



Women of Yesterday and To-day.

ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING.

BY LIZZIE P. LEWIS.

WANDERING aimlessly one afternoon through the portrait-gallery of South Kensington Museum, my eye was suddenly caught by a pictured representation of a face of wonderful sweetness and power, showers of dark curls falling on either side, and with large, tender eyes, fringed by long, dark lashes. It was a faithful likeness of the greatest woman-poet the world has ever known—Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

Mrs. Browning was born in Hertfordshire, in 1807, and her genius as a child, cherished and directed by her sympathetic father, she would have had a great reputation as an infant prodigy in literature, had not her maturer powers quite extinguished the glory of her youthful performances. The girl at ten

"Lisp'd in numbers, for the numbers came."

Her first published volume was *An Essay on Mind*, when she was about seventeen. This was succeeded by a translation from the Greek of *Prometheus Bound*. There was great boldness in this attempt, but no one was quicker to find it out than the author. Some years later she replaced this "early failure," as she called it, by an entirely new version, "made in expiation of a sin of my youth, with the sincerest application of my mature mind."

It was Mrs. Browning's privilege to have, for instructor and friend, Hugh Stuart Boyd, a man of great erudition, and blind. In one of the most perfect of her poems, *The Wine of Cyprus*, Mrs. Browning recalled the happy hours passed with her old friend among the folios. It is a most exquisite rhythmical chant, which could be inspired only by a genuine passion for learning. See how the dead letter, buried in its grave of parchment, is vivified by the light of the imagination, passing through this human atmosphere of friendship.

"And I think of those long mornings,
Which my thought goes far to seek,
When, betwixt the folios' turnings,
Solemn flowed the rhythmic Greek.
Past the pane the mountain spreading,
Swept the sheep-bells' tinkling noise,
While a girlish voice was reading,
Somewhat low for a's and of's."

"Ah, my gossip! you were older,
And more learned, and a man!
Yet that shadow, the enfolder
Of your quiet eyelids—ran
Both our spirits to one level;
And I turned from hill and lea
And the summer sun's green revel,
To your eyes that *could not see!*
Now Christ bless you with the one
light
Which goes shining night and day,
May the flowers which grow in sun-
light
Shed their fragrance on your way!
Is it not right to remember
All your kindness, friend of mine,
When we two sat in the chamber,
And the poets poured us wine."

In 1836, the breaking of a blood-vessel compelled our poetess to seek the mild climate of Torquay as a means of restoration to health. There fell upon her the master-grief of her life. She had been accompanied by a brother in talents and heart worthy such a sister, and to whom she was devotedly attached. One fine summer's morning, her brother and two young friends set sail for a short pleasure excursion, and were lost, by accident or mismanagement of the boat, within sight of the windows of the sister's lodging. It was a tragedy which nearly killed her, and months elapsed before she could be removed to her London home, where she was a prisoner to the English climate for years.

In the chambers of affliction, poets learn through suffering what they afterward teach in song; just as we darken the cages of birds, that they may learn to sing the better. So Providence dealt with Elizabeth Barrett. A caged invalid for years, she reclined on her sofa, seeing only a few old friends, but reading almost every book worth reading, in almost every language; studying Hebrew that she might read the Old Testament in the original, and having her Plato bound up as a novel to deceive her good old doctor, who could not believe Greek a healthful study for an invalid, and especially a woman.

In *Lady Geraldine's Courtship* she spoke of Robert Browning's poem, *The Pomegranate*:

"Or from Browning some 'Pomegranate,' which, if cut deep down the middle,
Shows a heart within blood-tinctured, of a veined humanity."

The poet, touched by the compliment, called upon her, and, by the blunder of a new servant, he was shown to her sick room. No one knows what passed at their first interview, but Browning was allowed to repeat the visit. In November, 1846, they were married, she rising from her sick bed to marry the man she loved—one of the most remarkable elective affinities ever written in the annals of the poets. They immediately went to Italy, and settled in Florence, in a house which has become historical because of the woman who lived, and wrote, and died there. Few lovers of literature or philanthropy visit Florence without seeking the Casa Guida, with its inclosed balcony, where the poet sat and wrote amid her flowers, overlooking the old iron-gray church of Santa Felice.

