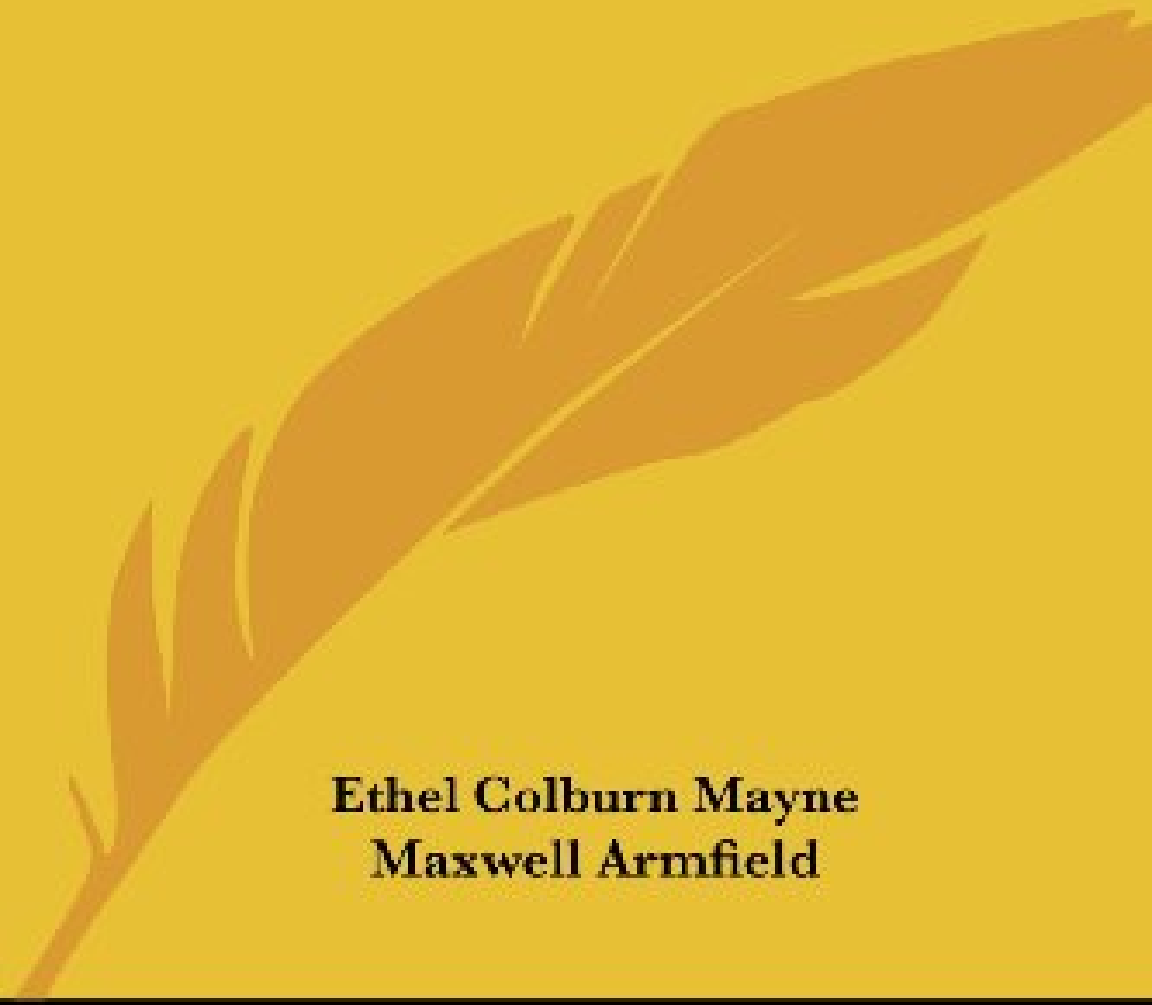
Browning's Heroines



Ethel Colburn Mayne
Maxwell Armfield

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BROWNING'S HEROINES ***



BROWNING'S HEROINES

by ETHEL COLBURN MAYNE
WITH FRONTISPIECE & DECORATIONS
BY MAXWELL ARMFIELD

LONDON

CHATTO & WINDUS
1913

PREFACE

When this book was projected, some one asked, "What is there to say about Browning's heroines beyond what he said himself?"—and the question, though it could not stay me, did chill momentarily my primal ardour. Soon, however, the restorative answer presented itself. "If there were nothing to say about Browning's heroines beyond what he said himself, it would be a bad mark against him." For to *suggest*—to open magic casements—surely is the office of our artists in every sort: thus, for them to say all that there is to say about anything is to show the casement stuck fast, as it were, and themselves battering somewhat desperately to open it. Saying the things "about" is the other people's function. It is as if we suddenly saw a princess come out upon her castle-walls, and hymned that fair emergence, which to herself is nothing.

