) turned into an I, and

a superfluous 'the' stuck in--all these blunders with the correctly

printed text before it! So does the charge of unintelligibility attach

itself to your poor friend--who can kick nobody. Robert Browning.

The carelessness often shown in the most friendly quotation could hardly

be absent from that which was intended to support a hostile view; and

the only injustice of which he ever complained, was what he spoke of

as falsely condemning him out of his own mouth. He used to say: 'If a

critic declares that any poem of mine is unintelligible, the reader

may go to it and judge for himself; but, if it is made to appear

unintelligible by a passage extracted from it and distorted by

misprints, I have no redress.' He also failed to realize those

conditions of thought, and still more of expression, which made him

often on first reading difficult to understand; and as the younger

generation of his admirers often deny those difficulties where they

exist, as emphatically as their grandfathers proclaimed them where they

did not, public opinion gave him little help in the matter.

The second (unspoken) request was in some sense an antithesis to the

first. Mr. Browning desired to be read accurately but not literally. He

deprecated the constant habit of reading him into his work; whether in

search of the personal meaning of a given passage or poem, or in the

light of a foregone conclusion as to what that meaning must be. The

latter process was that generally preferred, because the individual mind

naturally seeks its own reflection in the poet's work, as it does in the

facts of nature. It was stimulated by the investigations of the Browning

Societies, and by the partial familiarity with his actual life which

constantly supplied tempting, if untrustworthy clues. It grew out of the

strong personal as well as literary interest which he inspired. But the

tendency to listen in his work for a single recurrent note always struck

him as analogous to the inspection of a picture gallery with eyes blind

to every colour but one; and the act of sympathy often involved in this

mode of judgment was neutralized for him by the limitation of his genius

which it presupposed. His general objection to being identified with

his works is set forth in 'At the Mermaid', and other poems of the same

volume, in which it takes the form of a rather captious protest against

inferring from the poet any habit or quality of the man; and where also,

under the impulse of the dramatic mood, he enforces the lesson by saying

more than he can possibly mean. His readers might object that his

human personality was so often plainly revealed in his poetic utterance

(whether or not that of Shakespeare was), and so often also avowed by

it, that the line which divided them became impossible to draw. But he

again would have rejoined that the Poet could never express himself with

any large freedom, unless a fiction of impersonality were granted to

him. He might also have alleged, he often did allege, that in his case

the fiction would hold a great deal of truth; since, except in

the rarest cases, the very fact of poetic, above all of dramatic

reproduction, detracts from the reality of the thought or feeling

reproduced. It introduces the alloy of fancy without which the fixed

outlines of even living experience cannot be welded into poetic form. He

claimed, in short, that in judging of his work, one should allow for the

action in it of the constructive imagination, in the exercise of which

all deeper poetry consists. The form of literalism, which showed itself

in seeking historical authority for every character or incident which he

employed by way of illustration, was especially irritating to him.

I may (as indeed I must) concede this much, without impugning either

the pleasure or the gratitude with which he recognized the increasing

interest in his poems, and, if sometimes exhibited in a mistaken form,

the growing appreciation of them.

There was another and more striking peculiarity in Mr. Browning's

attitude towards his works: his constant conviction that the latest must

be the best, because the outcome of the fullest mental experience, and

of the longest practice in his art. He was keenly alive to the necessary

failings of youthful literary production; he also practically denied to

it that quality which so often places it at an advantage over that, not

indeed of more mature manhood, but at all events of advancing age. There

was much in his own experience to blind him to the natural effects of

time; it had been a prolonged triumph over them. But the delusion, in so

far as it was one, lay deeper than the testimony of such experience, and

would I think have survived it. It was the essence of his belief that

the mind is superior to physical change; that it may be helped or

hindered by its temporary alliance with the body, but will none the less

outstrip it in their joint course; and as intellect was for him the life

of poetry, so was the power of poetry independent of bodily progress and

bodily decline. This conviction pervaded his life. He learned, though

happily very late, to feel age an impediment; he never accepted it as a

disqualification.

He finished his work very carefully. He had the better right to

resent any garbling of it, that this habitually took place through

his punctuation, which was always made with the fullest sense of its

significance to any but the baldest style, and of its special importance

to his own. I have heard him say: 'People accuse me of not taking pains!

I take nothing \_but\_ pains!' And there was indeed a curious contrast

between the irresponsible, often strangely unquestioned, impulse to

which the substance of each poem was due, and the conscientious labour

which he always devoted to its form. The laborious habit must have grown

upon him; it was natural that it should do so as thought gained the

ascendency over emotion in what he had to say. Mrs. Browning told Mr.

Val Prinsep that her husband 'worked at a great rate;' and this fact

probably connected itself with the difficulty he then found in altering

the form or wording of any particular phrase; he wrote most frequently

under that lyrical inspiration in which the idea and the form are least

separable from each other. We know, however, that in the later editions

of his old work he always corrected where he could; and if we notice

the changed lines in 'Paracelsus' or 'Sordello', as they appear in the

edition of 1863, or the slighter alterations indicated for the last

reprint of his works, we are struck by the care evinced in them for

greater smoothness of expression, as well as for greater accuracy and

force.

He produced less rapidly in later life, though he could throw off

impromptu verses, whether serious or comical, with the utmost ease.

His work was then of a kind which required more deliberation; and other

claims had multiplied upon his time and thoughts. He was glad to have

accomplished twenty or thirty lines in a morning. After lunch-time, for

many years, he avoided, when possible, even answering a note. But he

always counted a day lost on which he had not written something; and in

those last years on which we have yet to enter, he complained bitterly

of the quantity of ephemeral correspondence which kept him back from

his proper work. He once wrote, on the occasion of a short illness which

confined him to the house, 'All my power of imagination seems gone. I

might as well be in bed!' He repeatedly determined to write a poem every

day, and once succeeded for a fortnight in doing so. He was then in

Paris, preparing 'Men and Women'. 'Childe Roland' and 'Women and Roses'

were among those produced on this plan; the latter having been suggested

by some flowers sent to his wife. The lyrics in 'Ferishtah's Fancies'

were written, I believe, on consecutive days; and the intention renewed

itself with his last work, though it cannot have been maintained.

He was not as great a reader in later as in earlier years; he had

neither time nor available strength to be so if he had wished; and he

absorbed almost unconsciously every item which added itself to the

sum of general knowledge. Books had indeed served for him their most

important purpose when they had satisfied the first curiosities of his

genius, and enabled it to establish its independence. His mind was made

up on the chief subjects of contemporary thought, and what was novel or

controversial in its proceeding had no attraction for him. He would read

anything, short of an English novel, to a friend whose eyes required

this assistance; but such pleasure as he derived from the act was more

often sympathetic than spontaneous, even when he had not, as he often

had, selected for it a book which he already knew. In the course of his

last decade he devoted himself for a short time to the study of Spanish

and Hebrew. The Spanish dramatists yielded him a fund of new enjoyment;

and he delighted in his power of reading Hebrew in its most difficult

printed forms. He also tried, but with less result, to improve his

knowledge of German. His eyesight defied all obstacles of bad paper and

ancient type, and there was anxiety as well as pleasure to those about

him in his unfailing confidence in its powers. He never wore spectacles,

nor had the least consciousness of requiring them. He would read an

old closely printed volume by the waning light of a winter afternoon,

positively refusing to use a lamp. Indeed his preference of the faintest

natural light to the best that could be artificially produced was

perhaps the one suggestion of coming change. He used for all purposes

a single eye; for the two did not combine in their action, the right

serving exclusively for near, the left for distant objects. This was why

in walking he often closed the right eye; while it was indispensable

to his comfort in reading, not only that the light should come from

the right side, but that the left should be shielded from any luminous

object, like the fire, which even at the distance of half the length of

a room would strike on his field of vision and confuse the near sight.

His literary interest became increasingly centred on records of the

lives of men and women; especially of such men and women as he had

known; he was generally curious to see the newly published biographies,

though often disappointed by them. He would also read, even for his

amusement, good works of French or Italian fiction. His allegiance to

Balzac remained unshaken, though he was conscious of lengthiness when he

read him aloud. This author's deep and hence often poetic realism was,

I believe, bound up with his own earliest aspirations towards dramatic

art. His manner of reading aloud a story which he already knew was

the counterpart of his own method of construction. He would claim his

listener's attention for any apparently unimportant fact which had a

part to play in it: he would say: 'Listen to this description: it will

be important. Observe this character: you will see a great deal more of

him or her.' We know that in his own work nothing was thrown away; no

note was struck which did not add its vibration to the general utterance

of the poem; and his habitual generosity towards a fellow-worker

prompted him to seek and recognize the same quality, even in productions

where it was less conspicuous than in his own. The patient reading which

he required for himself was justified by that which he always demanded

for others; and he claimed it less in his own case for his possible

intricacies of thought or style, than for that compactness of living

structure in which every detail or group of details was essential to the

whole, and in a certain sense contained it. He read few things with so

much pleasure as an occasional chapter in the Old Testament.

