but to inform them there was a pilot-boat in the vicinity. But this very fact required redoubled vigilance on our part, in order that we might not be run down. In the middle watch we were startled, just after firing the cannon, by the answering whistle of a steamer hoarsely coming down the wind, and close at hand. The excitement of the moment was intense. Again we fired the cannon. The whistle drew nearer, and all at once the colored lights of a steamer loomed out of the dripping mist, and her huge bow emerged from the gloom, so near that it actually seemed to overhang our deck. Passing close alongside, she slowed up the palpitation of her mighty engine a moment to make sure of our position, and then vaguely glided out of sight.

On the following morning, the sun was invisible. The war of the elements was raging with increasing fury. The wind had shifted to south-east. The fog was less dense, and we could see some distance. We were running under a bit of foresail, and hardly needed that. It seemed, at times, as if the following seas would founder the schooner as they towered over the low taffrail. Not a sail was in sight, not even a solitary gull; it is a curious fact that, excepting the petrels, sea-birds keep near to the land in bad weather. By means of the patent log towing astern and from casts of the lead, we knew we could not be far from Sandy Hook light-ship.

About ten, the light-ship hove in sight. We rushed by it at the rate of thirteen knots. An enormous sea was rolling over the bar, but the depth of water was enough for vessels like the *Caprice*, and by skillful steering she passed over handsomely. The fierceness of the wind was now terrific, and, dowsing the foresail, we ran up the Lower Bay and flew through the Narrows under bare poles. Thus ended a most delightful and entertaining cruise.

THE EARLY WRITINGS OF ROBERT BROWNING.

It is not my design in the following pages to attempt any exact review or any minute analysis of the writings of one of the most copious and versatile of modern poets. The range of Mr. Browning's genius is so wide, the temper of his muse so Shaksperean and universal, that he will probably exhaust the critical powers of a great many students of literature before he finally takes his right place among the chief authors of modern Europe. The constellation which is still ascending our poetical heavens is too much confused as yet by those mists of personal prejudice and meteors of temporary success which always lurk about the horizon of the Present to enable us to map the stars in it with certainty. Many attempts, of course, have been made, and some with a great measure of success. Two such studies, among others, demand recognition for their extent and authority—the volume on Mr. Browning's poetry by Mr. John Nettleship, since known as an animal-painter, and the elaborate criticism printed in this magazine by Mr. E. C. Stedman. I shall not attempt to compete with these or any similar reviews; my purpose is to touch lightly on those early volumes of Mr. Browning which are comparatively less known to his admirers, and to enrich such bibliographical notes as I have been able to put together with a variety of personal anecdotes and historical facts which now for the first time see the light, and which I have jotted down, from time to time, from Mr. Browning's lips, and with his entire consent and kindly coöperation. No one is more alive than Mr. Browning, or, may I add, than I, to the indelicacy of the efforts now only too widely made to pry into the private affairs of a man of genius, to peep over his shoulder as he writes to his intimate friends, and to follow him like a detective through the incidents of a life which should not be less sacred from curiosity than the life of his butler or his baker. The poet has expressed his mind with extreme plainness:

> "A peep through my window, if folks prefer;
> But, please you, no foot over threshold of mine."

But literary history, the most charming of all occupations of the human mind, as Warburton said, is a very different thing from personal history, and there are certain facts about the development of a poet's intellect and the direction that it took, the welcomes that it received and the reverses that it endured, about which curiosity is perfectly legitimate. For those who desire such a peep through Mr. Browning's window as this, the shutters are at last by his own courtesy taken down.

Mr. Robert Browning was born at Camberwell, a southern suburb of London, on the 7th of May, 1812. His father, who bore the same name as himself, and who died in 1866

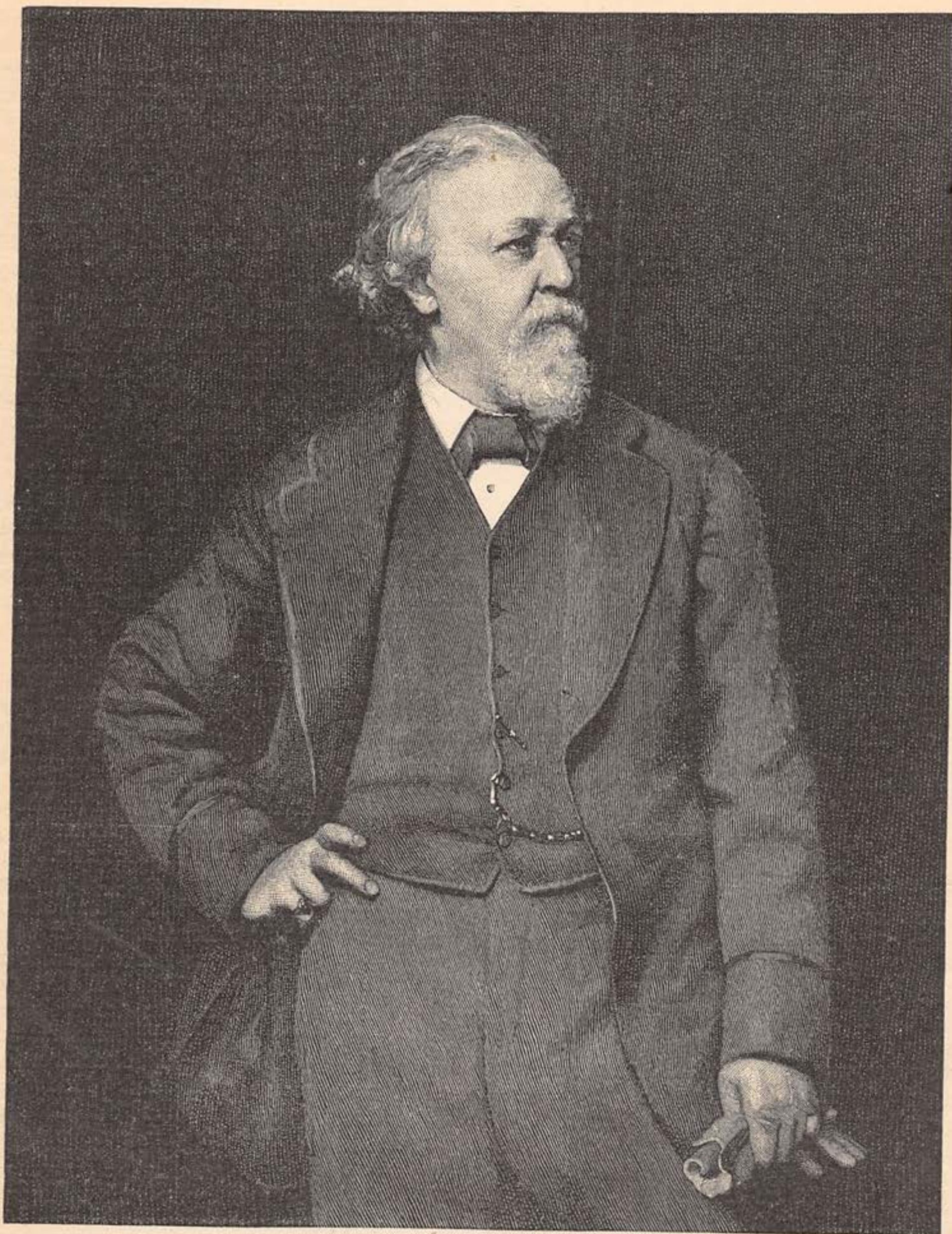
ROBERT BROWNING AT THE AGE OF 47. (FROM THE DRAWING BY RUDOLF LEHMANN, IN 1859.)

