Life and Letters of Robert Browning

Mrs. Sutherland Orr

Life and Letters of Robert Browning

by Mrs. Sutherland Orr

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The Following Books relating to Robert Browning are now online:

Corson, Hiram. An Introduction to the Study of Robert Browning's Poetry,
3rd edition.
This book is primarily concerned with Browning's poems.
Advantages: This book is an excellent introduction to Browning.

Orr, Mrs. Sutherland. Life and Letters of Robert Browning, 2nd edition.
This book is primarily concerned with Browning's life.
Advantages: As a close friend, the author has a good grasp of the facts,
and is meticulous in her treatment of the material.
Disadvantages: As a close friend, the author is sometimes partisan.

Sharp, William. Life of Robert Browning, 1st edition.
Despite the title, this book is as much a critique of Browning's works
as it is a biography of the poet.
Advantages: Further removed from poet, the author is willing to make
some criticisms of the poet. As an early and frequently quoted work
on the subject, this book is a good resource.
Disadvantages: Due to carelessness on the part of the author
and his publisher, a number of factual and other errors were made.
Although this electronic text has corrected many of the obvious errors,
they are frequent enough to leave misgivings.

[Note on text: Italicized words or phrases are capitalised.
Some obvious errors may have been corrected.]

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

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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.

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* 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 e/te/ 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.'

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* `Life of Browning', pp. 30, 31. [(Chapter 2) Now available online.]
--

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.*

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* 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 Lo

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Baixar livros de Direito
Baixar livros de Direitos humanos
Baixar livros de Economia
Baixar livros de Economia Doméstica
Baixar livros de Educação
Baixar livros de Educação - Trânsito
Baixar livros de Educação Física
Baixar livros de Engenharia Aeroespacial
Baixar livros de Farmácia
Baixar livros de Filosofia
Baixar livros de Física
Baixar livros de Geociências
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Baixar livros de História
Baixar livros de Línguas

Baixar livros de Literatura
Baixar livros de Literatura de Cordel
Baixar livros de Literatura Infantil
Baixar livros de Matemática
Baixar livros de Medicina
Baixar livros de Medicina Veterinária
Baixar livros de Meio Ambiente
Baixar livros de Meteorologia
Baixar Monografias e TCC
Baixar livros Multidisciplinar
Baixar livros de Música
Baixar livros de Psicologia
Baixar livros de Química
Baixar livros de Saúde Coletiva
Baixar livros de Serviço Social
Baixar livros de Sociologia
Baixar livros de Teologia
Baixar livros de Trabalho
Baixar livros de Turismo