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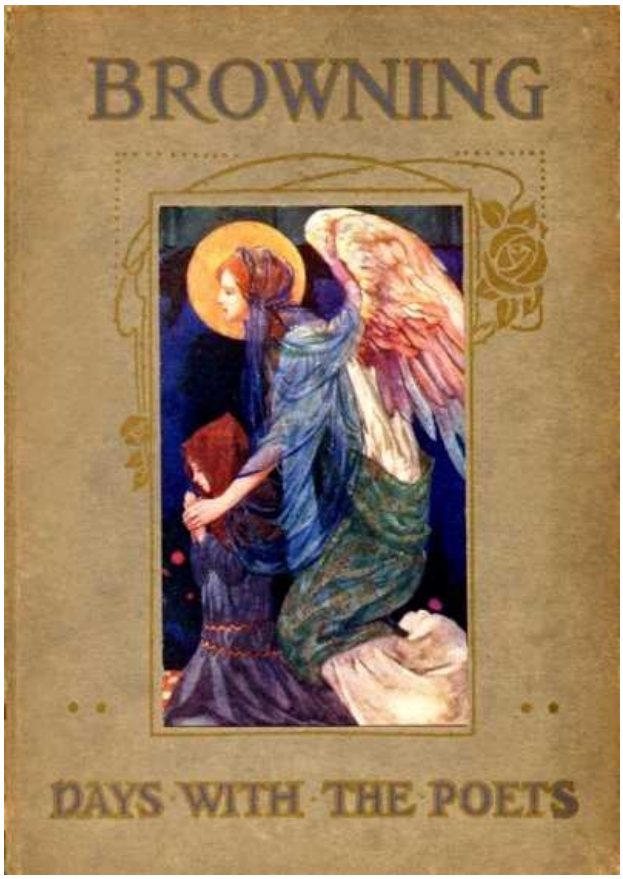
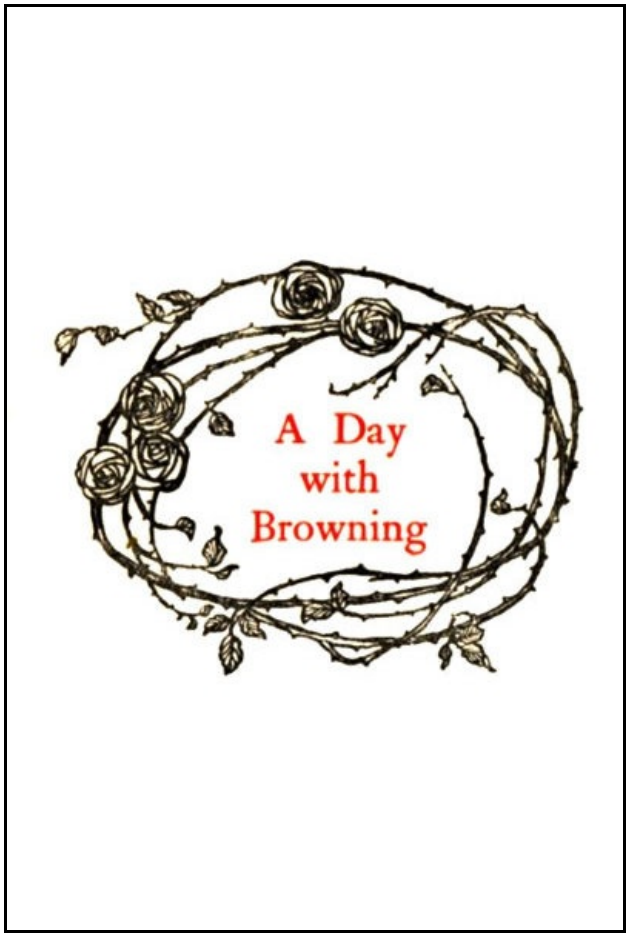