at the age of eighty-four, was in many ways a remarkable man. It is, we must suppose, not merely filial piety that makes his son declare that his father had more true poetic genius than he has. Of course the world at large will answer, "By their fruits shall ye know them," and of palpable fruit in the way of published verse the elder Mr. Browning has nothing to show. But it seems that his force and fluency in the use of the heroic couplet, the only metrical form for which he had much taste, were extraordinary; and his son speaks of his moral vein as that of a Pope born out of due time. For his son's poetic gods he had, of course, no fondness, and, from the very first, the two minds diverged upon every intellectual point—until the close of the old gentleman's life, when it is pathetic to hear that he learned, as the world was learning, to appreciate the fine flavor of his son's poetry. He was always, however, loving and sympathetic, divining the genuine poetic impulse though blind to the beauty of the forms it took, and in this one case the rare phenomenon seems to have appeared of a boy consciously, and of set purpose, trained to be a poet. The only other instance that occurs to me is that of Jean Chapelain, who was set apart from birth by his parents "to relight the torch of Malherbe"; the result was not nearly so happy as in the case of Mr. Browning. The latter, however, can hardly remember a time when his intention was not to be eminent in rhyme, and he began to write at least as early as Cowley. His sister remembers him, as a very little boy, walking round and round the dining-room table, and spanning out the scansion of his verses with his hand on the smooth mahogany. When he was about eight years old, this ambitious young person disdained the narrow field of poetry, and, while retaining that scepter, debated within himself, as Dryden says Anne Killegrew did, whether he should invade and conquer the province of painting or that of music. It soon became plain to him, however, that, as he himself put it thirty-five years later,

> "I shall never, in the years remaining,
> Paint you pictures, no, nor carve you statues,
> Make you music that should all-express me:
> . . . . . Verse alone, one life allows me,"

and he began writing with assiduity. It is curious to reflect that all the giants were alive in those days—not even Keats himself laid to sleep under the Roman grasses. In 1824, the year that Byron died, the boy had collected poems enough to form a volume, and these were taken around to publisher after publisher, but in vain. The first people who saw the nascent genius of this lad of twelve years old were the two Misses Flower, the younger afterward authoress of "Vivia Perpetua," and too sadly known as Sarah Flower Adams. The elder Miss Flower thought the poems so remarkable that she copied them and showed them to the distinguished Unitarian, the Rev. William Johnson Fox, then already influential as a radical politician of the finer order. As a matter of course, Mr. Fox was too judicious to recommend the publication of poems so juvenile, but he ventured to prophesy a splendid future for the boy, and he kept the transcripts in his possession. To Mr. Browning's great amusement, after the death of Mr. Fox, in 1864, his daughter returned the MS. to the author, who read in maturity the forgotten verses of his childhood. At the time they were written he was entirely under the influence of Byron, and his verse was so full and melodious that Mr. Fox confessed, long afterward, that he had thought that his snare would be a too gorgeous scale of language and tenuity of thought, concealed by metrical audacity. But about a year after this, an event revolutionized Robert Browning's whole conception of poetic art. There came into his hands a miserable pirated edition of part of Shelley's works; the window was dull, but he looked through it into an enchanted garden. He was impatient to walk there himself, but, in 1825, it was by no means easy to obtain the books of Shelley. No bookseller that was applied to knew the name, although Shelley had been dead three years. At last, inquiry was made of the editor of the "Literary Gazette," and it was replied that the books in question could be obtained of C. & J. Ollier, of Vere street. To Vere street, accordingly, Mrs. Browning proceeded, and brought back as a present for her son, not only all the works of Shelley, but three volumes written by a Mr. John Keats, which were recommended to her as being very much in the spirit of Mr. Shelley. A bibliophile of to-day is almost dazed in thinking of the prize which the unconscious lady brought back with her to Camberwell. There was the Pisa "Adonais," in its purple paper cover; there was "Epipsychidion,"—in short, all the books she bought were still in their first edition, except "The Cenci," which professed to be in the second. Poets of our own day need not grumble at the indifference of the public, when we see that within human memory two of the greatest writers of modern times, three and four years after their decease, were still utterly unsalable. Well, the dust of the dead Keats and Shelley turned to flower-seed in the brain of the young poet, and very soon wrought a change in the whole of his ambition. First of all, they made him thoroughly dissatisfied with what he had hitherto written, and showed him—always a very salutary lesson for a boy—that the elements of his art were still to be learned. Meanwhile, the business of ordinary education took up the main part of his time; till 1826, he was at school at Dulwich, then with a tutor at home, and finally, but I think only for a very short time, at London University.

