

JULY 8, 1909

years have taught thee judgment, thou mayest reckon up the worth of thy past and determine confidently thy powers.

"For each day brings its lesson, that thou must find in thy work. Learn thus daily, if thou wouldst be wise.

"Then in age, let youth's eager search for knowledge be turned to quiet trust in God, waiting death to reveal all other knowledge beyond this; that God and His attributes of Right and Good and Infinite are positive realities."

"Let age give judgment on the vexed questions of past life; judge none, for only the Potter knows his clay; the gold-greedy world knows not, cares not for, a man's inmost life.

"Well may life be compared to the Potter's wheel! Though life ends, the Potter and his clay are eternal. Wouldst thou stop the wheel that shapes thy life, when the gay dance of love and youth is pictured on it? Nay, fear not the sterner stress of the tool that finishes thee for thy release, when used by the Master, gladdening his heart with wine, thy great end is accomplished and you are his accepted cup."

The Rabbi has spoken rapturously. Now his voice drops in hungering prayer.

"But I need Thee, O God; never have I forgotten my purpose. Take and finish thy work; amend its flaws caused by my sin."

The sunlight filtering through the palm lights the Rabbi's face, showing its infinite trust and peace, its yearning love for the boy at his side. Then seeing the noble resolve and returned gladness there, he murmurs softly:

"Let age approve of youth, and death complete the same."

* * * *

II. The first stanza of Rabbi Ben Ezra may be accounted a sort of index to the whole, so thoroughly is the keynote of a lofty faith sounded and maintained throughout the poem. If space permitted, it would be inspiring to select from it the many expressions of unswerving faith with which it abounds. In the following brief review may be noted Browning's acquiescence in God's appointments, and unflinching faith in their ultimate perfection and triumph, even over sorrow, disappointment and seeming failure.

The earthy and lower should ever give place to the higher, because so closely allied to God through the "spark." To this end trials should be welcomed, inasmuch as they mean growth, and we should wait with patience and faith the disappointments and losses in our own and others' lives, for, ultimately, will be disposed to eye and heart the goodness, the justice of the whole plan. Again, not all seeming failures have been such. He speaks in both respects, as one who has struggled up through experience to the truth he affirms. In body and soul may be seen infinite power and perfection, and over all glows and burns transcendent love. In one of his last poems he wrote:—

"From the first power was—I knew,
Life has made clear to me,
That, strive but for a closer view
Love were as plain to see."

While Browning hints at evolution, he does not regard it in any sense as atheistic. In God's creation is found a plan and inspiration for constantly rising results. The Word and science gives the order alike—chaos, light, worlds, vegetable forms, animal life, man. Shall we pause here? Are God's original plan and forces exhausted? Or is His creative power still the same for the improvement of matter, and for the further refinement of mind and spirit? We read of a world so perfect that sin, sorrow, sickness and death exist no more. For such a world there must be corresponding inhabitants. That there are great mysteries through which our being must pass, should be the source of joy to every thoughtful soul, and the thought of an unending progression should prove the most inspiring of all. "Fearless and unperplexed when I wage battle next."

Here in this stage of preparation it should be man's aim to watch the Master Workman and learn the purpose of His being. The idea of a growing tolerance with a disposition to seek for points of agreement rather than those of difference is suggested. The broader the divergence permitted the greater and wider will be the resulting harmony. Nothing comes

into these lives of ours but "lasts ever, past recall," and God has given us the place we occupy for the purpose of necessary discipline. The world's coarse judgment upon man's work falls far short of the mark. Not so with God. He makes a just estimate of all things, even those above and beyond man's reach, but for which he longs and strives. At length we have a glimpse of the "consummate cup" as used at last by the Potter. In the last stanza he once more asks that God will use His work, and again takes comfort from the thought, "My times are in Thy hands," in the full assurance, "Perfect the cup as planned," and "death completes the same."

