

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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One who never turned his back, but marched breast forward,
 Never doubted clouds would break,
 Never dreamed, though right were worsted, wrong would triumph,
 Held we fall to rise, are baffled to fight better,
 Sleep to wake.

—*Epilogue to "Asolando."*

Robert Browning
see frontispiece

Robert Browning was born at Southampton Street, Camberwell, on May 7th, 1812. His father, who was a clerk in the Bank of England, married in 1811 the daughter of William Wiedemann, a small shipowner in Dundee, and had two children, a son and a daughter. When very young Robert was sent to a dame-school, where his remarkable precocity caused dissension among the parents of the other pupils, who thought they saw in his speedy advancement signs of undue favoritism. This led finally to Browning's withdrawal from the school. After an interlude of home teaching he was placed in the charge of the Misses Ready, who prepared boys for entering their brother's establishment at Peckham, and at the latter institution he remained until he reached the age of fourteen. In 1826 it was finally decided that Browning should not be sent to a public school, nor subsequently to the University. He was trained at home by a tutor, the course of instruction including music, singing, dancing, riding, boxing, and fencing; in short, all the acquirements of the day which were considered suitable and necessary to the "production of an accomplished gentleman."

At the age of eighteen he attended, for a short period, the Greek class at London University, afterwards University College.

About this time Browning made his choice of a future career, his father acquiescing willingly in his desire to devote his powers to the writing of poetry. In October, 1832, Browning was already engaged upon the production of "Pauline," which appeared anonymously in a small volume in January, 1833, being published at the expense of his aunt, Mrs. Silverthorne. "Pauline," however, was little known or discussed beyond the immediate circle of the author's friends.

During the two years following very little information is obtainable with regard to Browning's movements, beyond the fact that he spent three months at St. Petersburg, nominally in the character of Secretary to the Russian Consul-General, Mr. Benckhausen. His letters home were full of graphic description; and certainly his experiences abroad were not without their marked effect upon the development of his poetic faculties.

Early in 1834 Browning paid a visit to Italy, when for the first time he beheld Asolo and Venice, both places destined to play a large part in his future life. In the same year Browning commenced his contributions to the *Monthly Repository*—in all, five short poems, extending over a couple of years. Meanwhile, however, he was writing "Paracelsus," which was completed in March, 1835. "Paracelsus" not only led to Browning's friendship with John Forster, but through it he obtained introductions to Carlyle, Landor, Monckton-Milnes, Leigh Hunt, and many other well-known men of the day.