Mr. Browning was a brilliant talker; he was admittedly more a talker

than a conversationalist. But this quality had nothing in common with

self-assertion or love of display. He had too much respect for the

acquirements of other men to wish to impose silence on those who

were competent to speak; and he had great pleasure in listening to a

discussion on any subject in which he was interested, and on which

he was not specially informed. He never willingly monopolized the

conversation; but when called upon to take a prominent part in it,

either with one person or with several, the flow of remembered knowledge

and revived mental experience, combined with the ingenuous eagerness to

vindicate some point in dispute would often carry him away; while his

hearers, nearly as often, allowed him to proceed from absence of any

desire to interrupt him. This great mental fertility had been prepared

by the wide reading and thorough assimilation of his early days; and it

was only at a later, and in certain respects less vigorous period, that

its full bearing could be seen. His memory for passing occurrences, even

such as had impressed him, became very weak; it was so before he had

grown really old; and he would urge this fact in deprecation of any want

of kindness or sympathy, which a given act of forgetfulness might seem

to involve. He had probably always, in matters touching his own life,

the memory of feelings more than that of facts. I think this has been

described as a peculiarity of the poet-nature; and though this memory

is probably the more tenacious of the two, it is no safe guide to the

recovery of facts, still less to that of their order and significance.

Yet up to the last weeks, even the last conscious days of his life,

his remembrance of historical incident, his aptness of literary

illustration, never failed him. His dinner-table anecdotes supplied,

of course, no measure for this spontaneous reproductive power; yet some

weight must be given to the number of years during which he could

abound in such stories, and attest their constant appropriateness by not

repeating them.

This brilliant mental quality had its drawback, on which I have already

touched in a rather different connection: the obstacle which it created

to even serious and private conversation on any subject on which he was

not neutral. Feeling, imagination, and the vividness of personal points

of view, constantly thwarted the attempt at a dispassionate exchange of

ideas. But the balance often righted itself when the excitement of

the discussion was at an end; and it would even become apparent that

expressions or arguments which he had passed over unheeded, or as it

seemed unheard, had stored themselves in his mind and borne fruit there.

I think it is Mr. Sharp who has remarked that Mr. Browning combined

impulsiveness of manner with much real reserve. He was habitually

reticent where his deeper feelings were concerned; and the impulsiveness

and the reticence were both equally rooted in his poetic and human

temperament. The one meant the vital force of his emotions, the other

their sensibility. In a smaller or more prosaic nature they must have

modified each other. But the partial secretiveness had also occasionally

its conscious motives, some unselfish, and some self-regarding; and from

this point of view it stood in marked apparent antagonism to the more

expansive quality. He never, however, intentionally withheld from others

such things as it concerned them to know. His intellectual and religious

convictions were open to all who seriously sought them; and if, even

on such points, he did not appear communicative, it was because he took

more interest in any subject of conversation which did not directly

centre in himself.

Setting aside the delicacies which tend to self-concealment, and for

which he had been always more or less conspicuous; excepting also the

pride which would co-operate with them, all his inclinations were in

the direction of truth; there was no quality which he so much loved

and admired. He thought aloud wherever he could trust himself to do so.

Impulse predominated in all the active manifestations of his nature. The

fiery child and the impatient boy had left their traces in the man; and

with them the peculiar childlike quality which the man of genius never

outgrows, and which, in its mingled waywardness and sweetness, was

present in Robert Browning till almost his dying day. There was also a

recurrent touch of hardness, distinct from the comparatively ungenial

mood of his earlier years of widowhood; and this, like his reserve,

seemed to conflict with his general character, but in reality harmonized

with it. It meant, not that feeling was suspended in him, but that it

was compressed. It was his natural response to any opposition which his

reasonings could not shake nor his will overcome, and which, rightly

or not, conveyed to him the sense of being misunderstood. It reacted in

pain for others, but it lay with an aching weight on his own heart, and

was thrown off in an upheaval of the pent-up kindliness and affection,

the moment their true springs were touched. The hardening power in his

composition, though fugitive and comparatively seldom displayed, was in

fact proportioned to his tenderness; and no one who had not seen him

in the revulsion from a hard mood, or the regret for it, knew what that

tenderness could be.

Underlying all the peculiarities of his nature, its strength and its

weakness, its exuberance and its reserves, was the nervous excitability

of which I have spoken in an earlier chapter. I have heard him say:

'I am nervous to such a degree that I might fancy I could not enter a

drawing-room, if I did not know from long experience that I can do it.'

He did not desire to conceal this fact, nor need others conceal it for

him; since it was only calculated to disarm criticism and to

strengthen sympathy. The special vital power which he derived from this

organization need not be reaffirmed. It carried also its inevitable

disablements. Its resources were not always under his own control; and

he frequently complained of the lack of presence of mind which would

seize him on any conventional emergency not included in the daily social

routine. In a real one he was never at fault. He never failed in a

sympathetic response or a playful retort; he was always provided with

the exact counter requisite in a game of words. In this respect indeed

he had all the powers of the conversationalist; and the perfect ease and

grace and geniality of his manner on such occasions, arose probably

far more from his innate human and social qualities than from even his

familiar intercourse with the world. But he could not extemporize a

speech. He could not on the spur of the moment string together the

more or less set phrases which an after-dinner oration demands. All his

friends knew this, and spared him the necessity of refusing. He had

once a headache all day, because at a dinner, the night before, a false

report had reached him that he was going to be asked to speak. This

alone would have sufficed to prevent him from accepting any public

post. He confesses the disability in a pretty note to Professor Knight,

written in reference to a recent meeting of the Wordsworth Society.

19, Warwick Crescent, W.: May 9, '84.

My dear Professor Knight,--I seem ungracious and ungrateful, but am

neither; though, now that your festival is over, I wish I could have

overcome my scruples and apprehensions. It is hard to say--when kind

people press one to 'just speak for a minute'--that the business,

so easy to almost anybody, is too bewildering for oneself. Ever truly

yours, Robert Browning.

A Rectorial Address need probably not have been extemporized, but it

would also have been irksome to him to prepare. He was not accustomed

to uttering himself in prose except within the limits, and under

the incitements, of private correspondence. The ceremonial publicity

attaching to all official proceedings would also have inevitably been a

trial to him. He did at one of the Wordsworth Society meetings speak a

sentence from the chair, in the absence of the appointed chairman,

who had not yet arrived; and when he had received his degree from the

University of Edinburgh he was persuaded to say a few words to the

assembled students, in which I believe he thanked them for their warm

welcome; but such exceptions only proved the rule.

We cannot doubt that the excited stream of talk which sometimes flowed

from him was, in the given conditions of mind and imagination, due to

a nervous impulse which he could not always restrain; and that the

effusiveness of manner with which he greeted alike old friends and new,

arose also from a momentary want of self-possession. We may admit this

the more readily that in both cases it was allied to real kindness

of intention, above all in the latter, where the fear of seeming cold

towards even a friend's friend, strove increasingly with the defective

memory for names and faces which were not quite familiar to him. He was

also profoundly averse to the idea of posing as a man of superior

gifts; having indeed, in regard to social intercourse, as little of the

fastidiousness of genius as of its bohemianism. He, therefore, made it

a rule, from the moment he took his place as a celebrity in the London

world, to exert himself for the amusement of his fellow-guests at a

dinner-table, whether their own mental resources were great or small;

and this gave rise to a frequent effort at conversation, which converted

itself into a habit, and ended by carrying him away. This at least was

his own conviction in the matter. The loud voice, which so many persons

must have learned to think habitual with him, bore also traces of this

half-unconscious nervous stimulation.\* It was natural to him in anger

or excitement, but did not express his gentler or more equable states

of feeling; and when he read to others on a subject which moved him,

his utterance often subsided into a tremulous softness which left it

scarcely audible.

\* Miss Browning reminds me that loud speaking had become

natural to him through the deafness of several of his

intimate friends: Landor, Kirkup, Barry Cornwall, and

previously his uncle Reuben, whose hearing had been impaired

in early life by a blow from a cricket ball. This fact

necessarily modifies my impression of the case, but does not

quite destroy it.

The mental conditions under which his powers of sympathy were exercised

imposed no limits on his spontaneous human kindness. This characteristic

benevolence, or power of love, is not fully represented in Mr.