We find in Browning's assurance, such a marked contrast to much expressed in another noted poem from a great contemporary, that it appears the more striking. We often hear people say they do not read Browning, he is so hard to understand, and we often read that he is obscure and lacking in imagination and beauty of expression. Possibly for those so inclined it would be well to read the first three lines of stanza eleven, the whole of stanza fourteen, studying closely sentiment and expression; also the beautiful words in stanza sixteen—"calls the glory from the gray." If space permitted other portions might be mentioned. Among Browning's many critics we have not found any who denied his intellectual vigor and learning. Those of us who were presumptuous enough to attempt an interpretation of a poem of Browning's without recourse to a book of criticism or exposition on his works, will readily admit this poem has offered excellent opportunities for mental exercise. Enjoyable and profitable as this has been, we have been carried to greater heights than those of mere poetry, as we followed him from stanza to stanza.

Down the ages comes the cry of the anxious human heart, "If a man die shall he live again?" In our time the Christian verities and the Word of God are subjected to such sifting and criticism that many tempest-tossed souls welcome with joy such strong clear strains of hope and faith. Perhaps there is nothing more contagious than sincere belief. Browning opens to themes essential and eternal in the human heart, and the soul longs for the unwavering and certain. The fervor and assurance with which he approaches these deep and most important truths are so full of courage, hope and vision, that he can but impart some measure of faith to less positive souls. A student, a thinker, the future was his hope, and he never tires of the prophetic strain of ultimate bliss and perfection. One who taught these sacred truths with such unflinching faith could but inspire and open up to others larger meanings in life and stronger faith in Christ and His teachings. He wrote:

"The acknowledgment of God in Christ Accepted by thy reason, solves for thee All questions in the earth and out of it."

Perhaps Browning's strongest hold upon humanity will be the religious inspiration which he gives, and those who are led by him to spiritual heights will find a guide who assists to clearer hope and further insight into the soul's domain.

In Rabbi Ben Ezra, and the general tenor of his poetry, possibly he rises above the singer and becomes the Seer and Revealer.

* * * *

III. Rabbi Ben Ezra was distinguished chiefly as a grammarian and commentator, but also as a poet and philosopher. In this poem bearing his name, Browning puts into verse the philosophy of the old Rabbi, mingled with his own religion. The result is a very mine of beautiful and sublime thoughts and teachings. His meaning, in many cases rather obscure, being buried so deeply in metaphors, and curious phrases and sentences, that only by constant "digging" we can find it, is well worth working for, and is all the more appreciated, and better understood, and more deeply rooted in our minds, than had it been more obvious.

The beauty of the poem consists in its beauty of thought, rather than of expression. We miss the "music of words," which so adds to the charm of poetry. We have an exception to this, however, in verse sixteen:

For, note when evening shuts,
A certain moment cuts
The deed off, calls the glory from the gray:

A whisper from the west
Shoots, "Add this to the rest,
Take it and try its worth; here dies another day."

The chief thought which runs through the whole poem, is, that having striven after higher things, having subdued the flesh to the spirit, and having raised ourselves "nearer to God who gives than to His tribes who take," we have attained the highest success, and fulfilled the purpose for which we were made.

"What I aspired to be
And was not, comforts me;
A brute I might have been, but would not sink in the scale."

The highest ideals of life—the striving after truth and purity, the subduing of carnal desires, thankfulness for the wondrous plan of creation and life, and faith, that the work, so wisely begun, will be as wisely completed—are set forth, not once, but many times, throughout the poem.

* * * *

[The last essay, as will be noted, refers to the real Rabbi Ben Ezra, the inspiration of Browning's poem. We abridge from Browning's Encyclopedia: "The character is historical. Abenezra or Ibn Ezra, one of the most eminent of the Jewish literati of the Middle Ages, distinguished as philosopher, astronomer, physician and poet, was born at Toledo, Spain, in 1090, and at one time visited England." Mr. A. J. Campbell, who made especial research in regard to this poem (Rabbi Ben Ezra), thinks that some of its distinctive features were really drawn by Mr. Browning from the writings of the real Rabbi. The soul of man, the latter held, can exist with or without the body, and did, in fact, pre-exist. This theory is expressed by Browning in verse 27.]

* * * *

We conclude by a very interesting paragraph taken from the paper submitted by Mrs. Whelpley, N. S. Contrasting "Rabbi Ben Ezra" with The Rubaiyat, she says:

Man is compared to a cup. As it is moulded by the potter, so is he moulded by God. Omar's philosophy was "to drink, for to-morrow we die," but Browning opposes that idea in verse XXX., and says to look up and not down to the uses of the cup. Omar says:

"Ah, my Beloved, fill the Cup that clears
To-day of past Regrets and future Fears."