The elder Mr. Browning had but two children—the poet, and a daughter who still keeps house for her brother. When the son had arrived at that age at which the bias or opportunity of parents usually dictates a profession to a youth, Mr. Browning asked his son what he intended to be. It was known to the latter that his sister was provided for, and that there would always be enough to keep him also, and he had the singular courage to decline to be rich. He appealed to his father whether it would not be better for him to see life in the best sense, and cultivate the powers of his mind, than to shackle himself in the very outset of his career by a laborious training, foreign to that aim. The wisdom or unwisdom of such a step is proved by its measure of success. In the case of Mr. Browning the determination has never been regretted, and so great was the confidence of the father in the genius of the son that the former at once acquiesced in the proposal. At this time, young Browning's brain was full of colossal schemes of poems. It is interesting and curious to learn that at a time of life when almost every poet, whatever his ultimate destination, is trying his power of wing in song, Mr. Browning, the early Byronic lilt having been thrown aside, did not attempt any lyrical exercise. He planned a series of monodramatic epics, narratives of the life of typical souls—a gigantic scheme at which a Victor Hugo or a Lope de Vega would start back aghast. Several of these great poems were sketched; only one exists, and that in fragmentary form. At Richmond, whither the family had gone to live,—on the 22d of October, 1832,—Mr. Browning finished a poem which he named, from the object, not the



Robert Browning.

(FROM THE PAINTING BY RUDOLF LEHMANN.)

subject, "Pauline." This piece was read and admired at home, and one day his aunt said to the young man:

"I hear, Robert, that you have written a poem; here is the money to print it."

Accordingly, in January, 1833, there went to press, anonymously, a little book of seventy pages, which remained virtually unrecognized until the author, to preserve it from piracy, unwillingly received it among the acknowledged children of his muse, in 1867.

But, although "Pauline" was excluded from recognition by its author for more than thirty years, he has to confess that its production was attended with circumstances of no little importance to him. It was the intention and desire of Mr. Browning that the authorship should remain entirely unknown, but Miss Flower told the secret to Mr. Fox, who reviewed the poem with great warmth and fullness in the "Monthly Repository." But a more curious incident was that a copy fell into the hands of John Stuart Mill, who was only six years the senior of the poet. It delighted him in the highest degree, and he immediately wrote to the editor of "Tait's Magazine," the only periodical in which he was at that time free to express himself, for leave to review "Pauline" at length. The reply was that nothing would have been more welcome, but that, unfortunately, in the preceding number the poem had been dismissed with one line of contemptuous neglect. Mr. Mill's opportunities extended no further than this one magazine, but at his death there came into Mr. Browning's possession this identical copy, the blank pages of which were crowded with Mill's annotations and remarks. The late John Forster took such an interest in this volume that he borrowed it,—"convey, the wise it call,"—and when he died, it passed with his library into the possession of the South Kensington Museum, where the curious relic of the youth of two eminent men has at last found a resting-place. Nor was this the only instance in which the poem, despite its anonymity and its rawness, touched a kindred chord in a man of genius. There was much in it that was new, forcible, and fine,—such passages of description as this of the wood where Pauline and her lover met:

"Walled in with a sloped mound of matted shrubs,
Dark, tangled, old and green, still sloping down
To a small pool whose waters lie asleep
Amid the trailing boughs like water-plants;
And tall trees overarch to keep us in,
Breaking the sunbeams into emerald shafts;
And in the dreamy water one small group
Of two or three strange trees are got together,
Wondering at all around, as strange beasts herd
Together far from their own land: all wildness,
No turf nor moss, for boughs and plants pave all,
And tongues of bank go shelving in the waters,
Where the pale-throated snake reclines his head,
And old gray stones lie making eddies there,
The wild mice cross them dry-shod: deeper in!
Shut thy soft eyes—now look—still deeper in!
This is the very heart of the woods, all round
Mountain-like heaped above us; yet even here
One pond of water gleams; far off the river
Sweeps like a sea, barred out from land; but one—
One thin clear sheet has overleaped and wound
Into this silent depth, which gained, it lies
Still, as but let by sufferance; *the trees bend*
O'er it as wild men watch a sleeping girl,"—

or such fine bursts of versification as this about Andromeda:

"As she awaits the snake on the wet beach,
By the dark rock and the white wave just breaking
At her feet; quite naked and alone; a thing
You doubt not, fear not for, secure that God
Will come in thunder from the stars to save her."

Such beauties as these were not likely to escape the notice of curious lovers of poetry. Many years after, when Mr. Browning was living in Florence, he received a letter from a young painter whose name was quite unknown to him, asking him whether he were the author of a poem called "Pauline," which was somewhat in his manner, and which the writer had so greatly admired that he had transcribed the whole of it in the British Museum reading-room. The letter was signed D. G. Rossetti, and thus began Mr. Browning's acquaintance with this eminent man. But to the world at large "Pauline" was a sealed book, by nobody, and the reviewers simply ignored it.

One very creditable exception was the "Athenæum," then in its infancy, which dedicated several columns to a kindly, if not very profound, analysis, and to copious quotations. Mr. Browning discovered long afterward that this notice was written by Allan Cunningham.

