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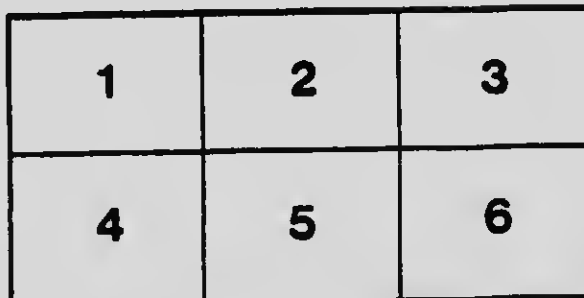
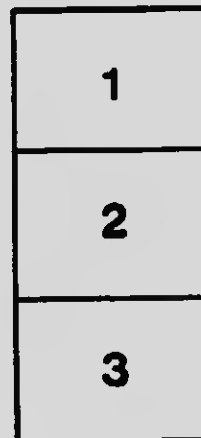
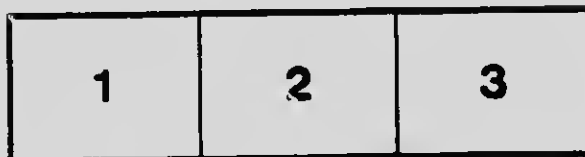
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ROBERT BROWNING









ROBERT BROWNING

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ROBERT BROWNING

ROBERT BROWNING

BY

JAMES DOUGLAS

WITH NUMEROUS ILLUSTRATIONS

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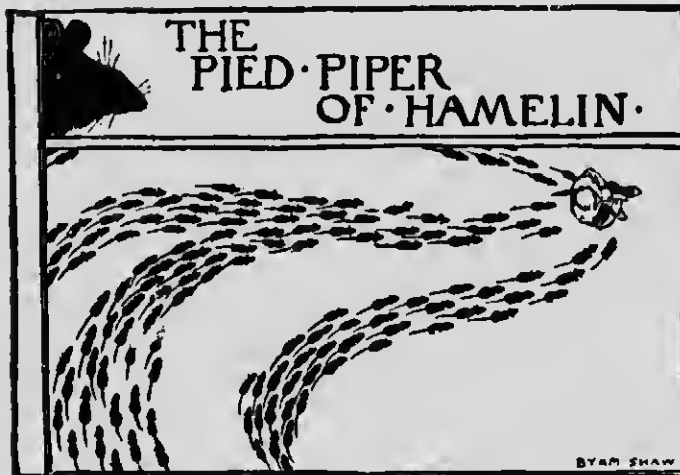
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ROBERT BROWNING



From a drawing by Byron Shaw

(Reproduced from "Poems by Robert Browning," by kind permission of Messrs. George Bell & Sons)

BROWNING is the most idiosyncratic poet in English literature. His poetry is his personality. Apart from his personality his poetry can hardly be said to exist. Other poets tinge poetry with their personality; Browning tinges his personality with poetry. Take even our greatest

poet, Shakespeare, and try to subtract from his work the portion which is coloured by his personality. The bulk of his work would remain. Subtract from the work of Milton, Shelley, Keats, Wordsworth, and Tennyson that part which is dyed by idiosyncrasy, and a great body of it would be left. But subtract from Browning's work the part which is dyed by idiosyncrasy, and what remains? Very little. In most poets personality expresses itself in verbal manner or mannerism, and not in the spiritual fibre of their poetry; but the poetry of Browning is in its very essence idiosyncratic. It is true that his personality expresses itself superficially in verbal manner and mannerism, but in his poetry the idiosyncrasy of manner and mannerism is only the garb worn by the idiosyncrasy of his

ROBERT BROWNING



NO. 50, WIMPOLE STREET
Elizabeth Barrett's Home from 1836 until her marriage

imaginative energy. The hasty critic is apt to think that the originality of Browning is purely an originality of manner and mannerism, of rhythm and of rhyme. That is profoundly untrue. The originality of his verbal form is a trivial and unimportant fact compared with the originality of his imaginative impulse. It is merely an originality of an originality. The one is the wave on the sea; the other is the sea itself. The one is born of the other, and you cannot conceive the one as existing apart from the other. It would be absurd to say that it is the waves

which make the sea different from the land, but not more absurd than to say that it is Browning's manner which makes him different from Tennyson. It is the fundamental energy of personality that is the true differentia between Browning and other poets. It is this mysteriously exuberant expression of personality which makes Browning unclassifiable and incomparable. That is why Browning is without poetic ancestors and will be without poetic posterity. You can ape a manner or a mannerism, but you can no more ape an idiosyncrasy than you can swap souls with your milkman. The only parallel to Browning's volcanic projection of his personality is to be found, not in poetry, but in prose—in Charles Dickens, whose fundamental imaginative energy is as idiosyncratic as Browning's. It is a mistake to compare Browning's expression of his personality with that of Ruskin or of Carlyle, for in their case idiosyncrasy does not go deeper than manner and mannerism. Their personality is not idiosyncratised in its essence, but only in its expression, whereas in the case of

Dickens and Browning their personality is idiosyncratised both in its essence and in its expression.

Idiosyncrasy calls unto idiosyncrasy as deep calls unto deep, as Murconigraph to Murconigraph. There are personalities which are deaf to Browning, and there are personalities which are tuned to receive his wireless signals. We do not realise how rare personality is in literature, or how deeply it is concerned with the making of literary vitality. The very ownership of a personality is an insult to the owners of other personalities. Most of us spend our lives in a suicidal attempt to harmonise our personality