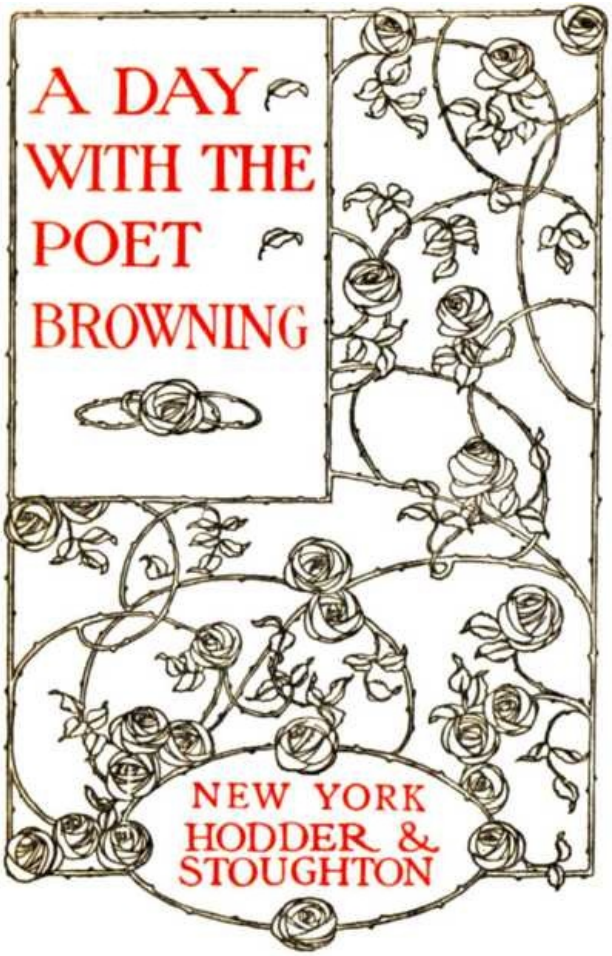
BROWNING
DAYS WITH POETS



A Day with Browning

"The Palazzo Giustiniani Recanati was a place of historical association and fifteenth-century traditions.... At three o'clock regularly, a friend's gondola, which was always at hand to convey him, came and carried him, usually, to the Lido,—his favourite spot."

Painting by E. W. Haslehust.
BROWNING'S HOUSE IN VENICE.



A DAY WITH THE POET BROWNING

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A DAY WITH BROWNING.

ROM his bed-room window in the Palazzo Giustiniani Recanati, every morning in 1885, Robert Browning watched the sunrise. "My window commands a perfect view," he wrote, "the still, grey lagoon, the few seagulls flying, the islet of San Giorgio in deep shadow, and the clouds in a long purple rack, from behind which a sort of spirit of rose burns up, till presently all the rims are on fire with gold.... So my day begins."

The Palazzo, in which a suite of rooms had been placed by Mrs. Bronson at the disposal of the poet and his sister, was a place of historical association and fifteenth-century traditions. And no more appropriate abiding-place than Venice could have been selected for a man of Browning's temperament. The Venetian colouring was a perpetual feast to his eye: its mediæval glories were a source of continual inspiration. And if much of his heart still remained with his native land, so that the London daily papers were a necessity of existence, and a certain sense of exile occasionally obtruded itself, we must needs be grateful to that fact for its result in certain immortal lines:

> Oh, to be in England
> Now that April's there,
> And whoever wakes in England
> Sees, some morning, unaware,
> That the lowest boughs and the brush-wood sheaf
> Round the elm-tree bole are in tiny leaf,
> While the chaffinch sings on the orchard bough
> In England—now!
>
> And after April, when May follows,
> And the whitethroat builds, and all the swallows!
> Hark! where my blossomed pear-tree in the hedge
> Leans to the field and scatters on the clover
> Blossoms and dewdrops—at the bent-spray's edge—
> That's the wise thrush; he sings each song twice over,
> Lest you should think he never could recapture
> The first fine careless rapture!
> And though the fields look rough with hoary dew,
> All will be gay when noontide wakes anew
> The buttercups, the little children's dower,
> —Far brighter than this gaudy melon-flower!

But there had always been a frankly cosmopolitan spirit in Browning,—no touch of parochialism or insularity. In the magnificent gallery of portrait studies, no two alike, which his poems present to us, the nationalities are legion. Yet Italian scenes predominate; for Browning could gauge, with the unerring instinct of genius, all the subtleties of the Italian temperament. So we come, at every turn, across some ardent vision of the South,—here, Waring sailing out of Trieste under the furled lateen-sail; and there, Fra Lippo Lippi tracking "lutestrings, laughs, and whifts of song"

down the darkling streets of Florence. The "Patriot," riding into Brescia, "roses, roses all the way," and the Duke of Ferrara,—that "typical representative of a whole phase of civilisation," discussing *My Last Duchess* and her foolishness.

That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,
Looking as if she were alive; I call
That piece a wonder, now: Frà Pandolf's hands
Worked busily a day, and there she stands.
Will't please you sit and look at her? I said
"Frà Pandolf" by design, for never read
Strangers like you that pictured countenance,
The depth and passion of its earnest glance,
But to myself they turned (since none puts by
The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)
And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,
How such a glance came there; so, not the first
Are you to turn and ask thus. Sir, 'twas not
Her husband's presence only, called that spot
Of joy into the Duchess' cheek: perhaps
Frà Pandolf chanced to say "Her mantle laps
Over my Lady's wrist too much," or "Paint
Must never hope to reproduce the faint
Half-flush that dies along her throat;" such stuff
Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough
For calling up that spot of joy. She had
A heart ... how shall I say? ... too soon made glad,
Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er
She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.
Sir, 'twas all one! My favour at her breast,
The dropping of the daylight in the West,
The bough of cherries some officious fool
Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule
She rode with round the terrace—all and each
Would draw from her alike the approving speech,
Or blush, at least. She thanked men,—good; but thanked
Somehow ... I know not how ... as if she ranked
My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name
With anybody's gift.