Browning's works; it is certainly not prominent in those of the later

period, during which it found the widest scope in his life; but he has

in some sense given its measure in what was intended as an illustration

of the opposite quality. He tells us, in 'Fifine at the Fair', that

while the best strength of women is to be found in their love, the best

product of a man is only yielded to hate. It is the 'indignant wine'

which has been wrung from the grape plant by its external mutilation. He

could depict it dramatically in more malignant forms of emotion; but he

could only think of it personally as the reaction of a nobler feeling

which has been gratuitously outraged or repressed.

He more directly, and still more truly, described himself when he said

at about the same time, 'I have never at any period of my life been deaf

to an appeal made to me in the name of love.' He was referring to an

experience of many years before, in which he had even yielded his better

judgment to such an appeal; and it was love in the larger sense for

which the concession had been claimed.

It was impossible that so genuine a poet, and so real a man, should be

otherwise than sensitive to the varied forms of feminine attraction. He

avowedly preferred the society of women to that of men; they were, as

I have already said, his habitual confidants, and, evidently, his most

frequent correspondents; and though he could have dispensed with woman

friends as he dispensed with many other things--though he most often won

them without knowing it--his frank interest in their sex, and the often

caressing kindness of manner in which it was revealed, might justly

be interpreted by individual women into a conscious appeal to their

sympathy. It was therefore doubly remarkable that on the ground of

benevolence, he scarcely discriminated between the claim on him of a

woman, and that of a man; and his attitude towards women was in this

respect so distinctive as to merit some words of notice. It was large,

generous, and unconventional; but, for that very reason, it was not,

in the received sense of the word, chivalrous. Chivalry proceeds on

the assumption that women not only cannot, but should not, take care

of themselves in any active struggle with life; Mr. Browning had no

theoretical objection to a woman's taking care of herself. He saw no

reason why, if she was hit, she should not hit back again, or even

why, if she hit, she should not receive an answering blow. He responded

swiftly to every feminine appeal to his kindness or his protection,

whether arising from physical weakness or any other obvious cause of

helplessness or suffering; but the appeal in such cases lay first to his

humanity, and only in second order to his consideration of sex. He would

have had a man flogged who beat his wife; he would have had one flogged

who ill-used a child--or an animal: he was notedly opposed to any

sweeping principle or practice of vivisection. But he never quite

understood that the strongest women are weak, or at all events

vulnerable, in the very fact of their sex, through the minor traditions

and conventions with which society justly, indeed necessarily,

surrounds them. Still less did he understand those real, if impalpable,

differences between men and women which correspond to the difference

of position. He admitted the broad distinctions which have become

proverbial, and are therefore only a rough measure of the truth. He

could say on occasion: 'You ought to \_be\_ better; you are a woman; I ought

to \_know\_ better; I am a man.' But he had had too large an experience of

human nature to attach permanent weight to such generalizations; and

they found certainly no expression in his works. Scarcely an instance of

a conventional, or so-called man's woman, occurs in their whole range.

Excepting perhaps the speaker in 'A Woman's Last Word', 'Pompilia' and

'Mildred' are the nearest approach to it; and in both of these we

find qualities of imagination or thought which place them outside the

conventional type. He instinctively judged women, both morally and

intellectually, by the same standards as men; and when confronted by

some divergence of thought or feeling, which meant, in the woman's case,

neither quality nor defect in any strict sense of the word, but simply

a nature trained to different points of view, an element of perplexity

entered into his probable opposition. When the difference presented

itself in a neutral aspect, it affected him like the casual

peculiarities of a family or a group, or a casual disagreement between

things of the same kind. He would say to a woman friend: 'You women are

so different from men!' in the tone in which he might have said, 'You

Irish, or you Scotch, are so different from Englishmen;' or again, 'It

is impossible for a man to judge how a woman would act in such or such

a case; you are so different;' the case being sometimes one in which

it would be inconceivable to a normal woman, and therefore to the

generality of men, that she should act in any but one way.

The vague sense of mystery with which the poet's mind usually invests

a being of the opposite sex, had thus often in him its counterpart in

a puzzled dramatic curiosity which constituted an equal ground of

interest.

This virtual admission of equality between the sexes, combined with his

Liberal principles to dispose him favourably towards the movement for

Female Emancipation. He approved of everything that had been done for

the higher instruction of women, and would, not very long ago,

have supported their admission to the Franchise. But he was so much

displeased by the more recent action of some of the lady advocates of

Women's Rights, that, during the last year of his life, after various

modifications of opinion, he frankly pledged himself to the opposite

view. He had even visions of writing a tragedy or drama in support of

it. The plot was roughly sketched, and some dialogue composed, though I

believe no trace of this remains.

It is almost implied by all I have said, that he possessed in every mood

the charm of perfect simplicity of manner. On this point he resembled

his father. His tastes lay also in the direction of great simplicity of

life, though circumstances did not allow of his indulging them to the

same extent. It may interest those who never saw him to know that he

always dressed as well as the occasion required, and always with great

indifference to the subject. In Florence he wore loose clothes which

were adapted to the climate; in London his coats were cut by a good

tailor in whatever was the prevailing fashion; the change was simply

with him an incident of the situation. He had also a look of dainty

cleanliness which was heightened by the smooth healthy texture of the

skin, and in later life by the silvery whiteness of his hair.

His best photographic likenesses were those taken by Mr. Fradelle in

1881, Mr. Cameron and Mr. William Grove in 1888 and 1889.

Chapter 21

1887-1889

Marriage of Mr. Barrett Browning--Removal to De Vere Gardens--Symptoms

of failing Strength--New Poems; New Edition of his Works--Letters to Mr.

George Bainton, Mr. Smith, and Lady Martin--Primiero and Venice--Letters

to Miss Keep--The last Year in London--Asolo--Letters to Mrs.

Fitz-Gerald, Mrs. Skirrow, and Mr. G. M. Smith.

The last years of Mr. Browning's life were introduced by two auspicious

events, in themselves of very unequal importance, but each in its own

way significant for his happiness and his health. One was his son's

marriage on October 4, 1887, to Miss Fannie Coddington, of New York, a

lady towards whom Mr. Barrett Browning had been strongly attracted when

he was a very young man and she little more than a child; the other, his

own removal from Warwick Crescent to De Vere Gardens, which took place

in the previous June. The change of residence had long been with him

only a question of opportunity. He was once even in treaty for a piece

of ground at Kensington, and intended building a house. That in which

he had lived for so many years had faults of construction and situation

which the lapse of time rendered only more conspicuous; the Regent's

Canal Bill had also doomed it to demolition; and when an opening

presented itself for securing one in all essentials more suitable, he

was glad to seize it, though at the eleventh hour. He had mentally fixed

on the new locality in those earlier days in which he still thought his

son might eventually settle in London; and it possessed at the same time

many advantages for himself. It was warmer and more sheltered than any

which he could have found on the north side of the Park; and, in that

close vicinity to Kensington Gardens, walking might be contemplated as a

pleasure, instead of mere compulsory motion from place to place. It was

only too soon apparent that the time had passed when he could reap much

benefit from the event; but he became aware from the first moment of his

installation in the new home that the conditions of physical life had

become more favourable for him. He found an almost pathetic pleasure

in completing the internal arrangements of the well-built, commodious

house. It seems, on looking back, as if the veil had dropped before his

eyes which sometimes shrouds the keenest vision in face of an impending

change; and he had imagined, in spite of casual utterances which

disclaimed the hope, that a new lease of life was being given to him. He

had for several years been preparing for the more roomy dwelling which

he would probably some day inhabit; and handsome pieces of old furniture

had been stowed away in the house in Warwick Crescent, pending the

occasion for their use. He loved antiquities of this kind, in a manner

which sometimes recalled his father's affection for old books; and most

of these had been bought in Venice, where frequent visits to the

noted curiosity-shops had been his one bond of habit with his tourist

countrymen in that city. They matched the carved oak and massive

gildings and valuable tapestries which had carried something of Casa

Guidi into his first London home. Brass lamps that had once hung inside

chapels in some Catholic church, had long occupied the place of the

habitual gaselier; and to these was added in the following year one of

silver, also brought from Venice--the Jewish 'Sabbath lamp'. Another

acquisition, made only a few months, if indeed so long, before he left

London for the last time, was that of a set of casts representing the

Seasons, which were to stand at intervals on brackets in a certain

unsightly space on his drawing-room wall; and he had said of these,

which I think his son was procuring for him: 'Only my four little heads,

and then I shall not buy another thing for the house'--in a tone of

childlike satisfaction at his completed work.