Browning, I think, is "coming back," as stars come back. There has been the period of obscuration. Seventeen years ago, when the *Yellow Book* and the *National Observer* were contending for *les jeunes*, Browning was, in the more "precious" côterie, king of modern poets. I can remember the editor of that

golden Quarterly reading, declaiming, quoting, almost breathing, Browning! It was from Henry Harland that this reader learnt to read *The Ring and the Book*: "Leave out the lawyers and the Tertium Quid, and all after Guido until the Envoi." It was Henry Harland who would answer, if one asked him what he was thinking of:

> "And thinking too—oh, thinking, if you
> like,
> How utterly dissociated was I. . . ."

—regardless of all aptitude in the allusion, making it simply because it "burned up in his brain," just as days "struck fierce 'mid many a day struck calm" were always *his* days of excitement. . . . A hundred Browning verses sing themselves around my memories of the flat in Cromwell Road.

Misconceptions was swung forth with gesture that figured swaying branches:

> "This is a spray the bird clung to. . . ."

You were to notice how the rhythms bent and tossed like boughs in that first stanza—and to notice, also, how regrettable the second stanza was. Nor shall I easily let slip the memory of *Apparent Failure*, thus recited. He would begin at the second verse, the "Doric little Morgue" verse. You were not to miss the great "phrase" in

> "The three men who did most abhor
> Their lives in Paris yesterday. . . ."

—but you were to feel, scarce less keenly, the dire descent to bathos in "So killed themselves." It was

almost the show-example, he would tell you, of Browning's chief defect—over-statement.

> "How did it happen, my poor boy?
> You wanted to be Bonaparte,
> And have the Tuileries for toy,
> And could not, so it broke your heart. . . ."

How compassionately he would give that forth! "A screen of glass, you're thankful for"; "Be quiet, and unclench your fist"; "Poor men God made, and all for this!"—the phrases (how alert we were for the "phrase" in those days) would fall grave and vibrant from the voice with its subtle foreign colouring: you could always infuriate "H. H." by telling him he had a foreign accent.

Those were Browning days; and now these are, or soon shall be. Two or three years since, to quote him was, in the opinion of a *Standard* reviewer, to write yourself down a back-number, as they say. I preserve the cutting which damns with faint praise some thus antiquated short stories of 1910. Browning and Wagner were so obsolete! . . . How young that critic must have been—so young that he had never seen a star return. Quite differently they come back—or is it quite the same? Soon we shall be able to judge, for this star is returning, and—oh wonder!—is trailing clouds of glory of the very newest cut. The stars always do that, this watcher fancies, and certainly Browning, like the Jub-jub, was ages ahead of the fashion. His passport for to-day is dated up to the very hour—for though he could be so many other things besides, one of his achievements, for us, will prove to have been that he could be so "ugly." *That* would not have been reckoned among his glories in the Yellow Book-room; but the wheel shall come full

circle—we shall be saying all this, one day, the other way round. For, as Browning consoles, encourages, and warns us by showing in *Fifine*,[x:1] each age believes—and should believe—that to it alone the secret of true art has been whispered.

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FOOTNOTES:

[x:1] I write far from my books, but the passage will be easily found or recalled.



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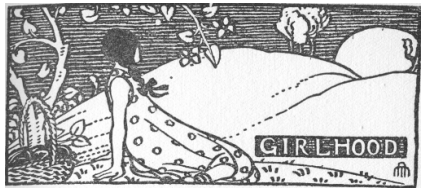
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PART I



BROWNING'S HEROINES

INTRODUCTORY

Browning's power of embodying in rhythm the full beauty of girlhood is unequalled by any other English poet. Heine alone is his peer in this; but even Heine's imagination dwelt more fondly on the abstract pathos and purity of a maiden than on her individual gaiety and courage. In older women, also, these latter qualities were the spells for Browning; and, with him, a girl sets forth early on her brave career. That is the just adjective. His girls are as brave as the young knights of other poets; and in this appreciation of a dauntless gesture in women we see one of the reasons why he may be called the first "feminist" poet since Shakespeare. To me, indeed, even Shakespeare's maidens have less of the peculiar iridescence of their state than Browning's have, and I think this is because, already in the modern poet's

day, girlhood was beginning to be seen as it had never been seen before—that is, as a "thing-by-itself." People had perceived—dimly enough, but with eyes which have since grown clearer-sighted—that there is a stage in woman's development which ought to be her very own to enjoy, as a man enjoys *his* adolescence. This dawning sense is explicit in the earlier verses of one of Browning's most original utterances, *Evelyn Hope*, which is the call of a man, many years older, to the mysterious soul of a dead young girl—

> "Sixteen years old when she died!
> Perhaps she had hardly heard my name;
> It was not her time to love; beside,
> Her life had many a hope and aim,
> Duties enough and little cares,
> And now was quiet, now astir . . ."