(*My Last Duchess.*)

That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,
Looking as if she were alive; I call
That piece a wonder, now: Frà Pandolf's hands
Worked busily a day, and there she stands.
Will't please you sit and look at her? I said
"Frà Pandolf" by design, for never read
Strangers like you that pictured countenance,
The depth and passion of its earnest glance,
But to myself they turned (since none puts by
The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)
And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,
How such a glance came there.

Painting by W. J. Neatby. **MY LAST DUCHESS.**

After a light and early breakfast—the poet, when abroad, lived almost entirely on milk, fruit, etc., abjuring animal food—Browning would follow his invariable custom, a stroll along the Riva to the public gardens. He never failed to leave the house at the same hour of the day: he was a man of singularly methodical habits in many ways. "Good sense," it has been said, "was his foible, if not his habit": and an orderly method of life was one of the strongest proofs of this fact: another evidence lay in his care to avoid being *labelled*. The disorderly locks and careless appearance of the typical poet were quite alien to this well-groomed, cleanly-looking Englishman, with his "sweet, grave face," silvery hair, and smooth, healthy skin. Singularly wholesome in body as well as in mind, until past seventy he could take the longest walks without fatigue; the splendid eyesight of his clear grey eyes remained untarnished to the last. These keen grey eyes of his never failed to notice anything worth seeing in his walks: an extraordinary minuteness of observation is perceptible in all his poems dealing with out-door life,—little touches of detail such as few men are masters of:

> And the leaf-buds on the vine are woolly,
> I noticed that, to-day;
> One day more bursts them open fully,
> —You know the red turns grey.
> (*The Lost Mistress.*)

And again, those lines of poignant, passionate reserve, which sum up *May and Death*:

> I wish that when you died last May,
> Charles, there had died along with you
> Three parts of spring's delightful things;
> Ay, and for me, the fourth part too.
>
> A foolish thought, and worse, perhaps!
> There must be many a pair of friends
> Who, arm in arm, deserve the warm
> Moon-births, and the long evening-ends.
>
> So, for their sake, be May still May!
> Let their new time, as mine of old,
> Do all it did for me: I bid

Sweet sights and sounds throng manifold.

Only, one little sight, one plant,
Woods have in May, that starts up green
Save a sole streak which, so to speak,
Is spring's blood, spilt its leaves between,—

That, they might spare; a certain wood
Might miss the plant; their loss were small:
But I,—whene'er the leaf grows there,
Its drop comes from my heart, that's all.

Arrived at the public gardens, Browning was careful to visit his "friends" there and to feed them —the elephant, baboon, kangaroo, ostrich, pelican, and marmosets. He had that particular *camaraderie* with wild animals which is almost akin to a hypnotic influence over them: and when in the country, he would "whistle softly to the lizards basking on the low walls which border the roads, to try his old power of attracting them." Flowers he enjoyed as a colour-feast for the eye; scenery he revelled in. In that perpetual contemplation of Nature, which with Wordsworth became an all-absorbent passion, Browning had but little share: his chief interest was in man. But "now and again external nature was for him ... pierced and shot through with spiritual fire."

Three times punctually he would walk round the gardens, and then walk home. Upon these daily strolls he was accompanied by his sister Sarianna: in whose love and companionship he was singularly fortunate. Sarianna Browning had always been the best of sisters to the poet and his wife,—a kindred spirit in every sense of the word; and she was now intent to supply, so far as in her lay, the place of that "soul of fire enclosed in a shell of pearl"—Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Of the dead wife, who had been all-in-all to him, Browning seldom spoke in words: but his burning need of her and hope of reunion with her gleamed continually through his writings:

"Oh, their Rafael of the dear Madonnas,
Oh, their Dante of the dread Inferno,
Wrote one song—and in my brain I sing it,
Drew one angel—borne, see, on my bosom!"

And in all his poems which deal with the love of man and woman, "he regarded the union of soul with soul as the capital achievement of life." He thought of love "as a supreme possession in itself, and as a revelation of infinite things which lie beyond it: as a test of character, and even as a pledge of perpetual advance in the life of the spirit." Hence, even where the shadow of death broods over a poem, as we see it *In a Gondola*, that shadow "glows with colour like the shadows of a Venetian painter." Love, to the very last, is infinitely stronger than death.