This summer he merely went to St. Moritz, where he and his sister were,

for the greater part of their stay, again guests of Mrs. Bloomfield

Moore. He was determined to give the London winter a fuller trial in the

more promising circumstances of his new life, and there was much to

be done in De Vere Gardens after his return. His father's six thousand

books, together with those he had himself accumulated, were for the

first time to be spread out in their proper array, instead of crowding

together in rows, behind and behind each other. The new bookcases, which

could stand in the large new study, were waiting to receive them. He did

not know until he tried to fulfil it how greatly the task would tax his

strength. The library was, I believe, never completely arranged.

During this winter of 1887-8 his friends first perceived that a change

had come over him. They did not realize that his life was drawing to a

close; it was difficult to do so when so much of the former elasticity

remained; when he still proclaimed himself 'quite well' so long as he

was not definitely suffering. But he was often suffering; one terrible

cold followed another. There was general evidence that he had at last

grown old. He, however, made no distinct change in his mode of life. Old

habits, suspended by his longer imprisonments to the house, were resumed

as soon as he was set free. He still dined out; still attended the

private view of every, or almost every art exhibition. He kept up his

unceasing correspondence--in one or two cases voluntarily added to it;

though he would complain day after day that his fingers ached from

the number of hours through which he had held his pen. One of the

interesting letters of this period was written to Mr. George Bainton, of

Coventry, to be used, as that gentleman tells me, in the preparation of

a lecture on the 'Art of Effective Written Composition'. It confirms the

statement I have had occasion to make, that no extraneous influence ever

permanently impressed itself on Mr. Browning's style.

29, De Vere Gardens: Oct. 6, '87.

Dear Sir,--I was absent from London when your kind letter reached

this house, to which I removed some time ago--hence the delay in

acknowledging your kindness and replying, in some degree, to your

request. All I can say, however, is this much--and very little--that,

by the indulgence of my father and mother, I was allowed to live my own

life and choose my own course in it; which, having been the same from

the beginning to the end, necessitated a permission to read nearly all

sorts of books, in a well-stocked and very miscellaneous library. I had

no other direction than my parents' taste for whatever was highest and

best in literature; but I found out for myself many forgotten fields

which proved the richest of pastures: and, so far as a preference of

a particular 'style' is concerned, I believe mine was just the same

at first as at last. I cannot name any one author who exclusively

influenced me in that respect,--as to the fittest expression of

thought--but thought itself had many impulsions from very various

sources, a matter not to your present purpose. I repeat, this is

very little to say, but all in my power--and it is heartily at your

service--if not as of any value, at least as a proof that I gratefully

feel your kindness, and am, dear Sir Yours very truly, Robert Browning.

In December 1887 he wrote 'Rosny', the first poem in 'Asolando', and

that which perhaps most displays his old subtle dramatic power; it was

followed by 'Beatrice Signorini' and 'Flute-Music'. Of the 'Bad Dreams'

two or three were also written in London, I think, during that winter.

The 'Ponte dell' Angelo' was imagined during the next autumn in Venice.

'White Witchcraft' had been suggested in the same summer by a letter

from a friend in the Channel Islands which spoke of the number of toads

to be seen there. In the spring of 1888 he began revising his works for

the last, and now entirely uniform edition, which was issued in monthly

volumes, and completed by the July of 1889. Important verbal corrections

were made in 'The Inn Album', though not, I think, in many of the later

poems; but that in which he found most room for improvement was, very

naturally, 'Pauline'; and he wrote concerning it to Mr. Smith the

following interesting letter.

29, De Vere Gardens, W.: Feb. 27, '88.

My dear Smith,--When I received the Proofs of the 1st. vol. on Friday

evening, I made sure of returning them next day--so accurately are they

printed. But on looking at that unlucky 'Pauline', which I have not

touched for half a century, a sudden impulse came over me to take the

opportunity of just correcting the most obvious faults of expression,

versification and construction,--letting the \_thoughts\_--such as they

are--remain exactly as at first: I have only treated the imperfect

expression of these just as I have now and then done for an amateur

friend, if he asked me and I liked him enough to do so. Not a line

is displaced, none added, none taken away. I have just sent it to the

printer's with an explanatory word: and told him that he will have less

trouble with all the rest of the volumes put together than with this

little portion. I expect to return all the rest to-morrow or next day.

As for the sketch--the portrait--it admits of no very superior

treatment: but, as it is the only one which makes me out youngish,--I

should like to know if an artist could not strengthen the thing by a

pencil touch or two in a few minutes--improve the eyes, eyebrows, and

mouth somewhat. The head too wants improvement: were Pen here he could

manage it all in a moment. Ever truly yours, Robert Browning.

Any attempt at modifying the expressed thoughts of his twenty-first year

would have been, as he probably felt, a futile tampering with the work

of another man; his literary conscience would have forbidden this, if it

had been otherwise possible. But he here proves by his own words what I

have already asserted, that the power of detail correction either was,

or had become by experience, very strong in him.

The history of this summer of 1888 is partly given in a letter to Lady

Martin.

29, De Vere Gardens, W.: Aug. 12, '88.

Dear Lady Martin,--The date of your kind letter,--June 18,--would affect

me indeed, but for the good conscience I retain despite of appearances.

So uncertain have I been as to the course we should take,--my sister and

myself--when the time came for leaving town, that it seemed as if

'next week' might be the eventful week when all doubts would

disappear--perhaps the strange cold weather and interminable rain made

it hard to venture from under one's roof even in fancy of being better

lodged elsewhere. This very day week it was the old story--cold--then

followed the suffocating eight or nine tropical days which forbade any

more delay, and we leave to-morrow for a place called Primiero, near

Feltre--where my son and his wife assure us we may be comfortably--and

coolly--housed, until we can accompany them to Venice, which we may stay

at for a short time. You remember our troubles at Llangollen about the

purchase of a Venetian house . . . ? My son, however, nothing daunted,

and acting under abler counsels than I was fortunate enough to obtain,\*

has obtained a still more desirable acquisition, in the shape of the

well-known Rezzonico Palace (that of Pope Clement 13th)--and, I believe,

is to be congratulated on his bargain. I cannot profess the same

interest in this as in the earlier object of his ambition, but am quite

satisfied by the evident satisfaction of the 'young people'. So,--by the

old law of compensation,--while we may expect pleasant days abroad--our

chance is gone of once again enjoying your company in your own lovely

Vale of Llangollen;--had we not been pulled otherwise by the inducements

we could not resist,--another term of delightful weeks--each tipped

with a sweet starry Sunday at the little church leading to the

House Beautiful where we took our rest of an evening spent always

memorably--this might have been our fortunate lot once again! As it is,

perhaps we need more energetic treatment than we should get with you

--for both of us are more oppressed than ever by the exigencies of

the lengthy season, and require still more bracing air than the

gently lulling temperature of Wales. May it be doing you, and dear Sir

Theodore, all the good you deserve--throwing in the share due to us, who

must forego it! With all love from us both, ever affectionately yours

Robert Browning.

\* Those of Mr. Alexander Malcolm.

He did start for Italy on the following day, but had become so ill, that

he was on the point of postponing his departure. He suffered throughout

the journey as he had never suffered on any journey before; and during

his first few days at Primiero, could only lead the life of an invalid.

He rallied, however, as usual, under the potent effects of quiet,

fresh air, and sunshine; and fully recovered his normal state before

proceeding to Venice, where the continued sense of physical health

combined with many extraneous circumstances to convert his proposed

short stay into a long one. A letter from the mountains, addressed to a

lady who had never been abroad, and to whom he sometimes wrote with more

descriptive detail than to other friends, gives a touching glimpse of

his fresh delight in the beauties of nature, and his tender constant

sympathy with the animal creation.

Primiero: Sept. 7, '88.

. . . . .

'The weather continues exquisitely temperate, yet sunny, ever since the

clearing thunderstorm of which I must have told you in my last. It is, I

am more and more confirmed in believing, the most beautiful place I

was ever resident in: far more so than Gressoney or even St.-Pierre de

Chartreuse. You would indeed delight in seeing the magnificence of the

mountains,--the range on either side, which morning and evening, in

turn, transmute literally to gold,--I mean what I say. Their utterly

bare ridges of peaks and crags of all shape, quite naked of verdure,

glow like yellow ore; and, at times, there is a silver change, as the

sun prevails or not.

'The valley is one green luxuriance on all sides; Indian corn, with

beans, gourds, and even cabbages, filling up the interstices; and the

flowers, though not presenting any novelty to my uninstructed eyes,

yet surely more large and purely developed than I remember to have seen

elsewhere. For instance, the tiger-lilies in the garden here must be

above ten feet high, every bloom faultless, and, what strikes me as

peculiar, every leaf on the stalk from bottom to top as perfect as if no

insect existed to spoil them by a notch or speck. . . .