Here recognition of the girl's individuality is complete. Not a word in the stanza hints at Evelyn's possible love for another man. "It was not her time"; there were quite different joys in life for her. . . . Such a view is even still something of a novelty, and Browning was the first to express it thus whole-heartedly. There had been, of course, from all time the hymning of maiden purity and innocence, but beneath such celebrations had lurked that predatory instinct which a still more modern poet has epitomised in a haunting and ambiguous phrase—

> "For each man kills the thing he loves."

Thus, even in Shakespeare, the Girl is not so much that transient, exquisite thing as she is the Woman-in-love; thus, even for Rosalind, there waits the Emersonian *précis*—

"Whither went the lovely hoyden?
  Disappeared in blessèd wife;
Servant to a wooden cradle,
  Living in a baby's life."

I confess that this tabloid "story of a woman" has, ever since my first discovery of it, been a source of anger to me; and I do not think that such resentment should be reckoned as a manifestation of modern decadence. The hustling out of sight of that "lovely hoyden" is unworthy of a poet; poet's eyes should rest longer upon beauty so irrecoverable—for though the wife and mother be the happiest that ever was, she can never be a girl again.

In the same way, to me the earliest verses of *Evelyn Hope* are the loveliest. As I read on, doubts and questions gather fast—

"But the time will come—at last it will,
  When, Evelyn Hope, what meant (I shall
    say)
In the lower earth, in the years long still,
  That body and soul so pure and gay?
Why your hair was amber, I shall divine,
  And your mouth of your own
    geranium's red—
And what you would do with me, in fine,
  In the new life come in the old one's
    stead.

I have lived (I shall say) so much since
    then,
  Given up myself so many times,
Gained me the gains of various men,
  Ransacked the ages, spoiled the climes;
Yet one thing, one, in my soul's full scope,

Either I missed, or itself missed me:
And I want and find you, Evelyn Hope!
What is the issue? let us see!

I loved you, Evelyn, all the while.
My heart seemed full as it could hold?
There was place and to spare for the frank
young smile,
And the red young mouth, and the hair's
young gold.
So, hush—I will give you this leaf to keep:
See, I shut it inside the sweet cold hand!
There, that is our secret: go to sleep!
You will wake, and remember, and
understand."

* * * * *

Here the average man is revived, the man who can imagine no meaning for the loveliness of a girl's body and soul but that it shall "do something" with him. When they meet in the "new life come in the old one's stead," this is the question he looks forward to asking; and instinctively, I think, we ask ourselves a different one. *Will* Evelyn, on waking, "remember and understand"? Will she not have passed by very far, in the spirit-world, this unconscious egotist? . . . True, he can to some extent realise that probability—

"Delayed it may be for more lives yet,
Through worlds I shall traverse, not a
few:
Much is to learn, much to forget,
Ere the time be come for taking you."

But Browning has used the wrong word here. She whom the "good stars that met in her horoscope" had

made of "spirit, fire, and dew," must, whether it be her desire to do so or not, eternally keep part of herself from the *taking* of any man. . . . This is a curious lapse in Browning, to whom women are, in the highest sense of the word, individuals—not individualists, a less lovable and far more capturable thing. His heroines are indeed instinct with devotion, but it is devotion that chooses, not devotion that submits. A world of "gaiety and courage" lies between the two conceptions—a world, no less, of widened responsibility and heavier burdens for the devotee. If we compare a Browning heroine with a Byron one, we shall almost have traversed that new country, wherein the air grows ever more bracing as we travel onward.

With shrinking and timidity the Browning girl is unacquainted. As experience grows, these sensations may sadly touch her, but she will not have been prepared for them; no reason for feeling either had entered her dream of life. She trusts—

> "Trust, that's purer than pearl"—

and how much purer than shrinking! Free from the athletics and the slang, she is antetype, indeed, of, say, the St. Andrews girl, that admirable creation of our age; but she soars beyond her sister on the wings of her more exquisite sensibility, and her deeper restfulness. Not for her the perpetual pursuit of the india-rubber or the other kinds of ball; she can conceive of the open air as something better than a place to play games in. Like Wordsworth's Lucy—

> "Hers shall be the breathing balm,
> And hers the silence and the calm,
> Of mute insensate things;"

and from such "being" she draws joys more instant and more glancingly fair than Lucy drew. Among them is the joy of laughter. Of all gifts that the fulness of time has brought to women, may we not reckon that almost the best? A woman laughs nowadays, where, before, as an ideal she smiled, or as a caricature giggled; and I think that the great symphony of sex has been deepened, heightened wellnigh beyond recognition, by that confident and delicate wood-note.