AN
EARLY
PORTRAIT
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ROBERT
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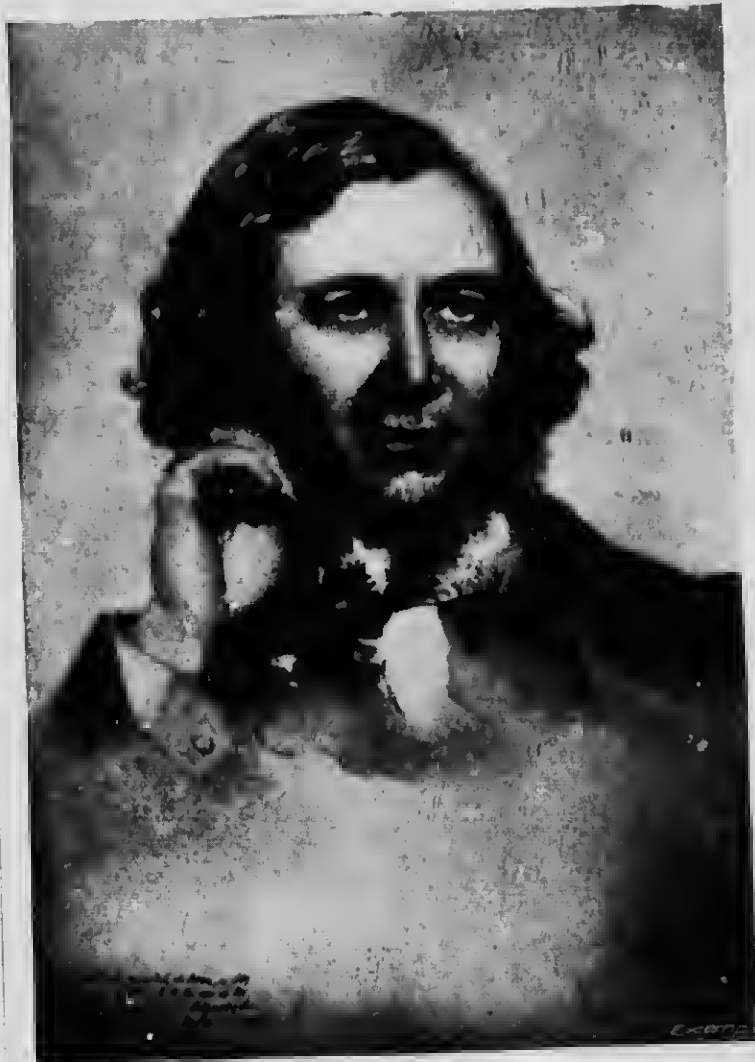
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4

ROBERT BROWNING



ROBERT
BROWNING,
1859

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with the great mass of half-harmonised personalities around us. But it is not enough to have the idiosyncratic insolence yourself in order to echo and answer the idiosyncratic insolence of another man: you must also have the same sort of idiosyncratic insolence.

ELIZABETH
BARRETT
BROWNING,

1850

*From the
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What, then, is this idiosyncratic insolence of Browning? It is, I think, his perception of that grotesque element in existence which is the true basis of optimism. Browning's humour is based on the cosmic incongruity which exists between the soul of man

and the external universe that cosmic incongruity which is at the root of laughter. He perceives that existence is a vast comedy of relationships, and that the relations between man's soul and the external universe are not fixed, but fluid and plastic, being



"PIPPA PASSES"

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by
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From a photograph by Fradette and Young.

ROBERT BROWNING



NO. 19, WARWICK CRESCENT, PADDINGTON
1861 TO 1887

Where Browning resided in London for twenty-five years after
the death of his wife

visible to man not only as what they are and as what they might be, but also as what they ought to be. Looking out from the central insolence of egoism man laughs (or weeps) at the comedy (or tragedy) of cosmic incongruity. Browning is the laureate of cosmic incongruity, the singer of the central laughter of the central soul. Call that laughter what you will, it is in its essence spiritual, and the absolute antithesis of the laughter of the cynic, which indeed is not true laughter at all, but a kind of miserable counterfeit.

This temper, this spiritual grotesquerie, is, as I have said, absolutely new in our poetry, and it is idle to pursue irrelevant analogies between it and the grotesquerie of Swift, Butler, Barham, Hood, Lear, and Lewis Carroll. But although it is new, it is, I think, a direct outcome of the great literary revival which Mr. Watts-Dunton has called "the renaissance of wonder." The poets of wonder, Blake, Coleridge, Keats, Shelley, Wordsworth, and Tennyson, fed their spiritual astonishment on the incongruity of life as seen through nature. Browning took this spiritual astonishment from the poets of wonder, but he fed it on the incongruity of life as seen through humanity. They looked at man through nature; he looked at nature through man. They glorified the external egoisms; he glorified the internal egoisms. He saw that life is essentially the energy of the one man transmitting the colossal comedy of external relations into terms of his own

idiosyncrasy. His poetry is one long, rapturous vindication of that central egoism of humanity which is the fortress of optimism.

"The poet," says Mr. Chesterton, in his recent monograph on Browning, "in his ancient office gave men halts and haloes; Browning gives men neither halter nor halo he gives them voices." And it is a very fine, resonant, hilarious, rollicking voice that he gives Mr. Chesterton; a voice which preaches the gospel of the grotesque and the gospel of optimism in a most brilliant, most original, and most suggestive piece of criticism, a criticism which is

a revelation of the critic as well as of the creator. The better the critic the more subjective the criticism, for criticism is an art of spiritual reverberations as well as an art of spiritual judgments. Life and literature, which is life in language, are things too nervously alive to be arranged, as a numismatist arranges coins, without passion and without prejudice. The spiritual blow struck by a poet is struck afresh on the soul of every reader, and criticism is the echo of these spiritual blows. Browning strikes Mr. Chesterton on that part of his soul which is most resonant, and the reverberating clang is deep and full and clear.

It is true that he sometimes runs a paradox off the rails. For instance, he goes wrong in treating "ruggedness" as being identical with "the grotesque," whereas the two qualities are quite different, for the grotesque is not always rugged, and the rugged is not always grotesque. But he quickly works his way to the heart of



NO. 20, DE VERE GARDENS, KENSINGTON

Browning's last home in London, to which he removed from 19, Warwick Crescent, in June, 1887

the matter, and reaches the real philosophy of the grotesque: "To present a matter in a grotesque manner does certainly tend to touch the nerve of surprise, and thus to draw attention to the essentially miraculous character of the object itself." That is deeply true. The great problem of poetry is not only to see, but to make others see what you see. Grotesquerie is the art of expressing idiosyncrasy by the creation of incongruous relationships. That is the whole secret of Browning, whose spiritual use of the grotesque is absolutely original. It is not altogether accurate to say that Browning "had a love of the grotesque of the nature of art for art's sake," for his love of the grotesque was deeper than any artificial theory or aesthetic shibboleth, being inspired by his yearning to escape from that refrigeration of poetic style which is fatal to the utterance of personality. It is not enough to understand poetry: you must feel it. It must shatter your indifference so violently that you are shaken by the eager emotion that shook the poet. Browning's grotesquerie is a revolt against the polite languors of literature. Like all revolts, it is scarred with violence and crudities; but regarded as a whole, it is a triumphant conquest of literary cynicism, and a triumphant deliverance of the spiritual wonder and mystery of life from the complacent lassitude of literary phrasemongers.