I send my heart up to thee, all my heart,
In this my singing.
For the stars help me, and the sea bears part;
The very night is clinging
Closer to Venice' streets to leave one space
Above me, whence thy face
May light my joyous heart to thee its dwelling-place.

Painting by W. Russell Flint. **IN A GONDOLA.**

He sings.

I send my heart up to thee, all my heart
In this my singing.
For the stars help me, and the sea bears part;
The very night is clinging
Closer to Venice' streets to leave one space
Above me, whence thy face
May light my joyous heart to thee its dwelling-place.

She speaks.

Say after me, and try to say
My very words, as if each word
Came from you of your own accord,
In your own voice, in your own way:
"This woman's heart and soul and brain
Are mine as much as this gold chain
She bids me wear; which," (say again)
"I choose to make by cherishing
A precious thing, or choose to fling
Over the boat-side, ring by ring."
And yet once more say ... no word more!
Since words are only words. Give o'er!
Unless you call me, all the same,
Familiarly by my pet-name
Which, if the Three should hear you call,
And me reply to, would proclaim
At once our secret to them all.

* * * * *

She speaks.

There's Zanze's vigilant taper; safe are we!
Only one minute more to-night with me?
Resume your past self of a month ago!
Be you the bashful gallant, I will be
The lady with the colder breast than snow:

Now bow you, as becomes, nor touch my hand
More than I touch yours when I step to land,
And say, "All thanks, Siora!"—
Heart to heart,
And lips to lips! Yet once more, ere we part,
Clasp me, and make me thine, as mine thou art!

(*He is surprised and stabbed.*)

It was ordained to be so, Sweet,—and best
Comes now, beneath thine eyes, and on thy breast.
Still kiss me! Care not for the cowards! Care
Only to put aside thy beauteous hair
My blood will hurt! The Three, I do not scorn
To death, because they never lived: but I
Have lived indeed, and so—(yet one more kiss)—can die!
(*In a Gondola.*)

The latter hours of the morning were devoted by the poet to work, proof-sheets, and correspondence. He would complain bitterly of the quantity of "ephemeral correspondence" which took up so much of his time: yet, with the rarest exceptions, he answered every letter he received. He counted that day lost in which he had not written at least a little. In earlier life he had worked fast and copiously, but now he was satisfied with twenty or thirty lines as the result of a morning's work. And upon these lines he expended infinite trouble; for, despite all suppositions to the contrary, he finished his work with great care. "People accuse me of not taking pains!" he grumbled, "I take nothing *but* pains!"

His subject-matter fell naturally into three groups of poems: those interpreting love in its various phases, those occupied with art and artists, those treating of religious ideas and emotions. And these again may be subdivided into poems of failure and attainment: it is hard to say which are which, for Browning was the singer of heroic failures, and they, to him, were spiritual triumphs. He held that "we fall to rise—are baffled to fight better,—sleep, to wake." No such moral tonic has ever been proffered to the weary and dispirited as the invulnerable optimism of Browning. He regarded this present life as a state of probation and preparation; therefore, "his faith in the unseen order of things created a hope which persists through all apparent failure." The Miltonic ideal, "and what is else, not to be overcome," is the core and centre of Browning's teaching. Sometimes it refers to hopeless love, as in *The Last Ride Together*.

I said—Then, Dearest, since 'tis so,
Since now at length my fate I know,
Since nothing all my love avails,
Since all, my life seemed meant for, fails,
Since this was written and needs must be—

My whole heart rises up to bless
Your name in pride and thankfulness!
Take back the hope you gave,—I claim
Only a memory of the same,
—And this beside, if you will not blame,
Your leave for one more last ride with me.

My mistress bent that brow of hers;
Those deep dark eyes where pride demurs
When pity would be softening through,
Fixed me a breathing-while or two
With life or death in the balance: right!
The blood replenished me again;
My last thought was at least not vain:
I and my mistress, side by side
Shall be together, breathe and ride,
So, one day more am I deified—
Who knows but the world may end to-night?

Sometimes death, to all seeming, has shut the doors of hope for ever:

Beautiful Evelyn Hope is dead!
Sit and watch by her side an hour.
That is her book-shelf, this her bed;
She plucked that piece of geranium-flower,
Beginning to die too in the glass;
Little has yet been changed, I think:
The shutters are shut, no light may pass

Save two long rays thro' the hinge's chink.

* * * * * * * * *

Is it too late then, Evelyn Hope?
What, your soul was pure and true,
The good stars met in your horoscope,
Made you of spirit, fire and dew—
And, just because I was thrice as old
And our paths in the world diverged so wide,
Each was nought to each, must I be told?
We were fellow-mortals, nought beside?