And, also, "Drink! for, once dead, you never shall return."

Looking down—use of wine cup. Looking up—cup in Communion. "This do in remembrance of Me." We are brought in closer touch with God. Man is Heaven's finished cup.

An old Persian story tells of a man who dips his hand in a spring of water to satisfy his thirst. Another man comes and drinks from an earthen bowl, and then leaves his bowl behind him. The first man takes another drink from this, and is surprised to find that the water which tasted so good before now tastes bitter, but a voice from Heaven tells him that the clay from which the bowl was made was once man; and into whatever shape it may be renewed cannot lose the bitter flavoring of mortality.

"Slake thy thirst": As we drink from a cup and slake our thirst, so we may compare God's thirst for souls to bring them to Him.

In stanzas XXVI. - XXXII., the poet wishes to convey to us the idea that the soul is immortal, and that all the daily occurrences are the means by which we are tried and made fit for the life beyond.

This is in direct opposition to the heathen or epicurean idea, that we must "seize the pleasures of the present day," for death ended everything. He might have said: "I live in pleasure, when I live to Thee."

Again we thank our contributors for their kind co-operation in making our Literary Society what it has been during the winter of 1908-9. The "Roundabout Club" will still appear, for miscellaneous articles and such communications as may be addressed to it, but the Literary Society will rest until November.

Wishing you, our students, then, all pleasure and profit in all things, and especially in such reading and thinking as you may find occasion to continue during the summer, we bid you adieu for a season.

That Old Canoe.

A straight-away course for the little bay
at the head of old Lac du Nor';
A quick turn, and into the fringe of
Reeds on its wooded shore;
Over the tiny bar that spreads from the
fallen maple tree—
"Keerful, boys, or ye'll have us out!"—
how it comes back to me!
Into the mouth of the little creek, twist-
ing and bumping along;
Well for us that our gallant craft,
though old and gray, is strong.
Then a stiff portage for our boyish
strength, and down with the old canoe
And paddle!—for this is the Spanish
Main, and we are a Pirate Crew!

Let us land in fancy once again, and
follow the well-known trail
Past the big fir tree and the blueberry
patch from the tiny beach of shale,
Till we come at length to the Pirate's
Cave, and gaze at its wealth untold.
You and I have taken the Pirate's Oath,
to be reckless and fierce and bold—
A thrilling, terrible, creepy oath, written
in blueberry-gore,
And signed in blood from our pin-pricked
thumbs—say, what could a fellow want
more?

Little indeed our neighbor thinks as he
chats with us, that we
Were once on a time bold buccaneers, and
the "terrors of the sea."

Remember the day that we found our
lake, and the trouble we had to get
Our old birch-bark to its virgin shore?
I smile at the memory yet.
And the long hours spent on a summer's
day at the little log settlement school,
Till our bare feet flashed along the path
to the shady swimming pool?
Remember the fish we used to catch with
a fresh-cut rod and a line,
Ferreted out of our hidden store at the
root of the fallen pine?
Then, after a feast and a joyous fight,
the vanquished walked the plank,
And we laughed in glee at their strug-
gling forms, till they clambered up the
bank.

There's a summer hotel near the Settle-
ment now, with launches, and gay
canoes,
And the folks hang round in white,
starched duds, and pipe-clayed canvas
shoes,
And a guide takes you and your new
steel rod, and your fancy, high-priced
bait,
And he shows you where to try your
luck, and you do as you're told—and
wait!
But now and again a Pirate comes on a
respite from Business-land,
And an old canoe is gently launched, and
it seems to understand
That its course lies straight for the little
bay at the head of old Lac du Nor';
And into the tangled rushes there on its
seldom-visited shore.

—A Sherwood Hart, in Saturday Night.

Left to His Sad Fate.

A French general's wife, whose tongue-
lashing ability was far-famed, demanded
that an old servant, who had served with
her husband in the wars, be dismissed.

"Jacques," said the general, "go to
your room and pack your trunk and leave
—depart."

The old Frenchman clasped his hands
to his heart with dramatic joy.

"Me—I can go!" he exclaimed in a
very ecstasy of gratitude. Then sudden-
ly his manner changed, as with utmost
compassion he added:

"But you—my poor general you must
stay!"