



ROBERT BROWNING.

Mr. William Sharp has given us the first biography of Browning. We had just been conversing with a friend on the combined power and delicacy of his portraiture of Heine, when the post brought us this latest product of his pen. The work, though necessarily brief—being adapted to the exigencies of the series to which it belongs—shows no sign of hurry, and there is evidence of study and research extending over several years. Like all the volumes of the "Great Writers" series, it is complete, notwithstanding its conciseness, being at once narrative and critical, and being furnished, not only with a full index, but with an admirable bibliography. The latter, which all students of Browning are sure to prize, brings the record down to the period of the poet's death. The opening chapter is devoted to Browning's birth, family and early years. He is said to have once told Mr. Moncreu Conway that his name was originally DeBruni. This may have been a joke. Surely Browning is one of those good old English clan-names of which Manning, Carling, Hemming, Billing or Billings, Canning, Dering, Dunning, and several others that we might mention, are well known instances. The poet who wrote "Oh, to be in England" is English and nothing else. Mr. Sharp weighs and dismisses the evidence for his Jewish descent, and there is just as little reason for ascribing to him an Italian ancestry. The lustrum in which he saw the light gave the world several other great men—Thackeray, Dickens, Tennyson, Darwin, Lepsius, Freiligrath, Alfred de Musset, Wagner, Millet. Elizabeth Barrett was a bright little girl of three years when he who was to make music with her was born. Brilliant lights were then going out, but some of the grandest figures of the century were still in their prime, and some of them lived to recognize Browning's genius. His childhood was a happy one; his education, well adapted to promote the enlargement of his faculties. His father was a man of exceptional powers—a scholar, a poet and an amateur artist. From his mother, a West Indian, he inherited the emotional nature which found expression in his son's passion for music.

Before he was fourteen, Robert Browning "knew the dimension of dreams." In Shelley he found a revelation, and thenceforth his poetic development was rapid. He was an eager and thoughtful student of history. At University College he read Greek with Prof. Long. In the fall of 1832 he "wrote a poem of singular promise and beauty, though immature in thought and crude in expression." This was "Pauline." His parents were impressed with it, though his father did not hesitate to point out its lack of polish. It is "a confession, fragmentary in detail but synthetic in range, of a young man of high impulses but weak determination." Mr. Sharp thinks, from a certain over-emphasis and fantastic self-consciousness, that "the author was at the time confused by the complicated flashing of the lights of life." It shows the influence of Greek literature and also of Shelley. Years afterwards it won the warm admiration of D. G. Rossetti, who felt, on reading it, that it was by the author of "Paracelsus." The years immediately following its publication were not productive. The poem just mentioned was not published till the summer of 1835. In selecting Paracelsus for a hero, Browning was "guided by keen sympathy with the scientific spirit—the spirit of dauntless inquiry, of quenchless curiosity, of searching enthusiasm." * * * The poem is the soul-history of the great medical student who began life so brave of aspect and died so miserably at Salzburg; but it is also the history of a typical human soul, which can be read without any knowledge of actual particulars. To the lover of poetry the poem "will always be a Golconda. It has lines and passages of extraordinary power, of a haunting beauty, and of a unique and exquisite charm." Mr. Sharp doubts whether, except "Pippa Passes," Browning ever produced a finer long poem. Yet the *Athenæum* dismissed it with a half contemptuous line or two. John Forster, however, did justice to its great merits, as the Rev. Mr. Fox had already done to those of "Pauline."

In the initial year of the Victorian era, Browning wrote "Strafford" and Macready put it on the stage. Though not faultless—the conception of King Charles being strangely weak—it is, in Mr. Sharp's opinion, a play of remarkable vigour and beauty. Well acted, as in 1886, under the auspices of the Browning Society, its real artistic power, which is apt to escape notice in private reading, is brought to light. He directs attention especially to the second scene of the fifth act, where Strafford is with his children in the Tower, and he knows what, of course, they do not know, that all hope is over and that when he sleeps soundly it will be the sleep of death.

Mr. Sharp reproduces the story of Douglas Jerrold's first acquaintance with "Sordello"—how, being an invalid and forbidden any mental exertion, he had, in his wife's absence, taken up a new book; how, after tasting the forbidden fruit by reading a few lines, he had become alarmed at his failure to understand a word of it, and how, his wife coming in and sympathizing with his obtuseness, he had exclaimed, "Thank God! I am not an idiot!" Browning

often told and enjoyed the story, says Mr. Sharp, though he would never admit any justification for the puzzlement of the Jerrolds. He was, nevertheless, not unaware of the shortcomings of the poem as a work of art, and had at one time even contemplated re-writing it. It has, says Mr. Sharp, "disastrous faults, but is a magnificent failure."