No, indeed! for God above
Is great to grant, as mighty to make,
And creates the love to reward the love:
I claim you still, for my own love's sake!
Delayed it may be for more lives yet,
Through worlds I shall traverse, not a few:
Much is to learn and much to forget
Ere the time be come for taking you.

But the time will come,—at last it will,
When, Evelyn Hope, what meant, I shall say,
In the lower earth, in the years long still,
That body and soul so pure and gay?
Why your hair was amber, I shall divine,
And your mouth of your own geranium's red—
And what you would do with me, in fine,
In the new life come in the old one's stead.

* * * * * * * * *

I loved you, Evelyn, all the while!
My heart seemed full as it could hold—
There was place and to spare for the frank young smile,
And the red young mouth and the hair's young gold.
So, hush,—I will give you this leaf to keep—
See, I shut it inside the sweet cold hand.
There, that is our secret! go to sleep;
You will wake, and remember, and understand.

Or, again, the tragedy of ingratitude and crumbled aspirations ends—as the world might say—upon the scaffold.

It was roses, roses, all the way,
With myrtle mixed in my path like mad:
The house-roofs seemed to heave and sway,
The church-spires flamed, such flags they had,
A year ago on this very day!

* * * * * * * * *

There's nobody on the house-tops now—
Just a palsied few at the windows set;
For the best of the sight is, all allow,
At the Shambles' Gate—or, better yet,
By the very scaffold's foot, I trow.

I go in the rain, and, more than needs,
A rope cuts both my wrists behind;
And I think, by the feel, my forehead bleeds,
For they fling, whoever has a mind,
Stones at me for my year's misdeeds.

Thus I entered Brescia, and thus I go!
In triumphs, people have dropped down dead.
"Thou, paid by the World,—what dost thou owe
Me?" God might question: but now instead,
'Tis God shall requite! I am safer so.

In all these, as in *Childe Roland*, that forlorn romance of dreary and depressed heroism, "the trumpet-note of the soul's victory rings through the darkness of terrestrial defeat":

Not hear? when noise was everywhere! it tolled
Increasing like a bell. Names in my ears
Of all the lost adventurers my peers,—
How such a one was strong, and such was bold,
And such was fortunate, yet each of old
Lost, lost! one moment knelled the woe of years.

There they stood, ranged along the hill-sides, met
To view the last of me, a living frame
For one more picture! in a sheet of flame
I saw them and I knew them all. And yet
Dauntless the slug-horn to my lips I set
And blew, "*Childe Roland to the Dark Tower came*."

... At noon, Browning would make a second and more substantial breakfast on Italian dishes; and at three o'clock regularly, a friend's gondola, which was always at hand to convey him, came and carried him, usually, to the Lido,—his favourite spot. "I walk, even in wind or rain," he wrote, "for a couple of hours on Lido, and enjoy the break of sea on the strip of sand, as much as Shelley did in those old days.... Go there,—if only to be blown about by the sea-wind!" The sea-wind, indeed, was the very utterance of his own robust and vigorous nature, his keen alertness of sense, and his impetuous, impulsive spirit.

In the course of the afternoon, he would explore Venice in all directions, studying her multitudinous points of interest and beauty. The daughter of his hostess, Mrs. Bronson, sometimes companioned him on these excursions, guiding him through the narrow by-streets, or examining, with him, the monuments, sculptures and frescoes of the churches.

Art, in its various manifestations, had been a life-long study with Browning. He took great delight in modelling in clay, and had for some while studied sculpture under Story. He possessed the artistic temperament—fiery, nervous, susceptible—in its sanest form: and not only was he able to express all an artist's aims, ambitions, and despairs, but to arrive in all his poems, at one point or other, at a superb pictorial moment. Some of his lines are penetrated from end to end with this remarkable pictorial quality: perhaps the most notable example is *Love Among the Ruins*, with its triple contrast,—the infinite calm of the pasture-lands prolonging themselves into the sunset, the noise and vital movement which had filled the now-vanished city,—and the lover, endeavouring to curb his impatience for the one beloved face by dwelling on these outward things:

And I know, while thus the quiet-coloured eve
Smiles to leave
To their folding, all our many-tinkling fleece
In such peace,
And the slopes and rills in undistinguished grey
Melt away—
That a girl with eager eyes and yellow hair
Waits me there
In the turret whence the charioteers caught soul
For the goal,
When the king looked, where she looks now, breathless, dumb
Till I come.

