

JULY 15, 1909

Abt Vogler; or even the obscure Jewish Rabbi, Ben Ezra, into whose mouth Browning chose to put the "largest and sublimest scheme of morals and religion which his imagination could conceive." A few people, however, saw that in this young man was sprouting a poet more than ordinary. Mill, Landor, Leigh Hunt, Talfourd and Carlyle were attracted to him. He was, indeed, one of the very few people with whom the last-named got on well.

Even lacking recognition, it never occurred to Browning to be discouraged. He was at no time obliged to write for money, and he could afford to wait. A description of him, written at this time by Miss Fox, is interesting. "He was," she writes, "slim and dark and very handsome, and—may I hint it?—just a trifle of a dandy, addicted to lemon-colored 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 is more, determined to conquer fame and to achieve success."

In 1840 *Sordello* was published, and Carlyle wrote to say that his wife had read it with great interest, and wished to know whether *Sordello* was a man, or a city, or a book. Tennyson said that the first and last lines—"Who will may hear *Sordello's* story told," and "Who would has heard *Sordello's* story told,"—were the only two lines in the poem that he understood, and they were his. . . . It may be imagined what the reception by the ordinary world amounted to.

But Browning was full of fight. "I was ever," he says, "a great fighter,"—and so he was. As was remarked of him, "He was always contending, whether it was with a German theory about the Gnostics, or with a stranger who elbowed his wife in a crowd,"—and so he arose from the attacks on "*Sordello*," with undaunted face.

The very next year "*Pippa Passes*," designated by a famous modern critic as "the greatest poem ever written, with the exception of one or two by Walt Whitman, to express the sentiment of pure love of humanity," was published, and two years later, "*Dramatic Lyrics*." Following these came "*The Return of the Druses*" (1843), a poem replete with Browning's typical qualities, but above all the poem which presents the first rise of that peculiar psychological tendency which was destined to mark his work henceforth as peculiarly original, absolutely Browningsque.

About this time he became interested in some poems written by Miss Barrett, an invalid, bedridden at her home among the Malvern Hills, and a correspondence began which developed into a romance, well worthy a place in the history of "Great Lovers." Finally, and after some difficulty, Browning called on the lady, to whom the new interest seems to have brought the elixir of life. An elopement followed, the world stared, and Wordsworth concisely summed up his opinion of the situation as follows: "So Robert Browning and Miss Barrett have gone off together. I hope they understand each other—nobody else would."

The elopement was, however, followed by the happiest consequences. The two settled in Florence, Italy, and there followed a life, quite idyllic, altogether ideal. Here Browning dabbled in art, painting, sculpture and music, and wrote his poems, thenceforth colored, nay mirrored, with the Italian atmosphere, and surcharged with the vivid political pulsations of the stirring times of Garibaldi, Mazzini and Cavour. As yet the poems were not recognized at their worth in England, but they were gaining ground, and in Italy a host of personal friends were being attracted to this unique home of poets. Mrs. Browning has always been described as a woman of great sweetness, and Browning himself possessed the faculty which drew to him the love of men—"even of geniuses."

The ideal life was, however, all too short. In 1861 Mrs. Browning died, and Browning returned to England, where he devoted himself henceforth to his only son.

In 1868, "*The Ring and the Book*," that strange psychological study which has baffled so many readers, was published, and Browning at last, among the circles of the learned at least, became known. In the succeeding years he wrote almost with feverish rapidity.

"Herve Riel," "Balaustion's Adventure," and "Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau," "Fifine at the Fair," "Pacchiarotto," "La Saisiaz," "Dramatic Idylls," "Ferdinand's Fancies," "Asolando," are a few of the poems that marked this fruitful old age.

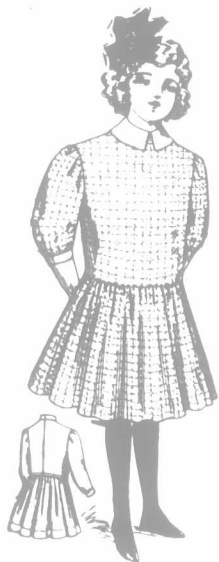
In 1887 his health began to break up slowly, and on August 13th, 1888, he set out for Italy for the last time, and there the last months came easily. "The old man could be seen continually in the lanes round Asolo, peering into hedges and whistling for the lizards," but one day he was not there. On December 12th, 1889, he died at Venice, or perhaps he would have preferred it said that he had not died. "Without death, which is our church-yard, crape-like word for change, for growth," he once said, "there could be no prolongation of that which we call life. Never say of me that I am dead."

He spoke of his own personality. Of his work it may be said that it has just begun its richest, fullest life. Browning is appreciated to-day as never before.

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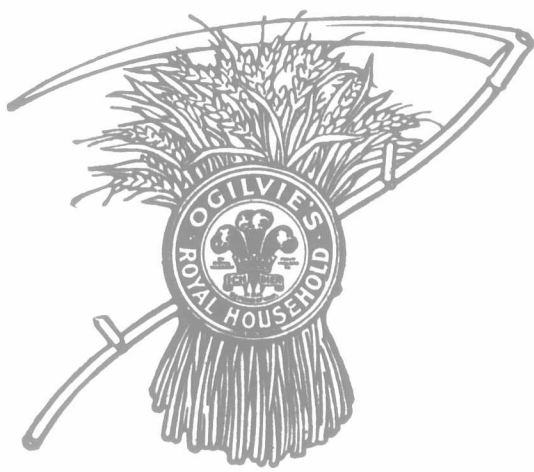
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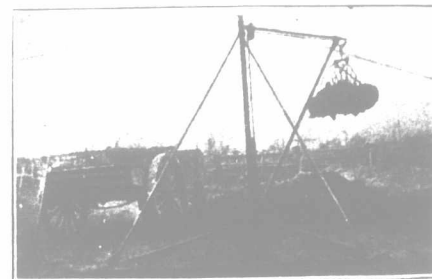
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