After the publication of "Pauline" there came a period of respite, in which the poetical ferment of the young writer's mind was settling down, and his genius was preparing to take its proper form. The scheme of illustrating, in a series of vast biographies in blank verse, whatever was unusual or tragical in the history of a soul, was gradually abandoned, and the excitement of travel took the place of the excitement of composition. Mr. Browning set out upon his *Wanderjahr*, 1834, and made a long stay at St. Petersburg. Of all that was thought and planned in these two years preceding the rapid authorship of "Paracelsus," the only specimen remaining is to be found in two very curious lyrics, included in the "Dramatic Lyrics" of 1842, and now finally relegated to "Men and Women." They were printed first in "Fox's Monthly Repository," under the single title of "Mad-house Cells," although they

are now known to every reader of Mr. Browning as "Joannes Agricola in Meditation" and "Porphyria's Lover." It is a curious matter for reflection that two poems so unique in their construction and conception, so modern, so interesting, so new, could be printed without attracting attention, so far as it would appear, from any living creature. Here was a poet with a fresh voice, appealing to the intellectual youth of Europe in a direct way, such as only one other man had dreamed of, and that was Heine. Then came "Paracelsus," written in London through the winter of 1834, finished in March, 1835, and published before the summer. This work has had so many admirers that it needs, perhaps, a little courage to say that it was surely not so important as a sign of its author's genius as the little pieces just mentioned. It is a drama of a shapeless kind, parent in this sort of a monstrous family of "Festuses," and "Balders," and "Life Dramas," only quite lately extirpated, and never any more, it is hoped, to flourish above ground. There are four persons in the drama: *Paracelsus*, the male and female genii of his career; *Festus* and *Michal*, friend and lover, and finally *Aprile*, the foil and counterpoise to his ambitious gravity. Every one knows how the poem is conducted; how full it is of subtlety, of melody, of eloquent and casuistical intelligence. But we cannot forget that it is a drama in which one of the characters, more than once, expresses himself in upward of three hundred lines of unbroken soliloquy. The precedent was bad, as all disregard of the canons of artistic form is apt to be; and in the hands of his imitators Mr. Browning must often have shuddered at his own contorted reflection. The public refused to have anything to say to so strange a poem; very few copies sold, and the reviews were contemptuously adverse. The "Athenæum," even, which had received "Pauline" so warmly, dismissed "Paracelsus" with a warning to the author that it was useless to reproduce the obscurity of Shelley minus his poetic beauty. But certain finer minds here and there recognized the treasury of power and genius concealed in this crabbed shape. The "Examiner," in particular, contained a review of the poem at great length, in which full justice was done to Mr. Browning's genius. This, again, was the commencement of a memorable intimacy. But in the meantime the young poet formed the acquaintance of one of the most striking personages of that generation—Macready, the tragedian. This happened at a dinner at the house of W. J. Fox, on the 27th of November, 1835. The actor was exceedingly charmed with the young and ardent writer, who, he said, looked more like a poet than any man he had ever met. He read "Paracelsus" with a sort of ecstasy, and cultivated Mr. Browning's acquaintance on every occasion. He asked him to spend New Year's Day with him at his country-house at Elstree, and on the last day of 1835, Mr. Browning found himself at "The Blue Posts" waiting for the coach, in company with two or three other persons, who looked at him with curiosity. One of these, a tall, ardent, noticeable young fellow, constantly caught his eye, but as the strangers knew one another, and as Mr. Browning knew none of them, no conversation passed as they drove northward. It turned out that they were all Macready's guests, one of the elder men being George Cattermole, while the noticeable youth was no other than John Forster. He, on being introduced to Mr. Browning, said: "Did you see a little notice of you I wrote in the 'Examiner'?" The friendship so begun lasted, with a certain interval, until the end of Forster's life.

The acquaintance with Macready deepened rapidly on both sides. The actor had scarcely finished reading "Paracelsus" before he began to think that here was a tragic poet to his mind. He suggested that Mr. Browning should write him an acting play, and the subject of Narses, the eunuch who conquered Italy for Justinian, was discussed between them. At first the actor seemed more eager in the matter than the poet. Early in 1836, Macready made this striking entry in his journal:

> "Browning said that I had *bit* him by my performance of *Othello*, and I told him I hoped I should make the blood come. It would, indeed, be some recompense for the miseries, the humiliations, the heart-sickening disgusts which I have endured in my profession, if, by its exercise, I had awakened a spirit of poetry whose influence would elevate, ennoble, and adorn our degraded drama. May it be!"

In April, 1836, the miseries to which Macready referred, and which were caused by the meanness of his manager and the bad state of the law of contract, were suddenly brought to a climax. One evening, after playing part of "Richard II.," and being forbidden to conclude the tragedy, Macready's patience suddenly failed him, and he inflicted upon the notorious and ridiculous Mr. Alfred Bunn a sound thrashing. Notwithstanding this unfortunate *contretemps*, to which Mr. Macready's chivalrous ideal gave more importance in his own eyes than was felt by an indulgent and scandal-loving public, it was possible, as early as May 26th, 1836, to bring out at Covent Garden Theater, under the management of Mr. Osbaldiston, Talfourd's new tragedy of "Ion." The supper which succeeded the first performance of this ex-