Painting by W. Russell Flint. **LOVE AMONG THE RUINS.**

Where the quiet-coloured end of evening smiles
Miles and miles
On the solitary pastures where our sheep
Half asleep
Tinkle homeward thro' the twilight, stray or stop
As they crop—

Was the site once of a city great and gay,
(So they say)
Of our country's very capital, its prince
Ages since
Held his court in, gathered councils, wielding far
Peace or war.

* * * * * * * * *

And I know, while thus the quiet-coloured eve
Smiles to leave
To their folding, all our many-tinkling fleece
In such peace,
And the slopes and rills in undistinguished grey
Melt away—

That a girl with eager eyes and yellow hair
Waits me there
In the turret whence the charioteers caught soul
For the goal,
When the king looked, where she looks now, breathless, dumb
Till I come.

But he looked upon the city, every side,
Far and wide,
All the mountains topped with temples, all the glades'
Colonnades,
All the causeys, bridges, aqueducts,—and then,
All the men!

When I do come, she will speak not, she will stand,
Either hand
On my shoulder, give her eyes the first embrace
Of my face,
Ere we rush, ere we extinguish sight and speech
Each on each.

* * * * * * * * *

Oh heart! oh, blood that freezes, blood that burns!
Earth's returns
For whole centuries of folly, noise and sin!
Shut them in,
With their triumphs and their glories and the rest.
Love is best!

Another characteristic of Browning was his consummate comprehension of artistic ideals, those of temperaments so opposite as Fra Lippo Lippi, *Pictor Ignotus*, and that too-perfect painter Andrea del Sarto. His poem on the last-named was written and forwarded to a friend, who had begged him to procure a copy of the Pitti portrait of Del Sarto and his wife. It tells far more than any portrait could: and expresses the writer's doctrine that in art, as in life, the aspiration toward the higher is greater than the achievement of the lower: "A man's reach should exceed his grasp, or what's heaven for?" According to Browning's belief, a soul's probation, its growth, its ultimate value, lie mainly if not wholly in this choice between the high and the less high.

... Love, we are in God's hand.
How strange now, looks the life He makes us lead!
So free we seem, so fettered fast we are!
I feel He laid the fetter: let it lie!
This chamber for example—turn your head—
All that's behind us! you don't understand
Nor care to understand about my art,
But you can hear at least when people speak;
And that cartoon, the second from the door
—It is the thing, Love! so such things should be—
Behold Madonna, I am bold to say.
I can do with my pencil what I know,
What I see, what at bottom of my heart
I wish for, if I ever wish so deep—
Do easily, too—when I say perfectly
I do not boast, perhaps: yourself are judge
Who listened to the Legate's talk last week,
And just as much they used to say in France.
At any rate 'tis easy, all of it,
No sketches first, no studies, that's long past—
I do what many dream of all their lives
—Dream? strive to do, and agonise to do,
And fail in doing. I could count twenty such
On twice your fingers, and not leave this town,
Who strive—you don't know how the others strive
To paint a little thing like that you smeared
Carelessly passing with your robes afloat,—
Yet do much less, so much less, Someone says,
(I know his name, no matter) so much less!
Well, less is more, Lucrezia! I am judged.
There burns a truer light of God in them,
In their vexed, beating, stuffed and stopped-up brain,
Heart, or whate'er else, that goes on to prompt
This low-pulsed forthright craftsman's hand of mine.
Their works drop groundward, but themselves, I know,
Reach many a time a heaven that's shut to me,
Enter and take their place there sure enough,
Though they come back and cannot tell the world.
My works are nearer heaven, but I sit here.
(*Andrea del Sarto.*)

Social intercourse occupied a large portion of the day. Browning identified himself with the daily life of Venice, and, besides this, English and American acquaintances were frequently in Venice: the poet, his reputation now firmly established and extending, was sought after by innumerable admirers. He was a man of great social charm,—a brilliant talker, full of amusing anecdotes,—his memory for historical incident was only paralleled by his immense literary knowledge, upon which he drew for apt illustration. Yet he was naturally a reticent man, of painfully nervous excitability; "nervous to such a degree," as he said of himself, "that I might fancy I could not enter a drawing-room, did I not know from my experience that I *could* do it." This very nervousness, however, often induced an almost abnormal vivacity of speech: and Browning was

warmly welcomed amongst the notable and even royal folk whose names were included in Mrs. Bronson's circle; they recognised in him, as Frederick Tennyson had done, "a man of infinite learning, jest, and *bonhomie*, and moreover a sterling heart that reveals no hollowness." To women he was specially attracted, and *vice-versâ*; "that golden-hearted Robert," as his wife had termed him, had an intimate understanding of the woman's mind. But towards children, he was, so to speak, almost numb. Devoted though he was to his only son, "the essential quality of early childhood was not that which appealed to him:" and the fervour of parental instinct finds practically no expression in his poems.