'. . . Did I tell you we had a little captive fox,--the most engaging

of little vixens? To my great joy she has broken her chain and escaped,

never to be recaptured, I trust. The original wild and untameable nature

was to be plainly discerned even in this early stage of the whelp's

life: she dug herself, with such baby feet, a huge hole, the use

of which was evident, when, one day, she pounced thence on a stray

turkey--allured within reach by the fragments of fox's breakfast,--the

intruder escaping with the loss of his tail. The creature came back one

night to explore the old place of captivity,--ate some food and retired.

For myself,--I continue absolutely well: I do not walk much, but for

more than amends, am in the open air all day long.'

No less striking is a short extract from a letter written in Venice to

the same friend, Miss Keep.

Ca' Alvise: Oct. 16, '88.

'Every morning at six, I see the sun rise; far more wonderfully, to my

mind, than his famous setting, which everybody glorifies. My bedroom

window commands a perfect view: the still, grey lagune, the few seagulls

flying, the islet of S. Giorgio in deep shadow, and the clouds in a

long purple rack, behind which a sort of spirit of rose burns up till

presently all the rims are on fire with gold, and last of all the orb

sends before it a long column of its own essence apparently: so my day

begins.'

We feel, as we read these late, and even later words, that the lyric

imagination was renewing itself in the incipient dissolution of other

powers. It is the Browning of 'Pippa Passes' who speaks in them.

He suffered less on the whole during the winter of 1888-9. It was

already advanced when he returned to England; and the attacks of cold

and asthma were either shorter or less frequent. He still maintained

throughout the season his old social routine, not omitting his yearly

visit, on the anniversary of Waterloo, to Lord Albemarle, its

last surviving veteran. He went for some days to Oxford during the

commemoration week, and had for the first, as also last time, the

pleasure of Dr. Jowett's almost exclusive society at his beloved Balliol

College. He proceeded with his new volume of poems. A short letter

written to Professor Knight, June 16, and of which the occasion speaks

for itself, fitly closes the labours of his life; for it states his view

of the position and function of poetry, in one brief phrase, which might

form the text to an exhaustive treatise upon them.

29, De Vere Gardens, W.: June 16, 1889.

My dear Professor Knight,--I am delighted to hear that there is a

likelihood of your establishing yourself in Glasgow, and illustrating

Literature as happily as you have expounded Philosophy at St. Andrews.

It is certainly the right order of things: Philosophy first, and Poetry,

which is its highest outcome, afterward--and much harm has been done by

reversing the natural process. How capable you are of doing justice

to the highest philosophy embodied in poetry, your various studies of

Wordsworth prove abundantly; and for the sake of both Literature and

Philosophy I wish you success with all my heart.

Believe me, dear Professor Knight, yours very truly, Robert Browning.

But he experienced, when the time came, more than his habitual

disinclination for leaving home. A distinct shrinking from the fatigue

of going to Italy now added itself to it; for he had suffered when

travelling back in the previous winter, almost as much as on the outward

journey, though he attributed the distress to a different cause: his

nerves were, he thought, shaken by the wearing discomforts incidental

on a broken tooth. He was for the first time painfully sensitive to

the vibration of the train. He had told his friends, both in Venice and

London, that so far as he was able to determine, he would never return

to Italy. But it was necessary he should go somewhere, and he had no

alternative plan. For a short time in this last summer he entertained

the idea of a visit to Scotland; it had indeed definitely shaped itself

in his mind; but an incident, trivial in itself, though he did not think

it so, destroyed the first scheme, and it was then practically too late

to form another. During the second week in August the weather broke.

There could no longer be any question of the northward journey without

even a fixed end in view. His son and daughter had taken possession of

their new home, the Palazzo Rezzonico, and were anxious to see him and

Miss Browning there; their wishes naturally had weight. The casting vote

in favour of Venice was given by a letter from Mrs. Bronson, proposing

Asolo as the intermediate stage. She had fitted up for herself a little

summer retreat there, and promised that her friends should, if they

joined her, be also comfortably installed. The journey was this time

propitious. It was performed without imprudent haste, and Mr. Browning

reached Asolo unfatigued and to all appearance well.

He saw this, his first love among Italian cities, at a season of the

year more favourable to its beauty than even that of his first visit;

yet he must himself have been surprised by the new rapture of admiration

which it created in him, and which seemed to grow with his lengthened

stay. This state of mind was the more striking, that new symptoms of his

physical decline were now becoming apparent, and were in themselves of a

depressing kind. He wrote to a friend in England, that the atmosphere

of Asolo, far from being oppressive, produced in him all the effects of

mountain air, and he was conscious of difficulty of breathing whenever

he walked up hill. He also suffered, as the season advanced, great

inconvenience from cold. The rooms occupied by himself and his sister

were both unprovided with fireplaces; and though the daily dinner with

Mrs. Bronson obviated the discomfort of the evenings, there remained

still too many hours of the autumnal day in which the impossibility of

heating their own little apartment must have made itself unpleasantly

felt. The latter drawback would have been averted by the fulfilment of

Mr. Browning's first plan, to be in Venice by the beginning of October,

and return to the comforts of his own home before the winter had quite

set in; but one slight motive for delay succeeded another, till at last

a more serious project introduced sufficient ground of detention. He

seemed possessed by a strange buoyancy--an almost feverish joy in life,

which blunted all sensations of physical distress, or helped him to

misinterpret them. When warned against the imprudence of remaining where

he knew he suffered from cold, and believed, rightly or wrongly, that

his asthmatic tendencies were increased, he would reply that he was

growing acclimatized--that he was quite well. And, in a fitful or

superficial sense, he must have been so.

His letters of that period are one continuous picture, glowing with

his impressions of the things which they describe. The same words will

repeat themselves as the same subject presents itself to his pen; but

the impulse to iteration scarcely ever affects us as mechanical.

It seems always a fresh response to some new stimulus to thought or

feeling, which he has received. These reach him from every side. It is

not only the Asolo of this peaceful later time which has opened before

him, but the Asolo of 'Pippa Passes' and 'Sordello'; that which first

stamped itself on his imagination in the echoes of the Court life of

Queen Catharine,\* and of the barbaric wars of the Eccelini. Some of his

letters dwell especially on these early historical associations: on the

strange sense of reopening the ancient chronicle which he had so deeply

studied fifty years before. The very phraseology of the old Italian

text, which I am certain he had never glanced at from that distant time,

is audible in an account of the massacre of San Zenone, the scene of

which he has been visiting. To the same correspondent he says that

his two hours' drive to Asolo 'seemed to be a dream;' and again, after

describing, or, as he thinks, only trying to describe some beautiful

feature of the place, 'but it is indescribable!'

\* Catharine Cornaro, the dethroned queen of Cyprus.

A letter addressed to Mrs. FitzGerald, October 8, 1889, is in part a

fitting sequel to that which he had written to her from the same spot,

eleven years before.

'. . . Fortunately there is little changed here: my old

Albergo,--ruinous with earthquake--is down and done with--but few

novelties are observable--except the regrettable one that the silk

industry has been transported elsewhere--to Cornuda and other places

nearer the main railway. No more Pippas--at least of the silk-winding

sort!

'But the pretty type is far from extinct.

'Autumn is beginning to paint the foliage, but thin it as well; and

the sea of fertility all round our height, which a month ago showed

pomegranates and figs and chestnuts,--walnuts and apples all rioting

together in full glory,--all this is daily disappearing. I say nothing

of the olive and the vine. I find the Turret rather the worse for

careful weeding--the hawks which used to build there have been "shot for

food"--and the echo is sadly curtailed of its replies; still, things

are the same in the main. Shall I ever see them again, when--as I

suppose--we leave for Venice in a fortnight? . . .'

In the midst of this imaginative delight he carried into his walks the

old keen habits of observation. He would peer into the hedges for what

living things were to be found there. He would whistle softly to the

lizards basking on the low walls which border the roads, to try his old

power of attracting them.

On the 15th of October he wrote to Mrs. Skirrow, after some preliminary

description:

Then--such a view over the whole Lombard plain; not a site in view, or

\_approximate\_ view at least, without its story. Autumn is now painting all

the abundance of verdure,--figs, pomegranates, chestnuts, and vines, and

I don't know what else,--all in a wonderful confusion,--and now glowing

with all the colours of the rainbow. Some weeks back, the little town

was glorified by the visit of a decent theatrical troop who played in a

theatre \_in\_side the old palace of Queen Catharine Cornaro--utilized also

as a prison in which I am informed are at present full five if not six

malefactors guilty of stealing grapes, and the like enormities. Well,

the troop played for a fortnight together exceedingly well--high tragedy

and low comedy--and the stage-box which I occupied cost 16 francs. The

theatre had been out of use for six years, for we are out of the way

and only a baiting-place for a company pushing on to Venice. In fine, we

shall stay here probably for a week or more,--and then proceed to Pen,

at the Rezzonico; a month there, and then homewards! . . .