tremely successful play was a momentous occasion to Mr. Browning. He found himself seated opposite to Macready, who was supported on his right hand and his left by two elderly gentlemen, in whom the young poet recognized for the first time William Wordsworth and Walter Savage Landor. In the course of the evening Talfourd, with marked kindness, proposed the name of the youngest English poet, and Wordsworth, leaning across the table, said, with august affability, "I am proud to drink your health, Mr. Browning!" The latter saw much of Wordsworth during the next few years, for Talfourd invited him to his house whenever Wordsworth came up to town. He listened to his slow talk with reverence and interest, but never got over the somewhat chilling and awful personal bearing of the old man. With Landor, on the contrary, Mr. Browning afterward became, as readers of Forster's life must be aware, extremely intimate, and helped, indeed, to add sunshine to the last dark days of that leonine exile. To return, however, to the "Ion" supper: the success of that tragedy had whetted the appetite of all the luckless playwrights of the day, and one of them, Miss Mitford, with pert audacity, ventured to propose a poetic play to the tragedian while he was at table. But she utterly failed in her ruse, and Mr. Browning was, therefore, doubly surprised when, as the guests were leaving, Macready came behind him on the stairs, and, laying his hand on his arm, said, "Write a play, Browning, and keep me from going to America!" It was said so earnestly that there could be no doubt that it was meant, and Mr. Browning simply replied: "Shall it be historical and English? What do you say to a drama on Strafford?" In this rapid interchange of sympathies Mr. Browning's next work was conceived, but it was several months before he satisfied himself that he was sufficiently read in the historical part of the subject to fill up the plot. On the 19th of November, 1836, the tragedy of "Strafford" was brought, almost finished, to Macready; in March of the next year it was completed and put in rehearsal, and, on the first of May, it was brought out on the boards of Covent Garden Theater.

It is time now to deny a statement that has been repeated *ad nauseam* in every notice that professes to give an account of Mr. Browning's career. Whatever is said or not said, it is always remarked that his plays have "failed" on the stage. In point of fact, the three plays which he has brought out have all succeeded, and have owed it to fortuitous circumstances that their tenure on the boards has been comparatively short. "Strafford" was produced when the finances of Covent Garden Theater were at their lowest ebb, and nothing was done to give dignity or splendor to the performance. "Not a rag for the new tragedy," said Mr. Osbaldiston. The *King* was taken by Mr. Dale, who was stone-deaf, and who acted so badly that, as one of the critics said, it was a pity that the pit did not rise as one man and push him off the stage. All sorts of alterations were made in the text; where the poet spoke of "grave gray eyes," the manager corrected it in rehearsal to "black eyes." But at last Macready appeared, in the second scene of the second act, in more than his wonted majesty, crossing and recrossing the stage like one of Vandyke's courtly personages come to life again, and Miss Helen Faucit threw such tenderness and passion into the part of *Lady Carlisle* as surpassed all that she had previously displayed of histrionic power. Under these circumstances, and in spite of the dull acting of Vanderhoff, who played *Pym* without any care or interest, the play was well received on the first night, and on the second night was applauded with enthusiasm by a crowded house. There was every expectation that the tragedy would have no less favorable a "run" than "Ion" had enjoyed, but after five nights, Vanderhoff suddenly withdrew, and though Elton volunteered to take his place, the financial condition of the theater, in spite of the undiminished popularity of the piece, put an end to its representation.

Mr. Browning, the elder, had paid for the cost of "Paracelsus"; "Strafford" was taken by Longmans, and brought out, at their expense, as a little volume—not, like most of the tragedies of the day, in dark-gray paper covers, with a white label. However, at that time the public absolutely declined to buy Mr. Browning's books, and "Strafford," although more respectfully received by the press, was as great a financial failure as "Paracelsus." It was part of Mr. Browning's essentially masculine order of mind to be in no wise disheartened or detached from his purpose by this indifference of the public. He was silent for three years, but all the time busy with copious production. The success of "Strafford" on the stage led Mr. Browning's thoughts very naturally to the drama, and besides the purely lyrical masque or "proverb" of "Pippa Passes," he concluded, before 1840, two tragedies with the intention of seeing them acted. These were "King Victor and King Charles," and "Mansoor the Hierophant," rebaptized on publication by the name of "The Return of the Druses."

These plays, however, found no manager or publisher willing to accept them, and the author fell back on the dream that he had commenced his career with, namely, that of chronicling in poetry the whole life of a single soul. He set to work, and produced one of the most considerable, certainly one of the most characteristic, of his works, in the epic of "Sordello," begun in 1838, finished and printed in 1840. It is scarcely necessary to remark that for forty years this book has been an eminent stumbling-block, not merely in the path of fools, but in that of very sensible and cultivated people. "The entirely unintelligible 'Sordello'" has enjoyed at least its due share of obloquy and neglect. There are not a few of Mr. Browning's readers who would miss it from the collection of his books more than any other of his longer poems. It possesses passages of melody and insight, fresh enough, surprising enough to form the whole stock-in-trade of a respectable poet; it needs reading three times, but on the third even a school-boy of tolerable intelligence will find it luminous, if not entirely lucid, and half the charge of obscurity is really a confession of indolence and inattention.

"Who wills may hear 'Sordello's' story told,"

and if our space to-day would give us leave to roam through its fragrant pages, we might find a thousand reasons why "Sordello" ought to be one of the most readable of books. And yet the Naddos of contemporary criticism were not wholly wrong. The book is difficult, and Mr. Browning in the philosophic afternoon of life frankly confesses as much. It is hard reading, over-condensed, over-rapid, like much of Milton in its too arrogant contempt for the commonplace habits of the intelligence. This is the author's explanation of his error, for that it was an error he is perhaps more ready than some of his admirers to admit. In 1838, the condition of English poetry was singularly tame and namby-pamby. Tennyson's voice was only heard by a few. The many delighted in poor "L. E. L.," whose sentimental "golden violets" and gushing *improvvisatores* had found a tragic close at Cape Coast Castle. Among living poets, the most popular were good old James Montgomery, droning on at his hopeless insipidities and graceful "goodnesses," the Hon. Mrs. Norton, a sort of soda-water Byron, and poor, rambling T. K. Hervey. The plague of annuals and books of beauty was on the land, with its accompanying flood of verses by Alaric A. Watts and "Delta" Moir. These virtuous and now almost forgotten poetasters had brought the art of poetry into such disesteem, with their puerilities and their thin, diluted sentiment, that verse was beginning to be considered unworthy of exercise by a serious or original thinker. Into this ocean of thin soup Mr. Browning threw his small square of solid pemmican—a little mass which could have supplied ideas and images to a dozen "L. E. L.'s" without losing much of its consistence. Of course, to a generation long fed on such thin diet, the new contribution seemed much more like a stone than like anything edible, and even to this day there are lovers of poetry who can get as little out of it as Alton Locke could. About 1863, Mr. Browning, becoming a little impatient of the long-repeated denigration of his favorite offspring, set about rewriting "Sordello" on a simpler principle; needless to say that was a failure, and there are few who will regret that for once, at least, so profound a student of the human heart wrote rather as he himself felt than as his readers, even the most sympathetic of them, might have wished. The book has become a classic, and to each coming generation will in all probability present less difficulty than to the preceding one.