It was there that *Aurora Leigh* was written, a poem of which Taine, the great French critic, says: "Space fails me in order that I may state, after having perused it *twenty* times, how beautiful I consider it to be." High praise, but not a whit too strong.

It is the story of a young girl's life, who tells us that her mother, a Florentine, died when Aurora was scarcely four years old, and so she went about the world

"As restless as a nest-deserted bird,
Grown chill through something being away, though what it knows not."

for she says,

"Women know

The way to rear up children (to be just),
They know a simple, merry, tender knack
Of tying sashes, fitting baby-shoes,
And stringing pretty words that make no sense,
And kissing full sense into empty words;
Which things are corals to cut life upon,
Although such trifles; children learn by such,
Love's holy earnest in a pretty play,
And yet not over-early solemnized,
But seeing, as in a rose-bush, love's divine,
Which burns and hurts not—not a single bloom—
Become aware and unafraid of love."

This she goes on to say is a mother's mission, and though fathers love as well, yet their brains being heavier and their wills more responsible, they love *less wisely because less foolishly*, and

"And so mothers have God's license to be missed."

After the mother's death, Aurora's father, who was an Englishman, left Florence to hide away with his grief and prattling child among the mountains, where he taught her what he had learnt the best.

"Out of books

He taught me all the ignorance of men,
And how God laughs in heaven when any man
Says, 'Here, I'm learned; this I understand.
In that, I am never caught at fault or doubt.'"

So for nine years their days were hid among the mountains until her father died, and there was no one left in all the world for her to love. And then a stranger came, and she was taken to England, where she was received by her father's sister, who had

"A close mild mouth, a little soured about
The ends, through speaking unrequited loves,
Or peradventure, niggardly half truths."

This aunt, who was not only her "father's sister," but her "mother's *hater*," did

"Her duty to me—

Her duty, in large measure, well pressed out,
But *measured always*."

And Aurora was generally a meek and manageable child, who

"Only thought

Of lying quiet there where I was thrown,
Like sea-weed on the rocks, and suffering her
To prick me to a pattern with her pin,
Fibre from fibre, delicate leaf from leaf,
And dry out from my drowned anatomy
The last sea-salt left in me."

She studied, to please this aunt, German and French, "brushed with extreme founce the circle of the sciences," music and drawing,

"Read a score of books on womanhood
To prove, if women do not think at all,
They may teach thinking."

and learned "cross-stitch," because it was not well to "wear the night with empty hands, doing nothing." Here it is she exclaims:

"By the way,

The works of women are symbolical.
We sew, sew, prick our fingers, dull our sight,
Producing what? a pair of shippers, sir,
To put on when you're weary—or a stool
To tumble over and vex you—'curse that stool!
Or else at best, a cushion, where you lean
And sleep, and dream of something we are not,
But would be for your sake. Alas, alas!
This hurts most, this—that after all, we are paid
The worth of our work, perhaps."

Aurora had a cousin, Romney Leigh, her elder by a few years, cold and shy and grave, as befitting the early master of Leigh Hall, but who was

fondly loved by their aunt. It happened one day that visitors whispered, and she hearing, blushed for joy at the words :

"The Italian child,
For all her blue eyes and her quiet ways,
Thrives ill in England; she will die."

When Romney, who had also overheard, said low between his teeth :

"You're wicked now!
You wish to die and leave the world a-dusk
For others, with your naughty light blown out?"

However, she did not die, but lived and learned to love the English nature, in whose presence you understand how

"Ere the fall
Adam lived in a garden."

She used to get up early to watch the morning quicken in the gray,

"And hear the silence open like a flower."

In a garret-room she found many cases upon which was her father's name, filled with books, and so she read at first for memory, but afterwards for hope.

"I read books bad and good—some bad and good
At once (good aims not always make good books) :
—Moral books
Exasperating to license ; —
Merry books which set you weeping when
The sun shines—aye, and melancholy books
Which make you laugh that any one should weep
In this disjointed life for one wrong more."