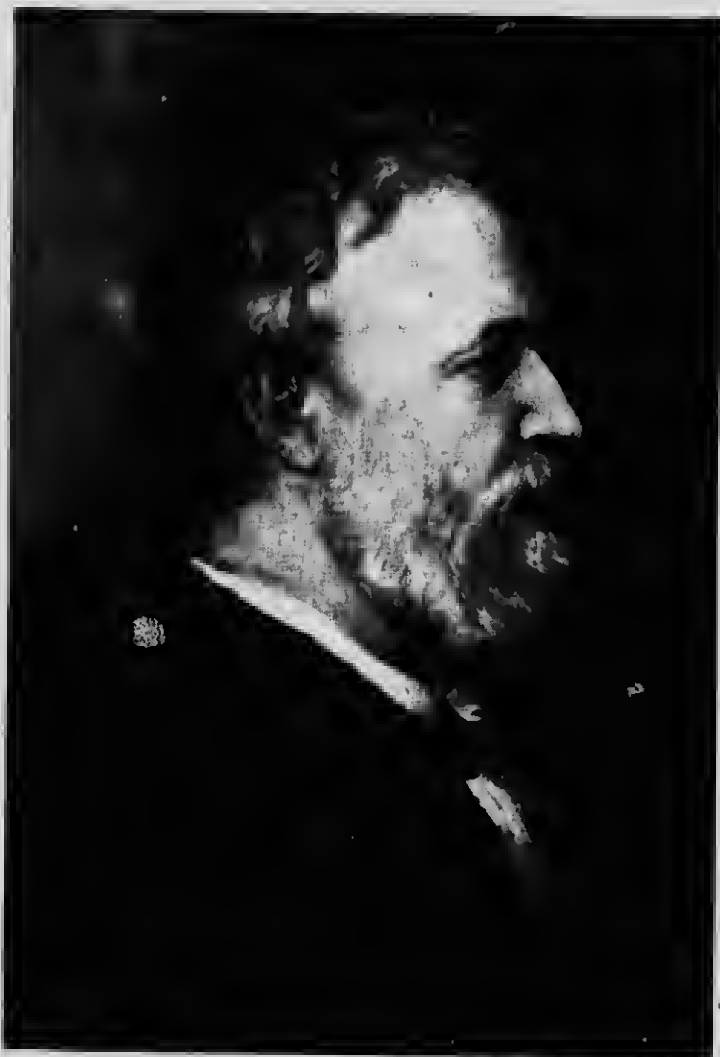
Unfortunately, Browning pushed his protest too far. He marched from rebellion to anarchy. In his struggles to loosen the fetters of poetic form he smashed it to pieces. His verse is too irregular for poetry and too regular for prose. Already it is beginning to crack like the Campanile. There is no doubt that Browning is in sore need of a doughty champion, for his popularity is fading fast—almost as fast as the popularity of Carlyle. Where are the Browning societies? Where are the Browning readers, the Browning essayists, the Browning exegetes? The decay of Browning seems at the first blush to upset the proposition that personality is one of the vital elements in literature. How comes it to pass that this poetry which is all personality is so perishable, while, on the other hand, impersonal poetry like Gray's *Elegy* is so imperishable. The explanation is to be found in Browning's contempt for beauty of



From a painting by Arthur J. Dixon

THE PIED PIPER OF HAMELIN

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ROBERT
BROWNING,
ABOUT
1875

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Frederick
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from the
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G. F. Watts,
R.A.,
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form. Style is the only antiseptic in literature, and even the power of personality cannot keep poetry alive which is formless. It may grasp contemporary imagination as a great politician grasps it, but without style it cannot hold the future. That is why Donne

ROBERT
BROWNING
IN
1858

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Professor
Leyros
in the
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Kensington
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is dead and Drayton is alive. It is a mistake to suppose that Browning's decline is chiefly due to his obscurity. Doubtless his obscurity damages his poetry as deeply as Meredith's obscurity damages his poetry; but obscurity alone is not fatal to a poet, as the

cases of Blake, Coleridge, Keats, and Shelley are sufficient to prove. Verbal beauty can immortalise the most obscure lyric. Nobody can explain "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," one of the most obscure poems in literature, yet its verbal glamour protects it against all the



From the painting by Rudolf Lehmann in the National Portrait Gallery

ROBERT BROWNING, 1879

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THE VIEW FROM BROWNING'S WINDOW AT NO. 19, WARWICK CRESCENT

assaults of time. Therefore, although Browning's verbal obscurity will accelerate his decay, the true cause of that decay is his contempt for verbal form. "Browning," said Tennyson, "never greatly cares about the glory of words or beauty of form: he has told me that the world must take him as it finds him. He has plenty of music in him, but he cannot get it out." Poets who cannot get their music out may make a deep mark on their own age by the force of personality, but they will not live. Byron is the supreme example of this law. His wit, his rhetoric, his lucidity are powerless without style. So it will be with Browning, whose subtle brain wasted its titanic powers because he cared nothing for "the glory of words." So it will be with Mr. Kipling, whose cockney verses in fifty years will be less intelligible than Chaucer. Keats, with



LA ROCCA, ASOLO: PIPPA'S COUNTRY

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his unerring genius for seizing the central principle of art, says the last word on the subject:

Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

That is untrue in everything save in art. For beauty is the only

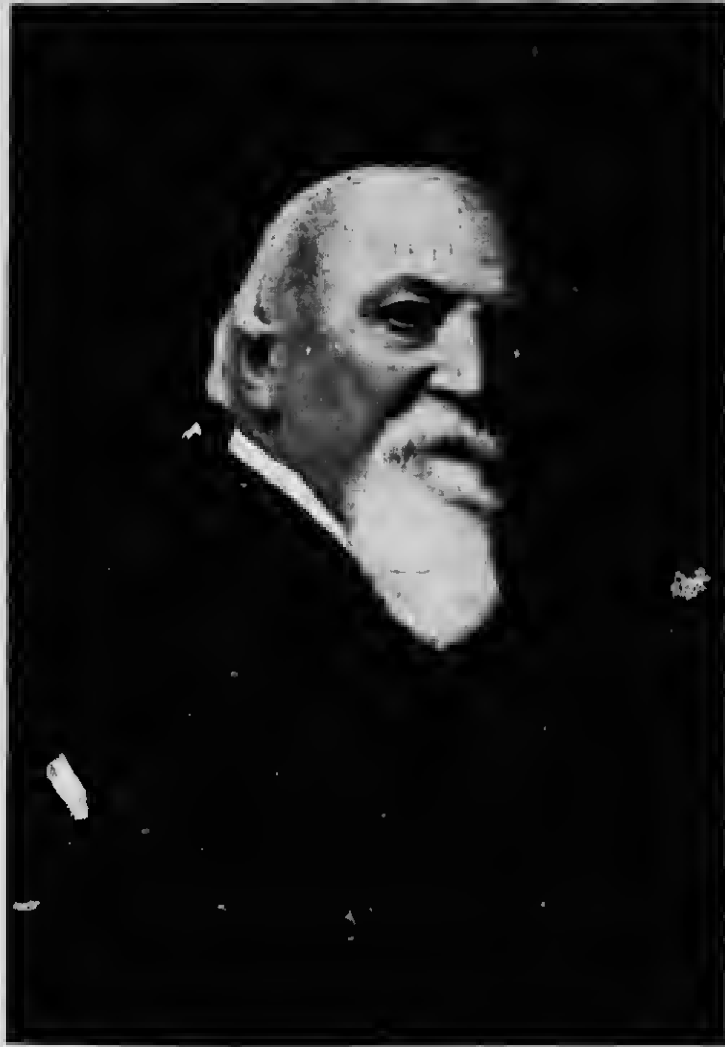
quality in art which is imperishable, and it is imperishable because it has no relation to time or place:

Thou, silent form! dost tease us out of thought
As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!
When old age shall this generation waste
Thou shalt remain.

THE HOUSE
IN
WHICH
ROBERT
BROWNING
LIVED
AT ASOLO

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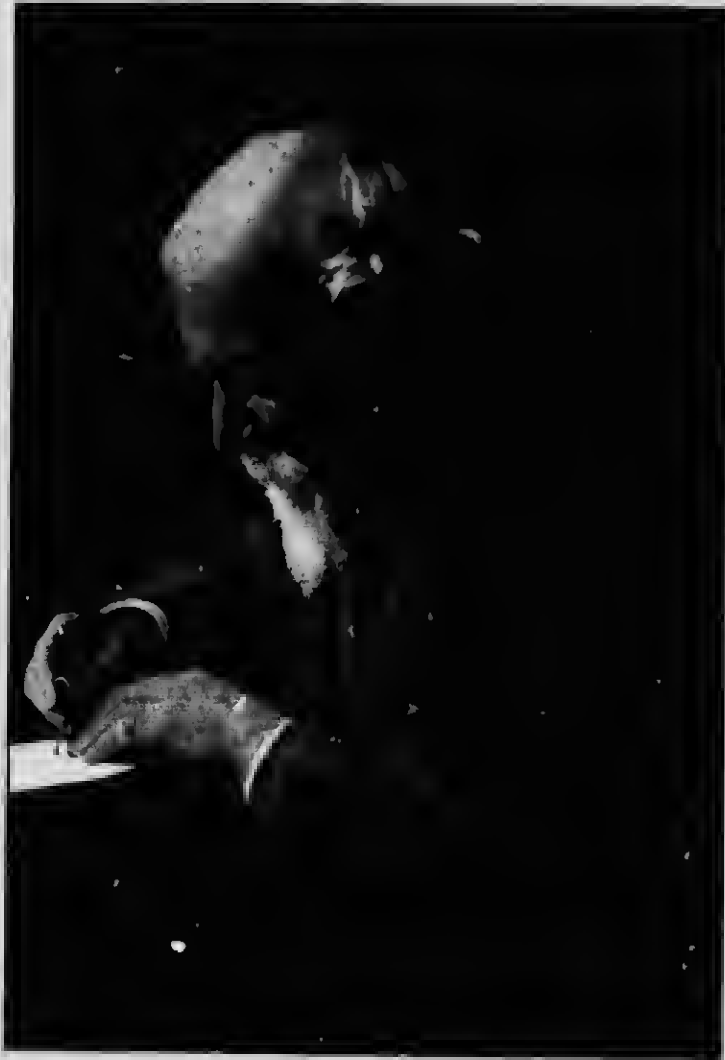
ROBERT
BROWNING

*From a
photograph
by
W. H. Grove*

That is why a line of Homer is as fresh to-day as it was on the day it was composed. Browning failed to realise that no agility of brain can achieve permanence in poetry without beauty of form. Mr. Chesterton holds that Browning was "a conscious and deliberate

ROBERT
BROWNING

*From a
photograph
by
W. H. Grove*



artist, who "cared more for form than any other English poet who ever lived. He was always weaving and inventing new forms. Among all his two hundred to three hundred poems, it would scarcely be an exaggeration to say that there are half as many



From a drawing by Byam Shaw

FRA LIPPO LIPPI

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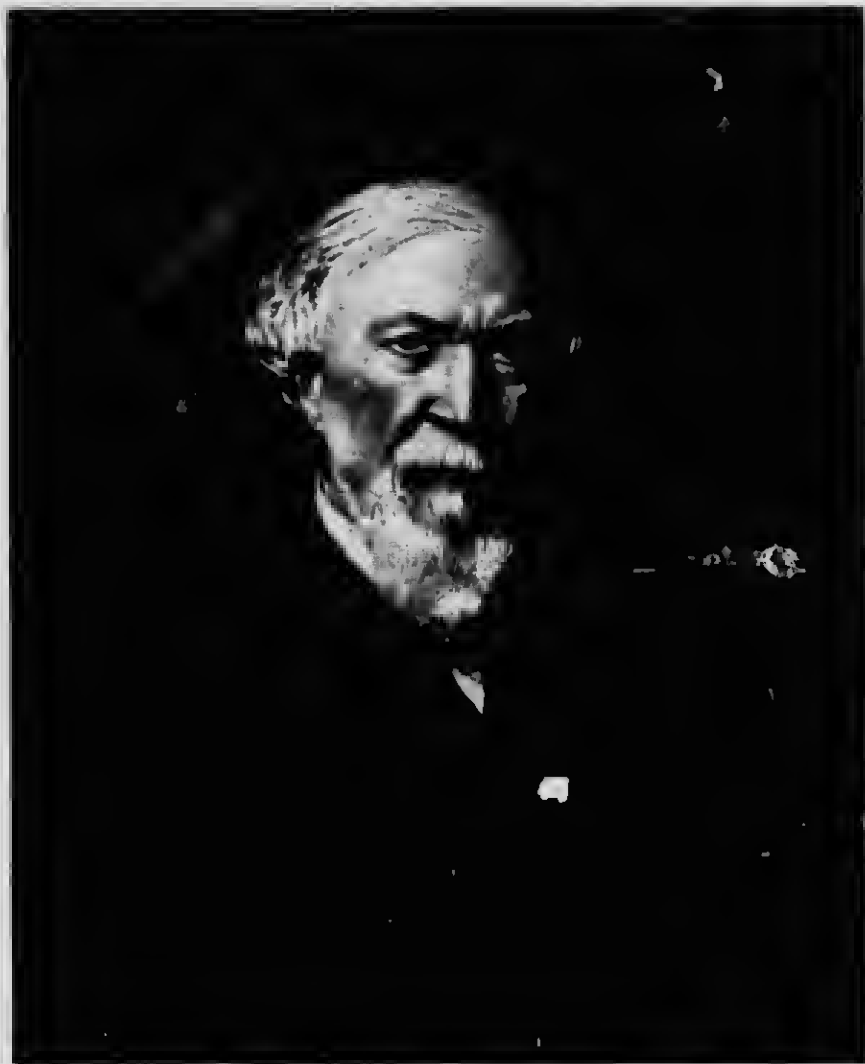
From a drawing by Philip Connard