But from the popular point of view "Sordello" was a failure, and in the face of so much poetry still unprinted, Mr. Browning could not but ruefully remember how expensive his books had been to his sympathetic and uncomplaining father. To go on indefinitely in this way was scarcely to be thought of, and yet poetry kept in a desk, on the Horatian principle, is a property that wears out the soul with hope deferred. One day, as the poet was discussing the matter with Mr. Edward Moxon, the publisher, the latter remarked that at that time he was bringing out some editions of the old Elizabethan dramatists in a comparatively cheap form, and that if Mr. Browning would consent to print his poems as pamphlets, using this cheap type, the expense would be very inconsiderable. The poet jumped at the idea, and it was agreed that each poem should form a separate brochure of just one sheet,—sixteen pages, in double columns,—the entire cost of which should not exceed twelve or fifteen pounds. In this fashion began the celebrated series of "Bells and Pomegranates," eight numbers of which, a perfect treasury of fine poetry, came out successively between 1841 and 1846. "Pippa Passes" led the way, and was priced first at sixpence; then, the sale being inconsiderable, at a shilling, which greatly encouraged the sale; and so, slowly, up to half a crown, at which the price of each number finally rested. As the advertisement of "Bells and Pomegranates" has never been reprinted, and as that volume is not very common, I make no

apology for reproducing that characteristic little document:

"Two or three years ago I wrote a play, about which the chief matter I much care to recollect at present is, that a pitfull of good-natured people applauded it. Ever since, I have been desirous of doing something in the same way that should better reward their attention. What follows I mean for the first of a series of dramatical pieces, to come out at intervals, and I amuse myself by fancying that the cheap mode in which they appear will for once help me to a sort of pit-audience again. Of course, such a work must go on no longer than it is liked; and to provide against a certain and but too possible contingency, let me hasten to say now what, if I were sure of success, I would try to say circumstantially enough at the close, that I dedicate my best intentions most admiringly to the author of 'Ion'—most affectionately to Sergeant Talfourd."

There had been nothing in the pastoral kind written so delightfully as "Pippa Passes" since the days of the Jacobean dramatists. It was inspired by the same feeling as gave charm and freshness to the masques of Day and Nabbes, but it was carried out with a mastery of execution and fullness of knowledge such as those unequal writers could not dream of exercising. The figure of *Pippa* herself, the unconscious messenger of good spiritual tidings to so many souls in dark places, is one of the most beautiful that Mr. Browning has produced, and in at least one of the more serious scenes,—that between *Sebald* and *Ottima*,—he reaches a tragic height that places him on a level with the greatest modern dramatists. Of the lyrical interludes and seed-pearls of song scattered through the scenes, it is a commonplace to say that nothing more exquisite or natural was ever written, or rather warbled. The public was first won to Mr. Browning by "Pippa Passes." Next year, 1842, he printed the old tragedy of "King Victor and King Charles," which he had had by him for some years. If "Pippa Passes" was, as Miss Barrett said, a pomegranate that showed

"A heart within blood-tinctured, of a veined humanity,"

this latter drama was a bell, clear-toned and clangorous, fitly rung before the curtain should rise upon a stately theatrical spectacle. The poetry here, as in "Strafford," which it resembles, is carefully subordinated to stage effect and movement, and it is unfortunate that Mr. Browning was not successful in getting it accepted by any manager, for it would be a popular piece on the stage. Not a lyrical passage, scarcely a lyrical touch, checks the business and bustle of the scenes till *Victor* dies so majestically, with his son's crown on his head, defying *d'Ormea*. The same year followed the brief pamphlet or booklet called "Dramatic Lyrics." Short as this book is, only sixteen pages, it was shorter still when the printer's devil came from Mr. Moxon's shop to ask for more copy to fill up the sheet. Mr. Browning gave him a *jeu d'esprit* which he had written to amuse little Willie Macready, and which he had had no idea of publishing. This was "The Pied Piper of Hamelin," which has probably introduced its author's name into hundreds of thousands of homes where otherwise it never would have penetrated. In other respects the collection was sparse, but remarkable enough. First came the three "Cavalier Tunes," as at present; then, under the titles of "Italy" and "France," what we now find among the "Dramatic Romances" as "My Last Duchess" and "Count Gismond." Then the "Incident of the French Camp" and "The Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister"; then "In a Gondola," perhaps the most delicate in harmonic effect of all Mr. Browning's lyrics; then "Artemis Prologizes"; then "Waring," in which was sung the disappearance of Mr. Alfred Dommett, who, after a long exile, returned from Vishnuland, or New Zealand, a few years ago; then "Rudel and the Lady of Tripoli," "Cristina," "Mad-house Cells,"—which we have already discussed,—"Through the Metidja," and finally "The Pied Piper." Early in 1843 there followed the glowing and passionate tragedy "The Return of the Druses," a play which would be sure to rivet attention on the stage, but which no manager hitherto has had the courage to produce.