Then she too began to write, and her quickening inner life began to reveal itself to the father's sister, who started when she caught the soul ablaze in Aurora's eyes.

"She could not say
I had no business with a sort of soul,
But plainly she objected—and demurred
That souls were dangerous things to carry straight
Through all the spilt saltpetre of the world."

Thus time sped away until Aurora's twentieth birthday, when she awoke, feeling

"So young, so strong, so sure of God!
So glad I could not choose but be very wise!"

In this mood she rushed out into the early morning,

"To fly my fancies in the open air
And keep my birth-day, till my aunt awoke
To stop good dreams."

There among the shrubberies she drew a wreath across her brow, and turning faced her cousin Romney. He offered her a book he had found—

"No name writ on it—poems, by the form;
Some Greek upon the margin—ladies' Greek,
Without the accents. Read it? Not a word,
I saw at once the thing had witchcraft in it."

He then advises her to

"Keep to the green wreath
Since even dreaming of the stone and bronze,
Brings head-aches."

To which she replies—

"If heads
That hold a rhythmic thought, must ache perforce,
For my part I choose head-aches."

Romney, who was a philanthropist, and no believer in woman except as the complement of man, but who very sincerely loves Aurora, argues with her as to the fitting sphere and duty of her sex, striving to make Aurora feel that her best aim in life should be the aiding him in his self-imposed task of making the crooked things of this world straight. But to his pleadings Aurora turns a deaf ear.

"Sir, you were married long ago.
You have a wife already whom you love,
Your social theory. Bless you both I say.

For my part, I am scarcely meek enough
To be the handmaid of a lawful spouse—
—Women of a softer mood,
Will sometimes only hear the first word, Jove,
And catch up with it any kind of work,
Indifferent, so that dear love go with it;
I do not blame such women, though, for love
They pick much oakum; *earth's fanatics make
Too frequently Heaven's saints.*
And I may love my art
Seeing that to waste true love on anything
Is womanly, past question."

With this last word Aurora went home to meet her aunt, who, shocked and distressed, told her that in refusing Romney's hand, she had shut herself off from every right, even to cross

"A single blade of grass beneath these trees,
Or cast a lamb's small shadow on the lawn."

Aurora, persistent in her refusal, recalls her father's love, when left alone.

"I had a father, yes, but long ago;
How long ago it seemed that moment. Oh, how far,
How far and safe, God, dost Thou keep Thy saints
When once gone from us! We may call against
The lighted windows of Thy fair June—heaven
Where all the souls are happy,—and not one,
Not even my father, looks from work or play,
To ask, 'Who is it that cries after us,
Below there, in the dark?' Yet formerly
He turned his face upon me quick enough,
If I said 'father.'"

Weeks passed after this in silence, though Aurora felt her aunt's watchful eyes constantly upon her, which,

"When observation is not sympathy
Is just being tortured."

But in the sixth week, when sitting at her woodbine-shaded window, she thought,

"Sleep late, and spare me yet the burden of your eyes."

A shriek resounded through the house, and Aurora hastening at the call to her aunt's room, found her

"Bolt upright in the chair beside the bed,"

with an unopened letter in her hand, dead. And so the prayer was answered.

"Sleep late," I said.
God answers sharp and sudden on some prayers,
And thrusts the thing we have prayed for in our face,
A gauntlet with a gift in't. Every wish
Is like a prayer with God."

After the funeral, Romney and Aurora meet again, and he urged upon her acceptance as her right a sum of money sent by him to her aunt, in the unopened letter found in her dead hand. Aurora, however, rejected the gift, and went to London, where for three years she

"Worked with patience, which means almost power."

"Get leave to work
In this world; 'tis the best you get at all,
For God, in cursing, gives us better gifts
Than men in benediction."

One day a lady called upon her.