THE STATUE AND THE BUST

(Reproduced from "The Statue and the Bust," by kind permission of Mr. John Lane)

different metres as there are different poems." The truth is that, as Tennyson said, Browning "never cared greatly for form," and never invented any new metres.

The central paradox of Mr. Chesterton's monograph on Browning is its masterly avoidance of Browning's poetry, and its no less masterly pursuit of Browning's prose. And yet this paradox is not so paradoxical as it seems, for although there is a silver lining of poetry in Browning's genius, the fabric of his genius is prose. He is at his best when he is least poetical; he is at his worst when he is most poetical. When he is lyrical he is often undistinguished; when he is ethical he is nearly always incomparable. He has wit, but little imagination. He has intellectual subtlety, but little verbal witchery. He can always preach a sermon, but he can seldom sing a song. He has analytical humour, but little poetical glamour. His ethical vision is piercing, but his poetical

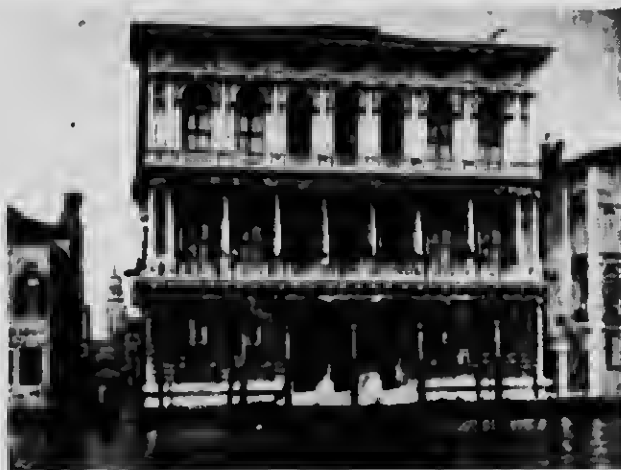


From a painting by Felix Moscheles

ROBERT BROWNING, 1884
(Reproduced by kind permission of the Artist)

vision is uncertain. He can dissect an emotion, but he rarely communicates it. He is diabolically clever, but his cleverness destroys the charmed illusion that is the atmosphere of poetry. Probably his obscurity is due to the fact that he was struggling to express himself in a form antagonistic to his temperament. In prose "Sardello" might have been pellucid, and "Paracelsus" clear. The sense of strain is present in all his work. His poetry is a determined stammer. The irony of his vogue lies in the passionate love which his admirers cultivated for his brilliant stuttering. Browningism was really a disease. Men and women took his poetry as a Chinaman takes opium. He was the fashionable drug of the nineteenth century.

Doubtless the Browning habit was largely due to literary snobbery, to that lazy lust after the intellectual aristocracy which flourishes in



THE PALAZZO REZZONICO

Where Robert Browning died on December 12th, 1889

Collection of Augustin Rischgitz

ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING'S MONUMENT
AT FLORENCE

Collection of Augustin Rischgitz



ROBERT
BROWNING

*From a
photograph
by
Mrs. F. W. H.
Myers*

England. To admire Browning became a badge of mental eclecticism, and serious minds that would no longer profess Christianity professed Browning. He was the religious life-buoy of cultured doubt, a refuge from Darwin, a shelter from Huxley. Religious thought has emerged from its temporary panic, and now fears the doctrine of evolution no more than the loctrine of gravitation. Dogma has ceased to be dogmatic, and culture



ROBERT
BROWNING

*From a
photograph
by
Elliott & Fry*

is once more turning towards a spiritual theology, based on the realities of religious experience rather than on the unrealities of abstract ideas. Browning is, therefore, rapidly becoming a sociological document, a picture of a passing posture of the human spirit. A hundred years hence his works will be read only by the professional man of letters, unless some of his shorter poems are preserved in twenty-first century anthologies. It may seem



From a drawing by Byam Shaw

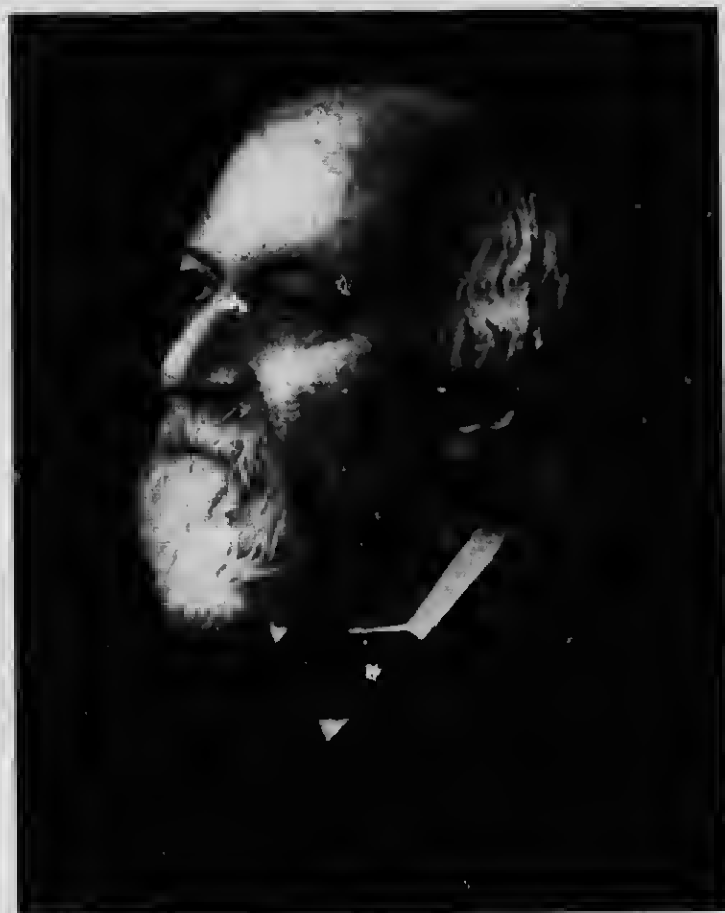
ANDREA DEL SARTO ('The Faultless Painter')