The great "dramatic poems" of Browning, as distinguished from his "poetic plays," are "Pippa Passes," "The Ring and the Book" and "The Inn Album." "The first," says Mr. Sharp, "is a drama of an idea; the second, of the immediate and remote consequences of a single act, and the third of the tyranny of the passions." In "The Ring and the Book," Browning is generally deemed to have reached the zenith of his poetic power. The poem itself, wonderful as it is in many ways, is extremely unequal, though, as Mr. Sharp points out, "in a poem of a dramatic nature, the dramatic properties must be dominant." Even with that proviso, however, he pronounces the sixth Book—Pompilia's narrative—to be "the heart of the whole poem," a "lustrous opal set midway in the 'Ring.'" But we could hardly apply that language to "The Ring and the Book," as compared with Browning's other work, in the sense that therein he reached his highest development, with a gradual rise before and a gradual descent afterwards. To fix such a middle point in Browning's career is not easy, perhaps. Mr. Sharp finds his culmination in his "Men and Women," comprising, however, in that category, not merely the collection so named, but a large number of poems which might be gathered into an imagined volume, entitled "Transcripts from Life"—an anthology which would include "My Last Duchess," "In a Gondola," "The Lost Leader," "Saul," "Rabbi Ben Ezra," "Evelyn Hope," "Any Wife to Any Husband," "My Star," "A Death in the Desert," "Abt Vogler," "James Lee's Wife," "O Lyric Love," "Pheidippides," and above a hundred other poems and selections. Mr. Sharp has imagined a still more *elite* anthology of thirty-one poems and passages, with the motto

"Man's thoughts and loves and hates—
Earth is my vineyard—these grew there."

from the Epilogue to "Pacchiarotto," and to be known as "Flower o' the Vine." Without restricting the choice to the smaller or even to the fuller compilation, Mr. Sharp concludes that "it is here, in the worthiest poems of Browning's most poetic period, that * * * his highest greatness is to be sought." Now, as the choice really embraces the poet's whole period of production, it seems to us that it would be wiser to substitute "most poetic moments" or "moods" for "poetic period," and to give up the comparison with either tide or sun course. Of Mr. Sharp's judgment, nevertheless, as to what constitutes the essence of Browning's claim to be accepted as poet and prophet, we say emphatically "stet," and we would be glad to see his "Transcripts from Life" in the hands of the public.

The volume which Browning himself brought out in 1872, and which he dedicated to Tennyson, contains the most of them up to that date. That selection is worthy of careful study, from a biographical standpoint, with the poet's words in the Dedication as a clue to its purpose and significance. It is worth mentioning that the friendship between the two supreme poets of our time remained unchanged till death parted them. Lord Tennyson, who in 1872 was addressed by Browning as "in poetry illustrious and consummate," and "in friendship noble and sincere," received on his last birthday (August 6, 1889), from the same gifted admirer, a letter no less cordial and enthusiastic.

To resume the thread of the biography, Mr. Sharp's seventh chapter is devoted to Elizabeth Barrett and her marriage. Frequent mention is made of a lady in whose life and work Canadians must always take a somewhat melancholy interest. Vice-Chancellor Jameson was for more than twenty years one of the leading figures in the political, professional and social life of Upper Canada. "No one loves him, but every one approves of him," said his wife, in writing to her sister Charlotte, on his promotion. She did not stay long to enjoy his honours.

"They parted, ne'er to meet again." Perhaps, in the case of neither husband nor wife would it be quite appropriate to continue the quotation. Just now we are concerned with a very different union. The generally received story of the first meeting of the Brownings, Mr. Sharp pronounces apocryphal. It was Kenyon who introduced them. "The love between them was almost instantaneous, a thing of the eyes, the mind and heart—each striving for supremacy till all were gratified equally in a common joy." *Am jam nulla mora est.* Mrs. Jameson, who, on leaving London, had received a note from the invalid deploring inability to bid her good-bye in person, forced, as she was, "to be satisfied with sofa and silence," was not a little startled, shortly after her arrival in Paris, to receive a letter from Robert, saying that "he and his wife" were in the French capital on their way to Italy. Her surprise, says her niece, was almost comical. We need not follow the course of that wedded love—in such contrast with Mrs. Jameson's own experience. Those who knew them well pronounced their happiness perfect. After March 9, 1849, their "own young Florentine" (Robert Wiedemann Barrett) was a source of endless joy and pride to both parents. Twelve short blissful years and Browning was again a lonely man, solaced, however, by a rich treasure of memories and a faith that even death could not conquer. It was in the autumn following his wife's death that he wrote "Prospice":

"I shall clasp thee again,
And with God be the rest."

Had Browning written only that poem and the Invocation—"O Lyric Love," he would not die to remembrance.