I delight in finding that the beloved Husband and precious friend

manages to do without the old yoke about his neck, and enjoys himself as

never anybody had a better right to do. I continue to congratulate him

on his emancipation and ourselves on a more frequent enjoyment of his

company in consequence.\* Give him my true love; take mine, dearest

friend,--and my sister's love to you both goes with it. Ever

affectionately yours Robert Browning.

\* Mr. Skirrow had just resigned his post of Master in

Chancery.

The cry of 'homewards!' now frequently recurs in his letters. We find it

in one written a week later to Mr. G. M. Smith, otherwise very

expressive of his latest condition of mind and feeling.

Asolo, Veneto, Italia: Oct. 22, '89.

My dear Smith,--I was indeed delighted to get your letter two days ago--

for there \_are\_ such accidents as the loss of a parcel, even when it has

been despatched from so important a place as this city--for a regular

city it is, you must know, with all the rights of one,--older far than

Rome, being founded by the Euganeans who gave their name to the

adjoining hills. 'Fortified' is was once, assuredly, and the walls

still surround it most picturesquely though mainly in utter ruin, and

you even overrate the population, which does not now much exceed 900

souls--in the city Proper, that is--for the territory below and around

contains some 10,000. But we are at the very top of things, garlanded

about, as it were, with a narrow line of houses,--some palatial, such as

you would be glad to see in London,--and above all towers the old

dwelling of Queen Cornaro, who was forced to exchange her Kingdom of

Cyprus for this pretty but petty dominion where she kept state in a

mimic Court, with Bembo, afterwards Cardinal, for her secretary--who has

commemorated the fact in his 'Asolani' or dialogues inspired by the

place: and I do assure you that, after some experience of beautiful

sights in Italy and elsewhere I know nothing comparable to the view from

the Queen's tower and palace, still perfect in every respect. Whenever

you pay Pen and his wife the visit you are pledged to, \* it will go hard

but you spend five hours in a journey to Asolo. The one thing I am

disappointed in is to find that the silk-cultivation with all the pretty

girls who were engaged in it are transported to Cornuda and other

places,--nearer the railway, I suppose: and to this may be attributed

the decrease in the number of inhabitants. The weather when I wrote last

\_was\_ 'blue and blazing--(at noon-day)--' but we share in the general

plague of rain,--had a famous storm yesterday: while to-day is blue and

sunny as ever. Lastly, for your admonition: we \_have\_ a perfect

telegraphic communication; and at the passage above, where I put a \* I

was interrupted by the arrival of a telegram: thank you all the same for

your desire to relieve my anxiety. And now, to our immediate business--

which is only to keep thanking you for your constant goodness, present

and future: do with the book just as you will. I fancy it is bigger in

bulk than usual. As for the 'proofs'--I go at the end of the month to

Venice, whither you will please to send whatever is necessary. . . . I

shall do well to say as little as possible of my good wishes for you and

your family, for it comes to much the same thing as wishing myself

prosperity: no matter, my sister's kindest regards shall excuse mine,

and I will only add that I am, as ever, Affectionately yours Robert

Browning.

A general quickening of affectionate impulse seemed part of this last

leap in the socket of the dying flame.

Chapter 22

1889

Proposed Purchase of Land at Asolo--Venice--Letter to Mr. G.

Moulton-Barrett--Lines in the 'Athenaeum'--Letter to Miss

Keep--Illness--Death-- Funeral Ceremonial at Venice--Publication

of 'Asolando'--Interment in Poets' Corner.

He had said in writing to Mrs. FitzGerald, 'Shall I ever see them' (the

things he is describing) 'again?' If not then, soon afterwards, he

conceived a plan which was to insure his doing so. On a piece of ground

belonging to the old castle, stood the shell of a house. The two

constituted one property which the Municipality of Asolo had hitherto

refused to sell. It had been a dream of Mr. Browning's life to possess

a dwelling, however small, in some beautiful spot, which should place

him beyond the necessity of constantly seeking a new summer resort, and

above the alternative of living at an inn, or accepting--as he sometimes

feared, abusing--the hospitality of his friends. He was suddenly

fascinated by the idea of buying this piece of ground; and, with the

efficient help which his son could render during his absence, completing

the house, which should be christened 'Pippa's Tower'. It was evident,

he said in one of his letters, that for his few remaining years his

summer wanderings must always end in Venice. What could he do better

than secure for himself this resting-place by the way?

His offer of purchase was made through Mrs. Bronson, to Count Loredano

and other important members of the municipality, and their personal

assent to it secured. But the town council was on the eve of

re-election; no important business could be transacted by it till after

this event; and Mr. Browning awaited its decision till the end of

October at Asolo, and again throughout November in Venice, without fully

understanding the delay. The vote proved favourable; but the night on

which it was taken was that of his death.

The consent thus given would have been only a first step towards the

accomplishment of his wish. It was necessary that it should be ratified

by the Prefecture of Treviso, in the district of which Asolo lies; and

Mr. Barrett Browning, who had determined to carry on the negotiations,

met with subsequent opposition in the higher council. This has now,

however, been happily overcome.

A comprehensive interest attaches to one more letter of the Asolo time.

It was addressed to Mr. Browning's brother-in-law, Mr. George

Moulton-Barrett.

Asolo, Veneto: Oct. 22, '89.

My dear George,--It was a great pleasure to get your kind letter; though

after some delay. We were not in the Tyrol this year, but have been for

six weeks or more in this little place which strikes me,--as it did

fifty years ago, which is something to say, considering that, properly

speaking, it was the first spot of Italian soil I ever set foot upon--

having proceeded to Venice by sea--and thence here. It is an ancient

city, older than Rome, and the scene of Queen Catharine Cornaro's exile,

where she held a mock court, with all its attendants, on a miniature

scale; Bembo, afterwards Cardinal, being her secretary. Her palace is

still above us all, the old fortifications surround the hill-top, and

certain of the houses are stately--though the population is not above

1,000 souls: the province contains many more of course. But the immense

charm of the surrounding country is indescribable--I have never seen its

like--the Alps on one side, the Asolan mountains all round,--and

opposite, the vast Lombard plain,--with indications of Venice, Padua,

and the other cities, visible to a good eye on a clear day; while

everywhere are sites of battles and sieges of bygone days, described in

full by the historians of the Middle Ages.

We have a valued friend here, Mrs. Bronson, who for years has been our

hostess at Venice, and now is in possession of a house here (built into

the old city wall)--she was induced to choose it through what I have

said about the beauties of the place: and through her care and kindness

we are comfortably lodged close by. We think of leaving in a week or so

for Venice--guests of Pen and his wife; and after a short stay with them

we shall return to London. Pen came to see us for a couple of days: I

was hardly prepared for his surprise and admiration which quite equalled

my own and that of my sister. All is happily well with them--their

palazzo excites the wonder of everybody, so great is Pen's cleverness,

and extemporised architectural knowledge, as apparent in all he has done

there; why, \_why\_ will you not go and see him there? He and his wife are

very hospitable and receive many visitors. Have I told you that there

was a desecrated chapel which he has restored in honour of his mother--

putting up there the inscription by Tommaseo now above Casa Guidi?

Fannie is all you say,--and most dear and precious to us all. . . .

Pen's medal to which you refer, is awarded to him in spite of his

written renunciation of any sort of wish to contend for a prize. He will

now resume painting and sculpture--having been necessarily occupied with

the superintendence of his workmen--a matter capitally managed, I am

told. For the rest, both Sarianna and myself are very well; I have just

sent off my new volume of verses for publication. The complete edition

of the works of E. B. B. begins in a few days.

The second part of this letter is very forcibly written, and, in a

certain sense, more important than the first; but I suppress it by the

desire of Mr. Browning's sister and son, and in complete concurrence

with their judgment in the matter. It was a systematic defence of the

anger aroused in him by a lately published reference to his wife's

death; and though its reasonings were unanswerable as applied to the

causes of his emotion, they did not touch the manner in which it had

been displayed. The incident was one which deserved only to be

forgotten; and if an injudicious act had not preserved its memory, no

word of mine should recall it. Since, however, it has been thought fit

to include the 'Lines to Edward Fitzgerald' in a widely circulated

Bibliography of Mr. Browning's Works,\* I owe it to him to say--what I

believe is only known to his sister and myself--that there was a moment

in which he regretted those lines, and would willingly have withdrawn

them. This was the period, unfortunately short, which intervened between

his sending them to the 'Athenaeum', and their appearance there. When

once public opinion had expressed itself upon them in its too extreme

forms of sympathy and condemnation, the pugnacity of his mind found

support in both, and regret was silenced if not destroyed. In so far as

his published words remained open to censure, I may also, without

indelicacy, urge one more plea in his behalf. That which to the merely

sympathetic observer appeared a subject for disapprobation, perhaps

disgust, had affected him with the directness of a sharp physical blow.