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ROBERT
BROWNING.
1888

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Mr. J. Caswall
Smith)



presumptuous to predict oblivion for a figure so great, for a heart so noble, for a soul so large; and, indeed, it is presumptuous to pronounce any opinion as to the taste of our great-grandchildren, which may possibly be worse than our own. It is, however, less presumptuous to say that a contemporary will be forgotten than to say that he will be remembered—a kind of vicarious egoism which is too common. Vicarious modesty is rare in the world of letters. It is easier to be modest for yourself than for your

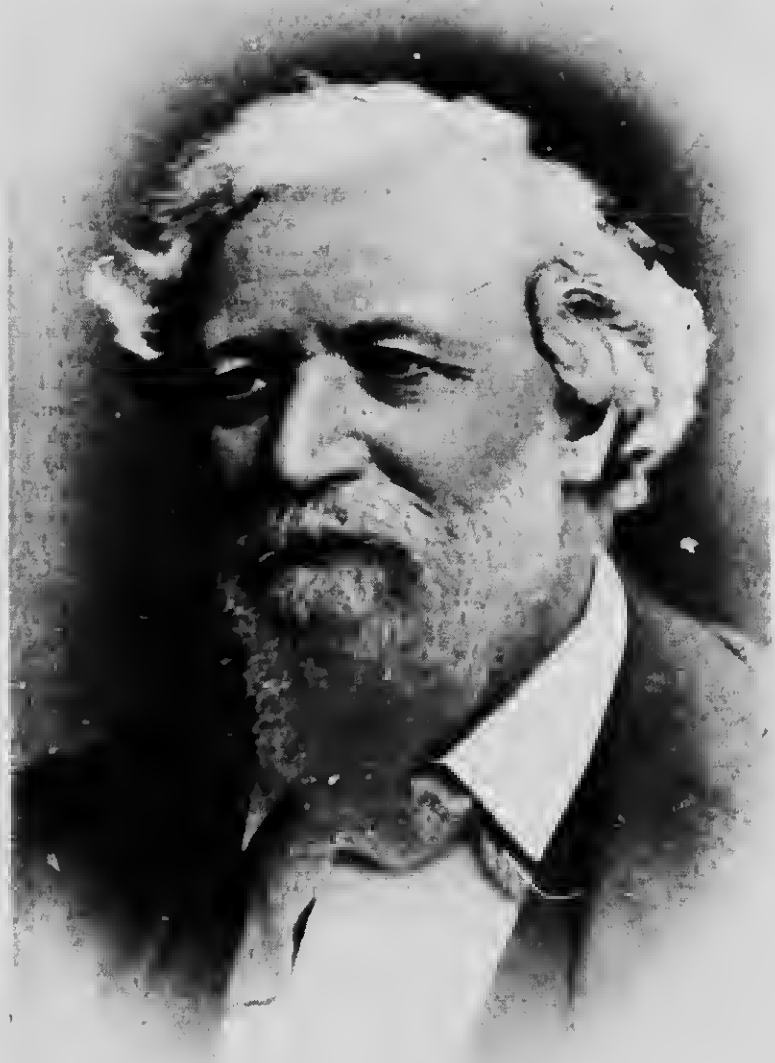


From a photograph by W. H. Grove

BROWNING'S COFFIN LYING IN STATE AT THE PALAZZO REZZONICO

neighbour; and the generosity of contemporaries is a perilous passport to fame. The great men of to-day are often the nonentities of to-morrow. Consider the comedy of monuments and the irony of epitaphs. Statues as a rule commemorate stupidity. The owners of the finest cenotaphs in Westminster Abbey are forgotten, and most sculptors are the advance agents of oblivion. Browning had plenty of music in him, but he could not get it out, although all his contemporaries tried to help him in the struggle. It is not likely that posterity will tackle the task. On the whole, we may say of Browning what Ben Jonson said of Donne: "For not keeping accent he deserved to be hanged, and he will perish from not being understood."

JAMES DOUGLAS.



From a photograph by the London Stereoscopic Co.
ROBERT BROWNING

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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.



From a photograph taken by W. H. Grove in August 1889

ROBERT BROWNING SHORTLY BEFORE HIS LAST
JOURNEY TO ITALY

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Not long after the appearance of "Paracelsus" the Browning family removed from Camberwell to a more commodious house at Hatcham, where the poet lived quietly for two or three years, an important intimacy being formed by him with the great actor Macready. Being urged by the latter to write for the stage, Browning set to work upon "Strafford," which was published on May 1st, 1837, and produced at Covent Garden Theatre, where it ran for only five performances, in spite of the fine acting of Macready and Helen Faucit.

"Strafford" was followed by "Sordello," a long narrative poem, which took several years to complete, and though probably commenced shortly after "Paracelsus," was not published before 1840, when it was coldly received by the critics and the public. Whilst "Sordello" was in preparation, Browning made his second trip to Italy, in the spring of 1838, and many of his best lyrics were written during this period. On his return to England he first made the acquaintance of John Kenyon, his father's old schoolfellow, who was afterwards instrumental in introducing him to Elizabeth Barrett.

"Pippa Passes"
see page 6

"Pied Piper of
Hamelin"
see page 11

Elizabeth Barrett
Browning
see page 5

No. 50, Wimpole
Street
see page 2

Between 1841 and 1846 were produced a series of eight numbers of "Bells and Pomegranates," the first of these being "Pippa Passes," which appeared in 1841. The idea of this poem is said to have presented itself to Browning in a wood near Dulwich, where an image came to his mind of a figure walking alone through life, humble and obscure, yet capable of exercising a lasting though unconscious influence at every turn. This image shaped itself finally into the little silk-winder of Asolo. "Dramatic Lyrics," the third of the "Bells and Pomegranates" series, included "The Pied Piper of Hamelin," a poem written in May, 1842, with the intention of amusing Macready's little son, William.