In the course of the day the poet would lose no opportunity of hearing any important concert: an accomplished musician himself, his love for the tone-art amounted to a passion: and in many of his greatest poems, he had voiced the most secret meanings of music, and the yearning aspirations of a composer. We "sit alone in the loft" with the organist, Master Hughes of Saxe-Gotha, and his "huge house of the sounds," to listen and wonder while his fugue "broadens and thickens, greatens and deepens and lengthens," and the intricacy of constructive technique forms, as someone has said, "an interposing web spun by the brain between art and things divine." Or we stand with Abt Vogler in his "palace of music" as it falls to pieces, and the magic of inspiration over-rides the mastery of construction. The void of the silence is filled with "the substance of things hoped for; the evidence of things not seen," and faith is born of the composer's very impotence to realize the heights of his own ambition—yet one more rendering of that triumphant failure, of which Browning was the prophet:

All we have willed or hoped or dreamed of good shall exist;
Not its semblance, but itself; no beauty, nor good, nor power
Whose voice has gone forth, but each survives for the melodist
When eternity affirms the conception of an hour.
The high that proved too high, the heroic for earth too hard,
The passion that left the ground to lose itself in the sky,
Are music sent up to God by the lover and the bard;
Enough that he heard it once: we shall hear it by-and-by.

And what is our failure here but a triumph's evidence
For the fulness of the days? Have we withered or agonized?
Why else was the pause prolonged but that singing might issue thence?
Why rushed the discords in but that harmony should be prized?
Sorrow is hard to bear, and doubt is slow to clear,
Each sufferer says his say, his scheme of the weal and woe:
But God has a few of us whom he whispers in the ear;
The rest may reason and welcome: 'tis we musicians know.
(*Abt Vogler.*)

And, as a final contrast, drawn out of that shoreless sea of contrasts which music can reveal, we have *A Toccata of Galuppi's*, suffused with the melancholy of mundane pleasure, steeped in the ephemeral voluptuousness of eighteenth-century Venice. In these lines, it has been pointed out, "Browning's self-restraint is admirable.... The poet will not say a word more than the musician has said in his Toccata."

Did young people take their pleasure when the sea was warm in May?
Balls and masks begun at midnight, burning ever to mid-day,
When they made up fresh adventures for the morrow, do you say?

* * * * * * * * *

Well (and it was graceful of them) they'd break talk off and afford—
—She to bite her mask's black velvet, he to finger on his sword,
While you sat and played Toccatas, stately at the clavichord?

Painting by W. Russell Flint. **A TOCCATA OF GALUPPI'S.**

Oh, Galuppi, Baldassaro, this is very sad to find!
I can hardly misconceive you; it would prove me deaf and blind;
But although I take your meaning, 'tis with such a heavy mind!
Here you come with your old music, and here's all the good it brings.
What, they lived thus at Venice, where the merchants were the kings,
Where St. Mark's is, where the Doges used to wed the sea with rings?

* * * * *

Did young people take their pleasure when the sea was warm in May?
Balls and masks begun at midnight, burning ever to mid-day,
When they made up fresh adventures for the morrow, do you say?

* * * * *

Well (and it was graceful of them) they'd break talk off and afford—
—She to bite her mask's black velvet, he to finger on his sword,
While you sat and played Toccatas, stately at the clavichord?

What? Those lesser thirds so plaintive, sixths diminished, sigh on sigh,
Told them something? Those suspensions, those solutions—"Must we
die?"
Those commiserating sevenths—"Life might last! we can but try!"

"Were you happy?"—"Yes."—"And are you still as happy?"—"Yes. And
you?"
—"Then, more kisses!"—"Did I stop them, when a million seemed so few?"
Hark! the dominant's persistence, till it must be answered to!

So an octave struck the answer. Oh, they praised you, I dare say!
"Brave Galuppi! that was music! good alike at grave and gay!
I can always leave off talking when I hear a master play!"

Then they left you for your pleasure: till in due time, one by one,
Some with lives that came to nothing, some with deeds as well undone,
Death came tacitly and took them where they never see the sun.

* * * * *

(*A Toccata of Galuppi's.*)

The afternoon wore by quickly, and it was soon time to dress for dinner: for Browning was precise in adhering to the customs of civilised life: and he liked to see his sister seated opposite him, clad in beautiful gowns of sombre richness, and wearing quaint old jewelry. Browning accepted his meals with frank pleasure; he was no ascetic, and "his optimism and his belief in direct Providence led him to make a direct virtue of happiness," and to welcome it in its simplest form. Any guest who might be present was privileged to enjoy that sparkling and many-faceted eloquence to which reference has been made already. But the host was always careful to avoid deep or solemn topics—doubtless because he felt them far too keenly, to use them as mere texts for dinner-table discussion. "If such were broached in his presence, he dismissed them with one strong convincing sentence, and adroitly turned the current of conversation into a shallower channel."