"She had the low voice of your English dames,
Unused, it seems, to need rise half a note
To catch attention,—and their quiet mood
As if they lived too high above the earth
For that to put them out in anything.
So gentle, because verily so proud;
So wary and afraid of hurting you.
By no means that you are not really vile,
But that they would not touch you with their foot.
To push you to your place: so self-possessed,
Yet gracious and conciliating, it takes
An effort in their presence to speak truth."

Lady Waldemar, she announced herself, and with but short prelude told Aurora that she loved her cousin, Romney Leigh—and that despite all her efforts she could not send him from her heart or thoughts.

"You eat of love,
And do as vile a thing as if you ate
Of garlic—which, whatever else you eat,
Tastes uniformly acrid, till your peach
Reminds you of your onion."

She goes on to tell Aurora how by every means in her power, she had sought to win his love, but all in vain, and that now he was to be married to one Marian Erle, a daughter of the people, and that she, Lady Waldemar, had come to Aurora to beg her to go to see the girl, and then prove to Romney how such an alliance would wrong the people and posterity.

"Say such a thing is bad for me and you,
And you fail utterly."

This Aurora refused to do, and Lady Waldemar

"Floated from me like a silent cloud
That leaves a sense of thunder."

However, two hours after, Aurora found herself within St. Margaret's Court, and ascending the long, steep, broken stairs, she reached the room under the roof where lived Marian Erle,—

"No wise beautiful.

She was not white nor brown,
But could look either, like a mist that changed
According to being shone upon more or less.
The hair, too, ran its opulence of curls
In doubt 'twixt dark and bright, nor left you clear
To name the color; — the eyes smiled too,
But 'twas as if remembering they had wept,
And knowing they should, some day, weep again."

She told Aurora her history, one old and sad and oft repeated, of drunken father and wretched mother; and of how she learned of God and right, of sin and virtue, at the Sunday School.

"Oh, 'tis hard

To learn you have a father up in heaven
By a gathering certain sense of being, on earth,
Still worse than orphaned."

And then as she grew older, how wandering peddlers would throw her down odd leaves from the heart of books, stray volumes, or some city friend would take her to a lecture, until she had grown to no book-learning, but had caught some fragmentary phrases of that fine music, which cherished in her soul, had reproduced itself in finer motions of the lips and eyes. But a day came when Marian's mother, who had been bruised and beaten, wished to sell her to the Squire. And Marian, mad with fear, rushed away, not pausing till her feet could run no more, and she sank down senseless, where she was found by a pitiful wagoner, who left her at a hospital. There stunned, half-tranced, she lay for weeks, until her strong youth brought her back to life, and she was told "she had leave to go the next week." But where to go, was her aching thought, till the day before the last, came a visitor who said aloud the question burning in her heart, whereupon she exclaimed amid her sobs:

"Can I say
Where I go? when it has not seemed worth while
To God himself, who thinks of every one,
To think of me, and fix where I shall go?"

and she told her piteous tale, to which Romney made answer:

"'Tis simple that betrayal by mother's love
Should bring despair of God's too. Yet he taught
He's better to us than many mothers are,
And children cannot wander beyond reach
Of the sweep of His white raiment. Touch and hold,
And if you weep still, weep where John was laid
While Jesus loved him."

Through Romney's help she was sent to a famous sempstress-house in London, to work and hope, until again they met by the deathbed of a poor girl, when Romney asked her to dedicate herself with him to works of ministration and of mercy, as his wife.

Her story finished, Aurora asked: "So, indeed, he loves you, Marian?" And Marian, looking up

"with a child's wonder when you ask him first, who made the sun?" replied,

"Loves me! he had not asked me else
To work with him forever and be his wife."

These words reproved Aurora, who soliloquized:

"This, perhaps, was love—
To have its hands too full of gifts to give,
For putting out a hand to take a gift.
To love so much, the perfect round of love
Includes, in strict conclusion, being loved."

While Aurora sat there in the humble room, Romney entered, and when she left he went with her, and as they parted at the door,

"How strange his good-night sounded—like good-night
Beside a deathbed, where the morrow's sun
Is sure to come too late for more good days."

At last the wedding day arrived. The church was thronged with

"Half St. Giles in frieze
Bidden to meet St. James in cloth of gold."