In the autumn of 1844 Browning paid his third visit to Italy, and very shortly after his return to England was induced by Mr. Kenyon to write to Elizabeth Barrett and tell her of the deep impression that her newly published volume of poems had made upon him. Correspondence led to a request on Browning's part for an interview, which was refused by Miss Barrett, with the touching plea that "there is nothing to see in me, nothing to hear in me. I am a weed fit for the ground and darkness." Her objection being finally overcome, their first meeting took place on Tuesday, May 20th, 1845, at No. 50, Wimpole Street, the house in which Miss Barrett passed many years in the confinement of a sick room, and where she composed "The Cry of the Children."

"She whom he now saw for the first time," wrote Mrs. Sutherland Orr, describing the poet's future wife, "had long been to him one of the greatest of living poets; she was learned as women seldom were in those days. It must have been apparent, in the most fugitive contact, that her moral nature was as exquisite as her mind was exceptional. She looked much younger than her age, which he only recently knew to have been six years beyond his own, and her face was filled with beauty by the large expressive eyes."

It soon became obvious to Browning that the happiness, perhaps even the life, of the invalid depended on her removal from the atmosphere in which she languished under the stern and eccentric governance of her father.

Inspired by passionate admiration, even at their first meeting, it became Browning's task to persuade Miss Barrett to allow him to devote his life to her care. Their intimacy was perforce carried on without the knowledge of Mr. Barrett. Upon the latter's refusal to comply with the doctor's advice that Miss Barrett should seek recovery by wintering abroad, matters reached a climax, and a private marriage was arranged, which took place at St. Pancras Church on September 12th, 1846, the bride returning to her father's house until all preparations for the departure from England should have been completed.

On September 10th the Brownings started for Paris, and journeying by slow stages reached Pisa early in October, where they settled for the winter. Mrs. Browning benefited greatly in health from the freedom and beauty of Italy; but her father remained obdurate to all her appeals for reconciliation, and she never afterwards met him. From Pisa the Brownings moved to Florence, where they took up their abode, and in 1848 the poet began to prepare a collected edition of his works. These appeared in two volumes in 1849, published by Messrs. Chapman & Hall, but contained only "Bells and Pomegranates" and "Paracelsus." After living in furnished apartments for six months the Brownings established themselves in the Palazzo Guidi, where they had "the favourite suite of the last Count, six beautiful rooms and a kitchen." In this home their only child, a son, was born on March 9th, 1849, and a few days later Browning's mother died, the poet for a time being overwhelmed by this his first great sorrow.

After an absence of five years the Brownings visited England in 1851, lodging in London at 26, Devonshire Street. In the autumn they proceeded to Paris, and spent the winter in apartments in the Avenue des Champs Elysées. It was on this journey from London to Paris that they were joined by Carlyle. In the following spring they returned for a short time to London, only to leave again for Florence in November, 1852.

In 1855 fifty of Browning's poems were gathered together and published in two volumes by Messrs. Chapman & Hall under the title of "Men and Women," which included some of his best-known shorter works: amongst others, "Andrea del Sarto; the Faithless Painter," in which Browning asserts the principle already laid down in "Sordello," that the ideal of the true artist must greatly transcend his technical powers of execution; that, in short, "a man's reach should exceed his grasp"; "Fra Lippo Lippi," that lively monologue of the painter-friar commencing:

I am poor brother Lippo, by your leave!
You need not clap your torches to my face.
Zooks! what's to blame? You think you see a monk!

and "The Statue and the Bust," a dramatic romance which Browning possibly intended as a warning against the dangerous results consequent on infirmity of purpose.

From this time onward until Mrs. Browning's death, on June 29th, 1861, the Brownings moved frequently between Rome, Florence, London, and Paris, and the poet did little writing of importance. After his wife's death, and taking into consideration the best method of superintending the education

"Andrea del Sarto"

see page 26

"Fra Lippo Lippi"

see page 20

"The Statue and the Bust"

see page 21

No. 19, Warwick
Crescent,
Paddington
see page 8

of his son, Browning established a residence in London at No. 19, Warwick Crescent, Paddington, where he lived for over twenty-five years. Mention is made of this house in "How it Strikes a Contemporary":

Poor man, he lived another kind of life
In that new succeed third house by the bridge,
Fresh-painted, rather smart than otherwise!
The whole street might o'erlook him as he sat,
Leg crossing leg, one foot on the dog's back.

View from
Browning's
Window
see page 15

The poet is said to have vastly enjoyed the view from the windows at 19, Warwick Crescent, which suggested to him memories of his loved Venice.

Whilst visiting Biarritz, in the summer of 1862, Browning first conceived the idea of the "Roman murder story" (as he called it), which was ultimately to be published as "The Ring and the Book." It was after the commencement of this work, during the spring of 1863, that Browning to some degree altered his mode of life. Hitherto much of a recluse, he now joined frequently in various forms of social entertainment, becoming one of the most familiar figures of the time at society functions of every kind. Meanwhile, the work which was to award him his rightful place among contemporary men of letters progressed slowly. In November and December of 1863, and January and February of 1869, "The Ring and the Book" appeared in four successive monthly instalments issued by Messrs. Smith, Elder & Co., following within a few months upon a complete edition of his works in six volumes. The reception of this, the longest and most impressive of Browning's poems, was an immediate triumph for the author.

In 1871 Browning was elected life governor of University College, and from this time on he wrote with great activity, which did not noticeably decrease until 1879, when the flow of his poetic invention began to decline. A year previously he had revisited Italy for the first time since the death of Mrs. Browning. At the moment Asolo failed to awaken in him the old delight, but after a comparatively short stay in the country of his adoption, his enthusiasm was rekindled, and for the remainder of his days he visited Italy at every possible opportunity.

Browning's
house at Asolo
see page 17

How many a year, my Asolo,
Since—one step just from sea to land -
I found you, loved yet feared you so.

Until 1883 Browning remained comparatively silent, but in that year he published several poems, under the title "Jocoseria." The following year he was made Hon. LL.D. of the University of Edinburgh, and for the third time declined to be elected Lord Rector of the University of St. Andrews. In the winter of 1884 a number of his idylls and lyrics appeared under the name of "Ferishtah's Fancies."