He spoke of it, and for hours, even days, was known to feel it, as such.

The events of that distant past, which he had lived down, though never

forgotten, had flashed upon him from the words which so unexpectedly met

his eye, in a vividness of remembrance which was reality. 'I felt as if

she had died yesterday,' he said some days later to a friend, in half

deprecation, half denial, of the too great fierceness of his reaction.

He only recovered his balance in striking the counter-blow. That he

could be thus affected at an age usually destructive of the more violent

emotions, is part of the mystery of those closing days which had already

overtaken him.

\* That contained in Mr. Sharp's 'Life'. A still more recent

publication

gives the lines in full.

By the first of November he was in Venice with his son and daughter; and

during the three following weeks was apparently well, though a physician

whom he met at a dinner party, and to whom he had half jokingly given

his pulse to feel, had learned from it that his days were numbered. He

wrote to Miss Keep on the 9th of the month:

'. . . Mrs. Bronson has bought a house at Asolo, and beautified it

indeed,--niched as it is in an old tower of the fortifications still

partly surrounding the city (for a city it is), and eighteen towers,

more or less ruinous, are still discoverable there: it is indeed a

delightful place. Meantime, to go on,--we came here, and had a pleasant

welcome from our hosts--who are truly magnificently lodged in this

vast palazzo which my son has really shown himself fit to possess, so

surprising are his restorations and improvements: the whole is all but

complete, decorated,--that is, renewed admirably in all respects.

'What strikes me as most noteworthy is the cheerfulness and comfort of

the huge rooms.

'The building is warmed throughout by a furnace and pipes.

'Yesterday, on the Lido, the heat was hardly endurable: bright sunshine,

blue sky,--snow-tipped Alps in the distance. No place, I think, ever

suited my needs, bodily and intellectual, so well.

'The first are satisfied--I am \_quite\_ well, every breathing inconvenience

gone: and as for the latter, I got through whatever had given me trouble

in London. . . .'

But it was winter, even in Venice, and one day began with an actual fog.

He insisted, notwithstanding, on taking his usual walk on the Lido. He

caught a bronchial cold of which the symptoms were aggravated not only

by the asthmatic tendency, but by what proved to be exhaustion of the

heart; and believing as usual that his liver alone was at fault, he took

little food, and refused wine altogether.\*

\* He always declined food when he was unwell; and maintained

that in this respect the instinct of animals was far more

just than the idea often prevailing among human beings that

a failing appetite should be assisted or coerced.

He did not yield to the sense of illness; he did not keep his bed. Some

feverish energy must have supported him through this avoidance of every

measure which might have afforded even temporary strength or relief. On

Friday, the 29th, he wrote to a friend in London that he had waited thus

long for the final answer from Asolo, but would wait no longer. He would

start for England, if possible, on the Wednesday or Thursday of the

following week. It was true 'he had caught a cold; he felt sadly

asthmatic, scarcely fit to travel; but he hoped for the best, and would

write again soon.' He wrote again the following day, declaring himself

better. He had been punished, he said, for long-standing neglect of

his 'provoking liver'; but a simple medicine, which he had often taken

before, had this time also relieved the oppression of his chest; his

friend was not to be uneasy about him; 'it was in his nature to get

into scrapes of this kind, but he always managed, somehow or other, to

extricate himself from them.' He concluded with fresh details of his

hopes and plans.

In the ensuing night the bronchial distress increased; and in the

morning he consented to see his son's physician, Dr. Cini, whose

investigation of the case at once revealed to him its seriousness. The

patient had been removed two days before, from the second storey of the

house, which the family then inhabited, to an entresol apartment just

above the ground-floor, from which he could pass into the dining-room

without fatigue. Its lower ceilings gave him (erroneously) an impression

of greater warmth, and he had imagined himself benefited by the change.

A freer circulation of air was now considered imperative, and he was

carried to Mrs. Browning's spacious bedroom, where an open fireplace

supplied both warmth and ventilation, and large windows admitted all

the sunshine of the Grand Canal. Everything was done for him which

professional skill and loving care could do. Mrs. Browning, assisted

by her husband, and by a young lady who was then her guest,\* filled the

place of the trained nurses until these could arrive; for a few days

the impending calamity seemed even to have been averted. The bronchial

attack was overcome. Mr. Browning had once walked from the bed to

the sofa; his sister, whose anxiety had perhaps been spared the full

knowledge of his state, could send comforting reports to his friends

at home. But the enfeebled heart had made its last effort. Attacks

of faintness set in. Special signs of physical strength maintained

themselves until within a few hours of the end. On Wednesday, December

11, a consultation took place between Dr. Cini, Dr. da Vigna, and Dr.

Minich; and the opinion was then expressed for the first time

that recovery, though still possible, was not within the bounds of

probability. Weakness, however, rapidly gained upon him towards the

close of the following day. Two hours before midnight of this Thursday,

December 12, he breathed his last.

\* Miss Evelyn Barclay, now Mrs. Douglas Giles.

He had been a good patient. He took food and medicine whenever they were

offered to him. Doctors and nurses became alike warmly interested in

him. His favourite among the latter was, I think, the Venetian, a widow,

Margherita Fiori, a simple kindly creature who had known much sorrow. To

her he said, about five hours before the end, 'I feel much worse. I

know now that I must die.' He had shown at intervals a perception, even

conviction, of his danger; but the excitement of the brain, caused by

exhaustion on the one hand and the necessary stimulants on the other,

must have precluded all systematic consciousness of approaching death.

He repeatedly assured his family that he was not suffering.

A painful and urgent question now presented itself for solution: Where

should his body find its last rest? He had said to his sister in the

foregoing summer, that he wished to be buried wherever he might die: if

in England, with his mother; if in France, with his father; if in Italy,

with his wife. Circumstances all pointed to his removal to Florence; but

a recent decree had prohibited further interment in the English Cemetery

there, and the town had no power to rescind it. When this was known

in Venice, that city begged for itself the privilege of retaining the

illustrious guest, and rendering him the last honours. For the moment

the idea even recommended itself to Mr. Browning's son. But he felt

bound to make a last effort in the direction of the burial at Florence;

and was about to despatch a telegram, in which he invoked the mediation

of Lord Dufferin, when all difficulties were laid at rest by a message

from the Dean of Westminster, conveying his assent to an interment in

the Abbey.\* He had already telegraphed for information concerning the

date of the funeral, with a view to the memorial service, which he

intended to hold on the same day. Nor would the further honour have

remained for even twenty-four hours ungranted, because unasked, but for

the belief prevailing among Mr. Browning's friends that there was no

room for its acceptance.

\* The assent thus conveyed had assumed the form of an offer,

and was characterized as such by the Dean himself.

It was still necessary to provide for the more immediate removal of the

body. Local custom forbade its retention after the lapse of two days and

nights; and only in view of the special circumstances of the case could

a short respite be granted to the family. Arrangements were therefore at

once made for a private service, to be conducted by the British Chaplain

in one of the great halls of the Rezzonico Palace; and by two o'clock of

the following day, Sunday, a large number of visitors and residents had

assembled there. The subsequent passage to the mortuary island of San

Michele had been organized by the city, and was to display so much of

the character of a public pageant as the hurried preparation allowed.

The chief municipal officers attended the service. When this had been

performed, the coffin was carried by eight firemen (pompieri), arrayed

in their distinctive uniform, to the massive, highly decorated municipal

barge (Barca delle Pompe funebri) which waited to receive it. It was

guarded during the transit by four 'uscieri' in 'gala' dress, two

sergeants of the Municipal Guard, and two of the firemen bearing

torches: the remainder of these following in a smaller boat. The barge

was towed by a steam launch of the Royal Italian Marine. The chief

officers of the city, the family and friends in their separate gondolas,

completed the procession. On arriving at San Michele, the firemen again

received their burden, and bore it to the chapel in which its place had

been reserved.

When 'Pauline' first appeared, the Author had received, he never learned

from whom, a sprig of laurel enclosed with this quotation from the poem,

Trust in signs and omens.

Very beautiful garlands were now piled about his bier, offerings of

friendship and affection. Conspicuous among these was the ceremonial

structure of metallic foliage and porcelain flowers, inscribed 'Venezia

a Roberto Browning', which represented the Municipality of Venice. On

the coffin lay one comprehensive symbol of the fulfilled prophecy: a

wreath of laurel-leaves which his son had placed there.