But, in the meantime, the hopes that had sprung eternal in the breasts of all dramatic poets began to cluster once more around the person of Mr. Macready. That illustrious actor, by that time recognized as by far the most able and eminent tragedian in the English-speaking world, after performing for a season at the Haymarket, took Drury Lane Theater under his own management, and held out flattering promises to the poets. This season opened on the 10th of December, 1842, with "The Patrician's Daughter" of Mr. Westland Marston. This was the first work of a young man of great promise, of whom much had been talked in literary and theatrical circles. Mr. Macready took the part of *Mordaunt*, Miss Helen Faucit that of *Lady Mabel Lynterne*, and great pains were taken to secure a thoroughly satisfactory cast. It was distinctly understood that if "The Patrician's Daughter" was a great success, the public was to be rewarded by a series of original tragedies by poets of repute. Everything seemed as glittering and auspicious as possible, and nobody knew what a dangerous game Macready was playing. He was, as a

matter of fact, on the verge of bankruptcy, and driven almost to distraction by a variety of vexations. Unfortunately, Marston's play, from which so much was expected, enjoyed only a success of esteem. It was removed, to be succeeded on the boards by a play called "Plighted Troth," by a brother of George Darley, and a man of the same peevish, hopeless temperament as his more distinguished relative. This tragedy proved to be miserable trash, and was scarcely endured a single night. But, in the meantime, Mr. Browning, who had been asked by Macready to write a play for him, had devised and composed, in the space of five days, one of the most remarkable of his works, "The Blot on the 'Scutcheon." This had been received, and delight had been expressed by Macready on reading it. The author was, therefore, surprised that, on the withdrawal of "Plighted Troth," he received no invitation, in accordance with etiquette, to read it aloud to the actors previous to rehearsal. He had no inkling whatever of Macready's embarrassments, and not the slightest notion that it was hoped that he would withdraw the piece. At last, on Saturday, the 4th of February, 1843, Macready called Mr. Browning into his private room, and said to him:

"Your play was read to the actors yesterday, and they received it with shouts of laughter."

"Who read it?"

"Oh, Mr. Wilmot."

Now, Wilmot was the prompter, a broadly comic personage with a wooden leg and a very red face, whose vulgar sallies were the delight of all the idle jesters that hung about the theater. That such a drama as "The Blot on the 'Scutcheon" should be given to Wilmot to read was simply an insult, and one of which Mr. Browning did not conceal his perception. Macready saw his mistake, and said: "Wilmot is a ridiculous being, of course. On Monday I myself will read it to the actors." On Monday, accordingly, he read it, but he announced to Mr. Browning that he should not act in it himself, but that Phelps, then quite a new man, would take the principal part. This was an unheard-of thing in those days, when it was supposed that Macready was absolutely essential to a new tragedy. Of course his hope was that Mr. Browning would say: "You not play in it? Then, of course, I withdraw it." But the actor's manner was so far from suggesting that truth that the poet never suspected the real state of the case. He accepted Phelps, but, when the rehearsal began on Tuesday, Phelps was very ill with English cholera, and could not be present, so Macready read his part for him. On Wednesday Mr. Browning noticed that Macready was not merely reading: he was rehearsing the part, moving across the stage, and counting his steps. When Mr. Browning arrived on Thursday, there was poor Phelps sitting close to the door, as white as a sheet, evidently very poorly. Macready began: "As Mr. Phelps is so ill—you are very ill, are you not, Mr. Phelps?—it will be impossible for him to master his part by Saturday, and I shall therefore take it myself." Mr. Browning was not at all pleased with this shuffling, for which he could divine no cause, and he was still more annoyed at the changes which were being made in the poem. The title was to be changed to "The Sisters," the first act was to be cut out, and it was to end without any tragic *finale*, but with these sublime lines, due to the unaided genius of Macready himself:

"Within a monastery's solitude
Penance and prayer shall wear my life away."

Mr. Browning was determined, if possible, to check this wanton sacrifice of the poem, and so he took the MS. to his publisher Moxon, who also had a quarrel with Macready, and who was therefore only too pleased to coöperate in his confusion. "The Blot on the 'Scutcheon" was printed in a few hours, in a single sheet, as part five of "Bells and Pomegranates," and was in the hands of each of the actors before Mr. Browning reached the theater on Friday morning. As he entered, he met Phelps, who was waiting for him at the door, and who said:

"It is true, sir, that I have been ill, but I am better now, and if you chose to give the part to me, which I can hardly expect you to do, I should be able to act it to-morrow night."

"But is it possible," said Mr. Browning, "that you could learn it so soon?"

"Yes," answered Phelps, "I should sit up all night and know it perfectly."

Mr. Browning's determination was soon taken; he took Phelps with him into the green-room, where Macready was already studying the play in its printed form, with the actors around him. Mr. Browning stopped him, and said:

"I find that Mr. Phelps, although he has been ill, feels himself quite able to take the part, and I shall be very glad to leave it in his hands." Macready rose and said:

"But do you understand that I, *I*, am going to act the part?"

"I shall be very glad to intrust it to Mr. Phelps," said Mr. Browning, upon which Macready crumpled up the play he was holding in his hand, and threw it to the other end of the room.