The following year Browning was persuaded by his son to purchase a residence in Venice, and immediately opened negotiations to secure the Palazzo Manzoni on the Grand Canal. Negotiations falling through, however, and Venice having ceased to attract him, Browning for the time being remained in England, and in 1886 succeeded Lord Houghton as Foreign Correspondent to the Royal Academy, a sinecure position which he accepted at the earnest wish of Sir Frederic Leighton.

**29, De Vere
Gardens,
Kensington**

see page 9

**La Rocca, Pippa's
Tower, Asolo**

see page 16

**The Palazzo
Rezzonico,
Venice**

see page 23

**Browning's
coffin lying in
state at the
Palazzo
Rezzonico**

see page 28

**Elizabeth Barrett
Browning's
monument in the
cemetery at
Florence**

see page 23

A move was made in June, 1867, from Warwick Crescent to 29, De Vere Gardens, a well-built commodious residence which Browning furnished with antiquities he had been collecting and storing for that very purpose. He took, indeed, an almost pathetic pleasure in completing the arrangements of this his last home, making a special feature of his library. Here at length he had sufficient accumulation for his books, which had formerly been crowded together, row behind row. The final touches to these arrangements had hardly been added, however, before the poet left England, never to return. His strength was now visibly failing; but on his arrival at Asolo, in the latter part of 1880, he "seemed possessed by a strange buoyancy—an almost feverish joy in life, which blunted all sensations of physical distress." "Autumn is beginning to paint the foliage, but thin it is well," he wrote at this time, "and the sea of fertility all round our height, which a month ago showed pomegranates and figs and chestnuts—walnuts and apples all rioting together in full glory—all this is daily disappearing." He made an endeavour to purchase a house in Asolo, intending to name it Pippa's Tower, and after his death this, in conjunction with other land in the town, became the property of his son. The latter was now settled in the Palazzo Rezzonico at Venice, the beautiful home on the Grand Canal to which he had taken his young American wife. This palace was one of the very few large ones which retained its original ornaments, statues, ceiling decorations, etc., at a time when many of these buildings were stripped to replenish the empty purses of impoverished owners.

Here, in the home of his son, the poet died on December 12th, 1889, and two days later the solemn ceremony of a public funeral was performed at Venice. On the 16th of the month the poet's body was conveyed to England, where it was interred on the 31st in the Poets' Corner at Westminster Abbey. A proposal was also made to remove Mrs. Browning's remains, in order that husband and wife might rest side by side. This suggestion, however, owing to the wishes of her son, was never carried out, and Mrs. Browning's grave in the old Protestant Cemetery at Florence was left undisturbed. The sarcophagus in which she was buried was designed by Robert Leighton. It bears upon it the lilies of Florence and the figures of poetry and her sister arts. The monument rests upon a broad base embedded in the green turf. On the very day of Browning's death his volume "Asolando" was given to the world, too late for him to appreciate its reception; but there had been time for a message to reach him describing the eagerness with which its appearance had been anticipated. Memorial tablets in the poet's honour were affixed by the City of Venice to the outer wall of the Palazzo Rezzonico, and by the Society of Arts to his house at 19, Warwick Crescent.

NOTE ON THE PORTRAITS OF BROWNING

In person Browning was somewhat below the middle height, but broad in build, and possessed of great muscular strength. His hair was dark brown, and exceedingly lustrous. In later years it became silvery white, and

36 NOTE ON THE PORTRAITS OF BROWNING

**Earliest known
portrait of
Browning**

see page 3

**From the crayon
drawing in 1866
by Field Talfourd**

see page 4

**From the
painting by
Rudolf Lehmann,
1879**

see page 14

**From the
painting by G. F.
Watts, R.A.,
about 1876**

see page 12

**From paintings
by Prof. Legros,
Felix Moscheles**

see pages 13, 22

**From
photographs
by Mrs. F. W. H.
Myers, Mr.
Cameron, and
Mr. W. H. Grove**

see pages 24, 27, 31

remained abundant to the last. The earliest known portrait of the poet was executed when he was about thirty-two, and was engraved for Horne's "New Spirit of the Age" in 1844. A highly finished pencil drawing by Frederic Leighton (1854) was apparently lost. The following year Giordigiani painted both Mr. and Mrs. Browning, and in 1850 Woolner executed a bronze medallion of the former. In 1850 husband and wife sat to Field Talfourd for life-size crayon portraits. These were drawn in Florence, and now hung in the National Portrait Gallery. Of his own likeness, which was formerly in the possession of Mr. Edmund Gosse, Browning wrote to the owner, February 23rd, 1880: "My sister a better authority than myself—has always liked it, as resembling its subject when his features had more resemblance to those of his mother than in after-time, when those of his father got the better—or perhaps the worse—of them."

In the same year a painting was made by Mr. Rudolf Lehmann, and Browning sat again to the same artist later. The picture executed in 1879 is now in the National Portrait Gallery.

"I think the likeness very true," writes Mr. W. M. Rossetti in the *Magazine of Art*, "and the expression of sharp and concentrated resolve quite accurate, but mixed with a certain degree of sternness of which Browning's face was indeed capable, but which it only rarely exhibited. The strong and rather massive line of the jaw, which was one of the many elements of virility in the visage, is well marked. This work has the character of an historical portrait."

"This portrait," continues the same writer, describing the painting by Mr. Watts, "presents Browning in a reflecting mood; not as if he were in the act of conversation with any one, but still with a certain potential look, as if he might at any moment hunch an observation, or turn a thought into a written couplet, and as if whatever he did would be done suddenly and on impulse; a true point of character truthfully realised."

Other paintings of Browning are those by Professor Legros in 1880, which now hangs in the South Kensington Museum; by Felix Moscheles in 1884; and several executed by his son, Mr. Robert Barrett Browning. Among the latter, one painted in the summer and autumn of 1880 may be mentioned as a particularly satisfactory representation of the poet.

In later years Browning was willing to sit frequently for his portrait, and among the numerous and excellent photographs in existence, those by Mr. Cameron, Mrs. F. W. H. Myers, and Mr. William H. Grove are all worthy of notice. To the latter was accorded the privilege of photographing the poet in August, 1880, shortly before his last journey to Italy.

"From ten till one he spent the time in his study writing, and when I afterwards photographed him," writes Mr. Grove, "I took him in an attitude I have seen him in thousands of times—his head leaning on his hand. He would sit like that for half an hour sometimes, and then take up his pen to jot something down."