A final honour was decreed to the great English Poet by the city in

which he had died; the affixing of a memorial tablet to the outer wall

of the Rezzonico Palace. Since these pages were first written, the

tablet has been placed. It bears the following inscription:

A

ROBERTO BROWNING

MORTO IN QUESTO PALAZZO

IL 12 DICEMBRE 1889

VENEZIA

POSE

Below this, in the right-hand corner appear two lines selected from his

works:

Open my heart and you will see

Graved inside of it, 'Italy'.

Nor were these the only expressions of Italian respect and sympathy. The

municipality of Florence sent its message of condolence. Asolo, poor

in all but memories, itself bore the expenses of a mural tablet for

the house which Mr. Browning had occupied. It is now known that Signor

Crispi would have appealed to Parliament to rescind the exclusion

from the Florentine cemetery, if the motive for doing so had been less

promptly removed.

Mr. Browning's own country had indeed opened a way for the reunion of

the husband and wife. The idea had rapidly shaped itself in the public

mind that, since they might not rest side by side in Italy, they

should be placed together among the great of their own land; and it was

understood that the Dean would sanction Mrs. Browning's interment in

the Abbey, if a formal application to this end were made to him. But

Mr. Barrett Browning could not reconcile himself to the thought of

disturbing his mother's grave, so long consecrated to Florence by her

warm love and by its grateful remembrance; and at the desire of both

surviving members of the family the suggestion was set aside.

Two days after his temporary funeral, privately and at night, all that

remained of Robert Browning was conveyed to the railway station; and

thence, by a trusted servant, to England. The family followed within

twenty-four hours, having made the necessary preparations for a long

absence from Venice; and, travelling with the utmost speed, arrived in

London on the same day. The house in De Vere Gardens received its master

once more.

'Asolando' was published on the day of Mr. Browning's death. The report

of his illness had quickened public interest in the forthcoming work,

and his son had the satisfaction of telling him of its already realized

success, while he could still receive a warm, if momentary, pleasure

from the intelligence. The circumstances of its appearance place it

beyond ordinary criticism; they place it beyond even an impartial

analysis of its contents. It includes one or two poems to which we would

gladly assign a much earlier date; I have been told on good authority

that we may do this in regard to one of them. It is difficult to refer

the 'Epilogue' to a coherent mood of any period of its author's life. It

is certain, however, that by far the greater part of the little volume

was written in 1888-89, and I believe all that is most serious in it

was the product of the later year. It possesses for many readers the

inspiration of farewell words; for all of us it has their pathos.

He was buried in Westminster Abbey, in Poets' Corner, on the 31st

of December, 1889. In this tardy act of national recognition England

claimed her own. A densely packed, reverent and sympathetic crowd of his

countrymen and countrywomen assisted at the consignment of the dead poet

to his historic resting place. Three verses of Mrs. Browning's poem,

'The Sleep', set to music by Dr. Bridge, were sung for the first time on

this occasion.

Conclusion

A few words must still be said upon that purport and tendency of Robert

Browning's work, which has been defined by a few persons, and felt by

very many as his 'message'.

The definition has been disputed on the ground of Art. We are told by

Mr. Sharp, though in somewhat different words, that the poet, qua poet,

cannot deliver a 'message' such as directly addresses itself to the

intellectual or moral sense; since his special appeal to us lies not

through the substance, but through the form, or presentment, of what he

has had to say; since, therefore (by implication), in claiming for it

an intellectual--as distinct from an aesthetic--character, we ignore its

function as poetry.

It is difficult to argue justly, where the question at issue turns

practically on the meaning of a word. Mr. Sharp would, I think, be the

first to admit this; and it appears to me that, in the present case, he

so formulates his theory as to satisfy his artistic conscience, and yet

leave room for the recognition of that intellectual quality so peculiar

to Mr. Browning's verse. But what one member of the aesthetic school may

express with a certain reserve is proclaimed unreservedly by many more;

and Mr. Sharp must forgive me, if for the moment I regard him as one of

these; and if I oppose his arguments in the words of another poet

and critic of poetry, whose claim to the double title is I believe

undisputed--Mr. Roden Noel. I quote from an unpublished fragment of a

published article on Mr. Sharp's 'Life of Browning'.

'Browning's message is an integral part of himself as writer; (whether

as poet, since we agree that he is a poet, were surely a too curious

and vain discussion;) but some of his finest things assuredly are the

outcome of certain very definite personal convictions. "The question,"

Mr. Sharp says, "is not one of weighty message, but of artistic

presentation." There seems to be no true contrast here. "The primary

concern of the artist must be with his vehicle of expression"--no--not

the primary concern. Since the critic adds--(for a poet) "this vehicle

is language emotioned to the white heat of rhythmic music by impassioned

thought or sensation." Exactly--"thought" it may be. Now part of this

same "thought" in Browning is the message. And therefore it is part of

his "primary concern". "It is with presentment," says Mr. Sharp, "that

the artist has fundamentally to concern himself." Granted: but it must

surely be presentment of \_something\_. . . . I do not understand how

to separate the substance from the form in true poetry. . . . If the

message be not well delivered, it does not constitute literature. But

if it be well delivered, the primary concern of the poet lay with the

message after all!'

More cogent objection has been taken to the character of the 'message'

as judged from a philosophic point of view. It is the expression or

exposition of a vivid a priori religious faith confirmed by positive

experience; and it reflects as such a double order of thought, in which

totally opposite mental activities are often forced into co-operation

with each other. Mr. Sharp says, this time quoting from Mr. Mortimer

('Scottish Art Review', December 1889):

'His position in regard to the thought of the age is paradoxical, if not

inconsistent. He is in advance of it in every respect but one, the most

important of all, the matter of fundamental principles; in these he

is behind it. His processes of thought are often scientific in their

precision of analysis; the sudden conclusion which he imposes upon them

is transcendental and inept.'

This statement is relatively true. Mr. Browning's positive reasonings

often do end with transcendental conclusions. They also start from

transcendental premises. However closely his mind might follow the

visible order of experience, he never lost what was for him the

consciousness of a Supreme Eternal Will as having existed before it; he

never lost the vision of an intelligent First Cause, as underlying all

minor systems of causation. But such weaknesses as were involved in

his logical position are inherent to all the higher forms of natural

theology when once it has been erected into a dogma. As maintained by

Mr. Browning, this belief held a saving clause, which removed it from

all dogmatic, hence all admissible grounds of controversy: the more

definite or concrete conceptions of which it consists possessed no

finality for even his own mind; they represented for him an absolute

truth in contingent relations to it. No one felt more strongly than he

the contradictions involved in any conceivable system of Divine creation

and government. No one knew better that every act and motive which we

attribute to a Supreme Being is a virtual negation of His existence.

He believed nevertheless that such a Being exists; and he accepted His

reflection in the mirror of the human consciousness, as a necessarily

false image, but one which bears witness to the truth.

His works rarely indicate this condition of feeling; it was not often

apparent in his conversation. The faith which he had contingently

accepted became absolute for him from all practical points of view; it

became subject to all the conditions of his humanity. On the ground of

abstract logic he was always ready to disavow it; the transcendental

imagination and the acknowledged limits of human reason claimed the last

word in its behalf. This philosophy of religion is distinctly suggested

in the fifth parable of 'Ferishtah's Fancies'.

But even in defending what remains, from the most widely accepted point

of view, the validity of Mr. Browning's 'message', we concede the fact

that it is most powerful when conveyed in its least explicit form; for

then alone does it bear, with the full weight of his poetic utterance,

on the minds to which it is addressed. His challenge to Faith and Hope

imposes itself far less through any intellectual plea which he can

advance in its support, than through the unconscious testimony of all

creative genius to the marvel of conscious life; through the passionate

affirmation of his poetic and human nature, not only of the goodness and

the beauty of that life, but of its reality and its persistence.

We are told by Mr. Sharp that a new star appeared in Orion on the night

on which Robert Browning died. The alleged fact is disproved by the

statement of the Astronomer Royal, to whom it has been submitted; but it

would have been a beautiful symbol of translation, such as affectionate

fancy might gladly cherish if it were true. It is indeed true that

on that twelfth of December, a vivid centre of light and warmth was

extinguished upon our earth. The clouded brightness of many lives

bears witness to the poet spirit which has departed, the glowing human

presence which has passed away. We mourn the poet whom we have lost far

less than we regret the man: for he had done his appointed work; and

that work remains to us. But the two beings were in truth inseparable.

The man is always present in the poet; the poet was dominant in the man.

This fact can never be absent from our loving remembrance of him. No

just estimate of his life and character will fail to give it weight.

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