Later on, he would probably visit the Goldoni Theatre, where he had a large box: or, if remaining at home, he was often prevailed upon to read aloud. His delivery was forcible and dramatic,—he would strongly emphasise all the light and shade of a poem, and the touches of character in the dialogue. Especially was this the case when reading his own compositions. But often he would say with a smile, "No R. B. to-night!—let us have some real poetry," and would take down a volume of Shelley, Keats or Coleridge.

At last, another of the "divine sunsets" which Browning adored had faded over the Lido; the "quiet-coloured end of evening" had darkened into dusk and stars. Even that alert and indefatigable frame grew weary with the day's long doings, and a natural desire for rest descended upon "the brain which too much thought expands." The vision of Guercino's picture, "fraught with a pathos so magnificent," returned upon him from that sultry day in which he had beheld the "Guardian Angel" at Fano, "my angel with me, too," and he longed for the touch of those divinely-healing hands.

Dear and great Angel, would'st thou only leave
That child, when thou hast done with him, for me!
Let me sit all the day here, that when eve
Shall find performed thy special ministry
And time come for departure, thou, suspending
Thy flight, may'st see another child for tending,
Another still, to quiet and retrieve.

Painting by W. Russell Flint. **THE GUARDIAN ANGEL.**

Dear and great Angel, wouldst thou only leave
That child, when thou hast done with him, for me!
Let me sit all the day here, that when eve
Shall find performed thy special ministry
And time come for departure, thou, suspending
Thy flight, mayst see another child for tending,
Another still, to quiet and retrieve.

Then I shall feel thee step one step, no more,
From where thou standest now, to where I gaze,
—And suddenly my head is covered o'er
With those wings, white above the child who prays
Now on that tomb—and I shall feel thee guarding
Me, out of all the world; for me, discarding
Yon Heaven thy home, that waits and opes its door!

I would not look up thither past thy head
Because the door opes, like that child, I know,
For I should have thy gracious face instead,

Thou bird of God! And wilt thou bend me low
Like him, and lay, like his, my hands together,
And lift them up to pray, and gently tether
Me, as thy lamb there, with thy garments spread?...

How soon all worldly wrong would be repaired!
I think how I should view the earth and skies
And sea, when once again my brow was bared
After thy healing, with such different eyes.
O world, as God has made it! all is beauty:
And knowing this, is love, and love is duty.
What further may be sought for or declared?

Yet it was not to a celestial visitant that Browning's thoughts turned most, now or at any other time. It was towards the one love of his life,—towards that re-union, that restoration, that infrangible joy of retrieval, which was the goal of his whole desire. And, characteristically of the man who was "ever a fighter," he did not expect to reach his haven by a calm and prosperous passage. It had to be fought for—struggled for from strength to strength,—attained through incessant and arduous combat. For those do not "mount, and that hardly, to eternal life," who remain content upon terrestrial planes;

"Surely they see not God, I know,
Nor all that chivalry of His,
The soldier-saints, who, row on row,
Burn upwards each to his point of bliss,
Since, the end of life being manifest,
He had cut his way through the world to this."

Therefore, as sleep, "Death's twin-brother," came slowly through the darkness, the fighter faced his last hour in imagination, and made haste to "greet the future with a cheer." For *Prospice* is an "act of the faith which comes through love.... No lonely adventure is here to reward the victor o'er death: the transcendant joy is human love recovered":

Fear death?—to feel the fog in my throat,
The mist in my face,
When the snows begin, and the blasts denote
I am nearing the place,
The power of the night, the press of the storm,
The post of the foe;
Where he stands, the Arch Fear in a visible form,
Yet the strong man must go:
For the journey is done and the summit attained,
And the barriers fall,
Though a battle's to fight ere the guerdon be gained,
The reward of it all.
I was ever a fighter, so—one fight more,
The best and the last!
I would hate that death bandaged my eyes, and forbore,

And bade me creep past.
No! let me taste the whole of it, fare like my peers
The heroes of old,
Bear the brunt, in a minute pay glad life's arrears
Of pain, darkness and cold.
For sudden the worst turns the best to the brave,
The black minute's at end,
And the elements' rage, the fiend-voices that rave,
Shall dwindle, shall blend,
Shall change, shall become first a peace out of pain,
Then a light, then thy breast,
O thou soul of my soul! I shall clasp thee again,
And with God be the rest!
(*Prospice.*)

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