After such an event, it was with no very hopeful feelings that Mr. Browning awaited the first performance on the next night, February 11th. He would not allow his parents or his sister to go to the theater; no tickets were sent to him, but finding that the stage-box was his, not by favor, but by right, he went with no other companion than Mr. Edward Moxon. But his expectations of failure were not realized. Phelps acted magnificently, carrying out the remark of Macready, that the difference between himself and the other actors was that they could do magnificent things now and then, on a spurt, but that he could always command his effects. Anderson, a *jeune premier* of promise, acted the young lover with considerable spirit, although the audience was not quite sure whether to laugh or no when he sang his song, "There's a Woman like a Dewdrop," in the act of climbing in at the window. Finally, Miss Helen Faucit almost surpassed herself in *Mildred Fresham.* The piece was entirely successful, though Mr. R. H. Horne, who was in the front of the pit, tells me that Anderson was for some time only half-serious, and quite ready to have turned traitor if the public had encouraged him. When the curtain went down, the applause was vociferous. Phelps was called and recalled, and then there rose the cry of "Author!" To this Mr. Browning remained silent and out of sight, and the audience continued to shout until Anderson came forward, and keeping his eye on Mr. Browning, said, "I believe that the author is not present, but if he is I entreat him to come forward!" The poet, however, turned a deaf ear to this appeal, and went home very sore with Macready, and what he considered his purposeless and vexatious schemings. "The Blot on the 'Scutcheon" was announced to be played "three times a week until further notice"; was performed with entire success to crowded houses, until the final collapse of Macready's schemes brought it abruptly to a close.

Such is the true story of an event on which Macready, in his journals, has kept an obstinate silence, and which one erring critic after another has chronicled as the failure, "as a matter of course," of Mr. Browning's "improbable" play. Neither on its first appearance, nor when Phelps revived it at Sadler's Wells, was "The Blot on the 'Scutcheon" received by the public otherwise than with warm applause. As in the case of "Strafford," a purely accidental circumstance, unconnected with Mr. Browning, cut it short in the midst of a successful run.

Fired with the memory of so many plaudits, Mr. Browning set himself to the composition of another actable play, and this also had its little hour of success, though not until many years afterward. "Colombe's Birthday," which formed number six of "Bells and Pomegranates," appeared in 1843. I have before me at the present moment a copy of the first edition, marked for acting by the author, who has written: "I made the alterations in this copy to suit some—I forget what—projected stage representation: not that of Miss Faucit, which was carried into effect long afterward." The stage directions are numerous and minute, showing the science which the dramatist had gained since he first essayed to put his creations on the boards. Some of the suggestions are characteristic enough. For instance, "unless a very good Valence" is found, this extremely fine speech, perhaps the jewel of the play, is to be left out. In the present editions the verses run otherwise. Valence speaks:

"He stands, a man, now; stately, strong and wise—
One great aim, like a guiding-star, before—
Which tasks strength, wisdom, stateliness to follow,
As, not its substance, but its shine, he tracks,
Nor dreams of more than, just evolving these
To fullness, will suffice him to life's end
After this star, out of a night he springs,
A beggar's cradle for the throne of thrones
He quits; so mounting, feels each step he mounts,
Nor as from each to each exultingly
He passes, overleaps one grain of joy.
This for his own good:—with the world each gift
Of God and man—Reality, Tradition,
Fancy, and Fact—so well environ him,
That as a mystic panoply they serve—
Of force untenanted to awe mankind,
And work his purpose out with half the world,
While he, their master, dexterously slipt
From such encumbrance, is meantime employed
In his own prowess with the other half.
So shall he go on, every day's success
Adding, to what is He, a solid strength,—
An airy might to what encircles him,
Till at the last, so life's routine shall grow,
That as the Emperor only breathes and moves,
His shadow shall be watched, his step or stalk
Become a comfort or a portent; how
He trails his ermine take significance,—
Till even his power shall cease his power to be,
And most his weakness men shall fear, nor vanquish
Their typified invincibility.
So shall he go on greatening, till he ends—
The man of men, the spirit of all flesh,
The fiery center of an earthy world!"

Mr. Browning says that very little has hitherto been printed about his life, and that little "mostly false." A curious instance of this last clause is the statement that has been authoritatively made, in a quarter from which we do not expect error, to the effect that "Colombe's Birthday" was brought out by Miss Cushman, at the Haymarket, in 1844, as "The Duchess of Cleves." The editor of Mr. Browning's letters to Mr. R. H. Horne was probably thinking about a play, with a "Duchess" in the title, written by Henry

Chorley for Miss Cushman, and which she brought out while Mr. Browning was in Italy. It seems to have been some projected performance of "Colombe's Birthday" in 1846, by Helen Faucit, to whom the poet had read his play, that caused the latter to make the stage directions to which I have just referred. In point of fact, it was not till 1852 that Miss Faucit produced, and with marked success, the play in question.

The last number of "Bells and Pomegranates," which appeared in double size, contained a quaint rabbinical apology for the general title, and consisted of two plays, "Luvia," dedicated to Walter Savage Landor, and "A Soul's Tragedy." These bore the date 1846, and with these the first act of Mr. Browning's public as well as private life would seem to have closed, for on the 12th of September, 1846, he was married, at St. Marylebone, to Miss Elizabeth Barrett Barrett, the illustrious poet, and directly afterward proceeded with her to find a new home in Italy.

TO RALPH WALDO EMERSON.

September, 1881.

Poet of every soul that grieves
  O'er death untimely: whose high plaint
Lights up the farthest Dark, and leaves
  A bow across the heavens bent:

Dead in an upper room doth lie
  A nation's darling; can it be
Thy ear too faintly hears the cry
  The West wind utters to the sea?

Thy Concord pæan may have caught
  Glow from that elder Garfield's name:
What fitter aureole could be sought
  For such a son than such a flame!

Bard of the Human: since we yearn
  For that one manly heart in vain,
Forgive the reverent eyes that turn
  Toward the low stream in Concord plain.

Warned by the favoring touch of Death,
  Thy *Nunc Dimittis* thou hast sung;
No more the thunder's stormy breath
  Shall sweep the lyre with lightnings strung.

And yet, for him, remains—unsigned,
  Unspoken—all thy noble praise,
When (port more worth the cruise!) thou find
  His sail beyond the final haze;

But us? . . . . . O Seer, to whose gift
  Looms large the Future's better part,
What other prophet voice shall lift
  This burden from the people's heart!