The hour came and passed, and in lieu of the bride, came a letter, tender and passionate, saying:

"I never will look more into your face
Till God says 'Look!'"

Worked on by Lady Waldemar, Marian had left him. Romney sought her days and weeks, but in vain. Aurora labored on alone.

"My Father! Thou hast knowledge, only Thou,
How dreary 'tis for women to sit still
On winter nights by solitary fires,
And hear the nations praising them far off;
Too far! ay, praising our quick sense of love.
Our very heart of passionate womanhood,
Which could not beat so in the verse without
Being present also in the unknissed lips,
And eyes undried because there's none to ask
The reason they grow moist ———
———. To have our books

Appraised by love, associated with love
While *we* sit loveless! Is it hard you think?
At least 'tis mournful. Fame, indeed, 'twas said
Means simply love. It was a *man* said that.
And then there's love and love; the love of all
(To risk in turn a woman's paradox),
Is but a small thing to the love of one.

———. Hungry! but it's pitiful
To wail like unweaned babes, and suck our thumbs
Because we're hungry. ———

———. But since
We needs must hunger—better, for man's love
Than God's truth! better, for companions sweet
Than great convictions! Let us bear our weights,
Preferring dreary hearths to desert souls."

Worn out by toil, Aurora goes to Paris, and there chances upon Marian, where, following to her home, she saw

"A yearling creature, warm and moist with life
To the bottom of his dimples—to the ends
Of the loosely tumbled curls about his face;
For since he had been covered over-much
To keep him from the light glare, both his cheeks
Were hot and scarlet as the first 'live rose,
The shepherd's heart blood ebbed away into,
The faster for his love. And love was here
As instant; in the pretty baby mouth,
Shut close as if for dreaming that it sucked;
The little naked feet drawn up the way
Of nestled birdlings; everything so soft
And tender, to the tiny hold-fast hands,
Which, closing on the finger into sleep,
Had kept the mould off."

Aurora grieved, reproaches Marian, who tells of how she was urged by Lady Waldemar to leave Romney, and go with a strange woman to some foreign city, where alone, friendless, she was taken to a house of shame, and "not *seduced* but *simply murdered*." Aurora then entreats her to go South with her, where

"In my Tuscan home I'll find a niche,
And set thee there, my saint, the child and thee,
And burn the lights of love before thy face;
That so in gravity and holy calm,
We two may live on toward the truer life."

And so they went to Florence, and Aurora took up the old days

"With all their Tuscan pleasures worn and spoiled,
Like some lost book we drop in the long grass
On such a happy summer afternoon,
When last we read it with a loving friend,
And find in autumn, when the friend is gone,
The grass cut short, the weather changed, too late,
And stare at, as at something wonderful
For sorrow, thinking how two hands before
Had held up what is left to only one."

The days swept by, while Aurora lived at her Florentine house on the hill of Beleosquardo, and thinks of Romney, who she fancied married to Lady Waldemar, until one evening as she sat and watched the gaslights tremble out along the squares and streets of the beautiful city, she saw before her unannounced, Romney her "*King!*" as her heart then acknowledged him to be. He told her he had come to her,

"My Italy of women, just to breathe
My soul out once before you, ere I go,
As humble as God makes me at the last,
(I thank Him) quite out of the way of men,
And yours, Aurora, like a punished child,
His cheeks all blurred with tears and naughtiness,
To silence in a corner."

His grand schemes for regenerating and reforming the race had come to naught, his house, his pictures all destroyed by those he had tried to benefit, leaving of his father's house only

"One stone stair, symbolic of my life,
Ascending, winding, leading up to naught."

After this misfortune it was he heard that Marian lived, and had come to Italy to claim her as his wife, and to take her outcast child

"To share my cup, to slumber on my knee,
To play his loudest gambols at my foot,
To hold my finger in the public ways,
Till none shall need inquire, 'Whose child is this?'
The gesture saying so tenderly, 'my own.'"

