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## The Browning Elopement.

To the adventurous young women of the present day Miss Elizabeth Barrett must indeed appear a timid, poor-spirited creature. Let us sum up their own case against her.

### Afraid of Men.

She was, at the time when she contemplated her great adventure, no child, but a woman of forty—there were her reasons. She was a woman of independent means—£400 or £500 a year—she was far too unworldly ever to know the exact figure of her income. She was a learned woman—learned enough to translate the choruses of the "Agamemnon" and perceive, as clearly as Mr. Gilbert Murray himself, the difference between Euripides and the other Greek dramatists. She was clever as well as learned—clever enough to be a valued contributor to the Athenaeum. And with all that, she was afraid of men; afraid of strange men on the principle of omne ignotum pro horrido; afraid of papa, who wanted to keep her like a canary in a cage. It does, when one comes to think of it, seem rather absurd. And yet, when the situation occurred, it was almost normal, though it occurred only a little more than seventy years ago.

### Invalidism.

It occurred, that is to say, in the early Victorian Age, which, to us, seems almost as remote as the Stone Age. It was the age, among other things, of the feminine malade imaginaire; and Miss Elizabeth Barrett was a shining example of that type. No doubt she was delicate; but there certainly was nothing serious the matter with her. The medicines which she needed were fresh air, exercise, freedom, and congenial society. Instead of that, she was regarded by herself and her family as a permanent invalid. When she went out of doors she wore that obsolete and insensate appliance, a respirator; and she spent most of her time on the sofa, in a darkened room, complaining of headache, dosing herself with sal volatile and dabbling her fevered brow with a handkerchief soaked in eau-de-Cologne.

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Victorian Age must have been an age of leisure! Moreover, even when the invitation was finally sent, it was hedged about with so many precautionary hints that Browning wondered whether he was suspected of predatory designs on the umbrellas in the hat-stand, and ended with a postscript which opened the door to still further procrastination: "If on Tuesday you should not be well, pray do not come!" But Browning's health was robust. He came, and saw, and conquered; and then it was his turn to feel that perhaps he had been too tamerous. He actually wrote to say that, if his society was disturbing to Miss Barrett's peace of mind, he would, of course, withdraw before irreparable harm was done. It was a silly thing to do; but it did, at least, by wounding Miss Barrett's vanity, sting her into self-respect. She returned Browning's letter to him, with the suggestion that he should reconsider it. He not only reconsidered it, but burnt it, cursing himself for a conceited ape; and then, at last, relations were gradually established on a sound basis.

### "That Man."

Yet not so far, on a very dignified basis. Mr. Barrett used to refer darkly to Browning as "that man;" and Browning had to slink in and out of the house like a servant's "follower" in a place in which no followers are allowed. When, the ice being now really broken, he began to talk of marriage, he discovered that the obstacles were formidable, and was told that they were insuperable. Miss Barrett reported to him a conversation which she had had on the subject with her sister Arabella, who was in her confidence.

"If a Prince of Eldorado should come, with a pedigree of lineal descent from signory in one hand and a ticket of good behaviour from the nearest Independent chapel in the other—"

"Why, even then," said my sister Arabella, "it would not do."

And Miss Barrett further warned him what would be the consequences if her father ever found out that he was anything more than a literary conferee with whom she investigated the precise meaning of the more obscure passages in the *Æschylean* choruses:—

We should be able to meet never again in this room, nor to have intercourse by letter through the ordinary channel. I mean that letters of yours addressed to me here would infallibly be stopped and destroyed—if not opened. Things were actually as bad as that; Miss Barrett was actually as scared as that. Her father not only had no right of jurisdiction over her—it was not even in his power to bring pecuniary pressure to bear. She was, as has been said, forty, and had an income of her own on which she could comfortably have set up a separate establishment. Browning was socially eligible, and could not be suspected of fortune-hunting, as he had a sufficient allowance from his father. Yet she had not the courage to assert herself. It had been a struggle for her to deceive her father, but she absolutely dared not defy him.

### The Elopement.

So they decided to elope, and they eloped. It was at once a justifiable and an unnecessary elopement; but Miss Barrett's heart trembled to the very last. She screwed her courage to the sticking point with sal volatile; and she collapsed on to a sofa and called for more sal volatile after her flight had been successfully accomplished. She nearly gave herself up for lost when the barking of the lap dog in her muff threatened to betray her; but she did get off—carrying a portion of her trousseau in that very early-Victorian receptacle, a carpet-bag; and there was, towards the end, at least one gesture which demonstrated that she was still more afraid of being left than of being taken. Her father had announced his intention of transporting his entire family to the country while his house in Wimpole Street was in the hands of the decorators; and that danger moved Miss Barrett to suggest to Browning that their enterprise might advantageously be speeded up:—

If we are taken away on Monday . . . what then? . . . It seems quite too soon and too sudden for us to set out on our Italian expedition now—and perhaps even we could not compass—Well—but you must think for both of us. . . I will do what you wish—understand.

### Across the Channel.

He did not understand. The situation was one in which he might even have quoted (though he did not) the old saying about a nod and a wink and a blind horse. Left to himself, he would probably have missed the train, for in his excitement he had read the time-table wrongly; but Miss Barrett happily retained sufficient presence of mind to point out his error to him. So the train was caught and the Channel crossed; and their friend, Mrs. Jameson, wrote from Paris: "I know not how the two poet heads and poet hearts will get on through this prosaic world." But they got on much better than Mrs. Jameson expected—much better than the majority of more precipitate lovers who really defy the conventions, instead of only pretending to do so—much better, for instance, than Geo. Sand and Alfred de Musset,

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who made shipwreck of their happiness in that famous unconventional honeymoon of theirs at Venice. They never fell out of love with each other as long as they lived. So perhaps there is something in the conventions after all. The possibility seems to merit the attention of this article. John O'London, the adventurous young women re-