In 1866, after his father's death, his sister, Miss Sarianna Browning, had become his companion. Two years later (in 1868) the "Poetical Works of Robert Browning, M.A., Honorary Fellow of Balliol College, Oxford," were issued in six volumes. "Here," writes Mr. Sharp, "the equator of Browning's genius may be drawn. On the further side lie the 'Men and Women' of the period anterior to the 'Ring and the Book'; midway is the transitional zone itself: on the hither side are the 'Men and Women' of a more temperate, if not colder, zone." The final chapter deals with Browning's widowed, as the seventh and eighth deal with his married, life. They are all interesting, but the last especially so, as it contains a good deal of new information touching the poet's life and character.

On the organization of the Browning Society in 1881, the poet wrote the following letter, privately, to Mr. Edmund Yates:

"The Browning Society, I need not say, as well as Browning himself, are fair game for criticism. I had no more to do with founding it than the babe unborn; and, as Wilkes was no Wilkie, I am quite other than a Browningite. But I cannot wish harm to a society of, with a few exceptions, names unknown to me, who are busied about my books so disinterestedly. The exaggerations probably come of the fifty-years-long charge of unintelligibility against my books; such reactions are possible, though I never looked for the beginning of one so soon. That there is a grotesque side to the thing is certain, but I have been surprised and touched by what cannot but have been well intentioned, I think. Anyhow, as I never felt inconvenienced by hard words, you will not expect me to wax bumptious because of undue compliments; so enough of 'Browning,' except that he is yours very truly, 'while this machine is to him.'"

In his later years, the poet's home was first at Warwick Crescent, and subsequently at 29 De Vere Gardens, Kensington Gore, but every year he went abroad to France and Italy, and once or twice on a yachting trip to the Mediterranean. "The crowning happiness of a happy life was his death in the city he loved so well, in the arms of his dear ones, in the light of a world-wide fame." The silence came upon him suddenly, calmly, and without terrors. "Death! death! It is this harping on death I despise so much," Mr. Sharp heard him say not very long since—"this idle and often cowardly and ignorant harping! Why should we not change like everything else? * * * For myself, I deny death as an end of everything. Never say of me that I am dead."

We have, in following Mr. Sharp's narrative, been forced to pass by much that we would gladly reproduce, if the exigencies of our space permitted. In the biography there is a rich store of *memorabilia*; in the criticism, no lack of guidance and suggestion. We hope we have sufficiently interested our readers to send them to the book itself, which they can procure for a trifle at Mr. Picken's here or Messrs. Gage & Co.'s, Toronto. With its full and careful Bibliography (the work of Mr. Anderson, of the British Museum), its evidence of conscientious study, and its well authenticated facts, from first-hand sources, the book may be confidently recommended both to the novice and the expert in Browning's poetry. While to the former it will serve as a trustworthy introduction to the life and works of the poet, the latter will find it a welcome addition to his stock of Browning lore. It is made still more valuable by the abundance of apt quotation with which Mr. Sharp illustrates and confirms his criticism. London: Walter Scott.

ROBERT BROWNING.

Mourn, Italy, with England mourn, for both
He sang with song's discriminating love;
Thy towers that flash the wooded crag above:
Thy trellised vineyard's purple overgrowth;
Thy matin balm; thy noontide's pleasing sloth;
Thy convent bell, dim lake, and homeward dove;
Thine evening star, that through the bowered alcove
Sifts the white flight of the circling moth.
He sang thy best and worst—false love, fierce war,
Renaissance craft, child graces, saintly art;
Old pomps from "Casa Guidi Windows" seen.
There he happy; there that minstrel queen
Who shared his poet's crown but gladdened more
To hold, unshared, her poet's manly heart.

AUBREY DE VERE in the April Century

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This fine eclectic weekly continues to be without rival for the excellence of its selections. The very cream of the European periodical press is found in its pages. In the last few numbers we have had the articles of greatest current and permanent interest, from the foremost quarterlies and monthlies: Mr. Gladstone's contribution to the *Nineteenth Century* on "Books, and the Housing of Them"; the remarkable article, "On Justice," from the *Nineteenth Century*; the "Centenary of White's 'Selborne,'" from the *National*; "Curiosities of Schoolboy Wit," from *Longman's*; "The Anonyma," from *Temple Bar*; that much discussed production of ex-Sergeant Palmer, "A Battle Described from the Ranks" (*Nineteenth Century*); the answer given by Mr. W. L. Courtney to that grave question, "Can there be a Science of Character?" (*National Review*); M. Emile de Laveleye's definition of and comments on "Communism," and a variety of other entertaining and valuable reading matter. *Littell's Living Age*, which is now in its 18th volume, is published by Messrs. Littell & Co., 31 Bedford street, Boston.