But she refused, saying:

"Here's a hand shall keep
Forever clean without a wedding-ring,
To tend my boy until he cease to need
One steady finger of it, and desert
(Not miss) his mother's lap, to sit with men,
And when I miss him (not he me) I'll come
And say, 'Now give me some of Romney's work,
To help your outcast orphans of the world
And comfort grief with grief.'"

It was only at the hour of parting, Aurora learned that her cousin had been blinded by a falling beam of the burning house, and then it was she confessed she loved him.

"I love you, loved you, loved you first and last,
And love you on forever. Romney mistook the world,
And I mistook my own heart, and that slip
Was fatal.

Art symbolizes heaven, but love is God,
And makes heaven. I, Aurora, fell from mine;
I would not be a woman like the rest,
A simple woman who believes in love,
And owns the right of love because she loves,
And, hearing she's beloved, is satisfied
With what contents God; I must analyze,
Confront and question; I must fret,
Forsooth, because the month was only May;
Be faithless of the kind of proffered love,
And captious, lest it miss my dignity,
And scornful, that my lover sought a wife
To use—to use! O Romney, O, my love,
I am changed since then, changed wholly, for indeed
If now you'd stoop so low to take my love,
And use it roughly, without stint or spare,
As men use common things with more behind
(And in this, ever would be more behind),
To any mean and ordinary end,
The joy would set me like a star in heaven,
So high up, I should shine because of height,
And not of virtue."

Romney, overjoyed at the fruition of his lost hope, gives thanks that he is blind, and says:

"The world waits
For help. Beloved, let us love so well,

Our work shall be the better for our love,
And still our love be sweeter for our work,
And both commended for the sake of each,
By all true workers and true lovers born."

Mrs. Browning warmly espoused the cause of Italian freedom, and some of her noblest poems are written on that theme. It would be a hard task to count the souls which have thrilled under the influence of Casa Guida windows, and mother and poet.

On the 29th of June, 1861, Mrs. Browning died after a week's illness. Her last words were, "It is beautiful!" In the lonely English cemetery, outside the walls of Florence, she was laid to rest where the tall cypress trees sway and sigh, as nature's special mourners for one who loved her in her every mood. As we stood by the side of the monumental marble which marks the spot, these words floated in upon our ear:

"Oh! the little birds sang east, and the little birds sang west,

Toll slowly!

And I said in underbreath,
All our life is mixed with death,
And who knoweth which is best?

* * * * *

Oh! the little birds sang east, and the little birds sang west,

Toll slowly!

And I paused to think God's goodness
Flowed around our incompleteness,
Round our restlessness, *His rest.*"

What Women are Doing.

Miss Emily Sartain, of Philadelphia, has been elected an honorary member of the Ladies' Art Association of New York.

Susan L. Cole has been elected librarian of the public library at East Saginaw, Michigan.

Mrs. C. A. Plympton, of Cincinnati, has found out for herself the art of making figures in relief on pottery.

This summer for the first time lady students were admitted to the Harvard Summer School of Geology.

Mary J. Salter has just published a book entitled "The Lost Receipt." Miss Salter is blind, and was twenty-two years old when she met with this misfortune.

The Ladies' Art Association of New York will begin a series of botanical lectures in October.

Turning the Tables.—At Wellesley College "the cooks are men. The professors are women."

The "Stanley" Club of Paris received ladies for the first time on the occasion of a dinner given to Miss C. Thursby, who was the bright, particular star of the occasion.

Miss Gardiner, a young American lady who has received "honorable" mention from the judges of the Paris "salon" of 1879, is a pupil of Bougerean, and engaged to be married to him. He is a widower.

Miss Lina Berger is a young German lady who has received the title of "Doctor" from the Philosophical Faculty of the University of Berne, in Switzerland, for an excellent dissertation on "Thomas Morus and Plato."

Sarah Bernhardt, the great French tragedienne, is coming to this country.

Churchwarden.—Miss Caroline Harcastle was lately appointed Churchwarden of the parish of Hardwood, near Bolton, Lancashire.

A Woman's College is being erected near Windsor, the gift of a Mr. Hallowsay. It is to be magnificent.