* * * * *

"All the breath and the bloom of the year
in the bag of one bee:
All the wonder and wealth of the mine in
the heart of one gem:
In the core of one pearl all the shade and
the shine of the sea:
Breath and bloom, shade and shine—
wonder, wealth, and—how far
above them!—
Truth, that's brighter than gem,
Trust, that's purer than pearl—
Brightest truth, purest trust, in the
universe, all were for me
In the kiss of one girl."

Nothing there of "Be good, sweet maid, and let who will be clever"! Do the fortunate girls of to-day get *Summum Bonum* in their albums (if they have albums), as we of the past got Kingsley's ineffable pat on the head? But since even for us to be a girl was bliss, these maidens of a later day must surely be in paradise. They keep, in the words of our poet, "much

that we resigned"—much, too, that we prized. No girl, in our day, but dreamed of the lordly lover, and I hazard a guess that the fantasy persists. It is slower to be realised than even in our own dream-period, for now it must come through the horn-gate of the maiden's own judgment. Man has fallen from the self-erected pedestal of "superiority." He had placed himself badly on it, such as it was—the pose was ignoble, the balance insecure. One day, he will himself look back, rejoicing that he is down; and when—or if—he goes up again, it will be more worthily to stay, since other hands than his own will have built the pillar, and placed him thereupon. His chief hope of reinstatement lies in this one, certain fact: No girl will ever thrill to a lover who cannot answer for her to *A Pearl, A Girl*—

"A simple ring with a single stone,
To the vulgar eye no stone of price:
Whisper the right word, that alone—
Forth starts a sprite, like fire from ice,
And lo! you are lord (says an Eastern scroll)
Of heaven and earth, lord whole and sole,
Through the power in a pearl.

A woman ('tis I this time that say)
With little the world counts worthy praise,
Utter the true word—out and away
Escapes her soul: I am wrapt in blaze,
Creation's lord, of heaven and earth
Lord whole and sole—by a minute's birth —
Through the love in a girl!"

As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be! But observe that he has to utter the *true* word.

This brave and joyous note is the essential Browning, and to me it supplies an easy explanation for his much-discussed rejection of the very early poem *Pauline*, for which, despite its manifold beauties, he never in later life cared at all—more, he wished to suppress it. In *Pauline*, his deepest sense of woman's spiritual function is falsified. This might be accounted for by the fact that it was written at twenty-one, if it were not that at twenty-one most young men are most "original." Browning, in this as in other things, broke down tradition, for *Pauline* is by far the least original of his works in outlook—it is, indeed, in outlook, of the purest common-place. "It exhibits," says Mr. Chesterton, "the characteristic mark of a juvenile poem, the general suggestion that the author is a thousand years old"; and it exhibits too the entirely un-characteristic mark of a Browning poem, the general suggestion that the poet has not thought for himself on a subject which he was, in the issue, almost to make his own—that of the inspiring, as opposed (for in Browning the antithesis is as marked as that) to the consoling, power of a beloved woman. From the very first line this emotional flaccidity is evident—

> "Pauline, mine own, bend o'er me—thy
> soft breast
> Shall pant to mine—bend o'er me—thy
> sweet eyes
> And loosened hair and breathing lips, and
> arms

Drawing me to thee—these build up a
screen
To shut me in with thee, and from all fear
. . ."

And again in the picture of her, lovely to the sense, but, in some strange fashion, hardly less than nauseating to the mind—

". . . Love looks through
—
Whispers—E'en at the last I have her still,
With her delicious eyes as clear as heaven
When rain in a quick shower has beat
down mist . . .
How the blood lies upon her cheek,
outspread
As thinned by kisses! only in her lips
It wells and pulses like a living thing,
And her neck looks like marble misted o'er
With love-breath—a Pauline from heights
above,
Stooping beneath me, looking up—one
look
As I might kill her and be loved the more.
So love me—me, Pauline, and nought but
me,
Never leave loving! . . ."

Something is there to which not again, not once again, did Browning stoop; and that something removes, for me, all difficulty in understanding his rejection, despite its exquisite verbal beauties, of this work. Moreover, it is interesting to observe the queer sub-conscious sense of the lover's inferiority betrayed in the prose note at the end. This is in French, and feigns to be written by Pauline herself. She is there

made to speak of "*mon pauvre ami*." Let any woman ask herself what that phrase implies, when used by her in speaking of a lover—"my poor dear friend"! We cannot of course be sure that Browning, as a man, was versed in this scrap of feminine psychology; but we do gather with certainty from Pauline's fabled comment that her view of the confession—for the poem is merely, as Mr. Chesterton says, "the typical confession of a boy"—was very much less lachrymose than that of *mon pauvre ami*. Unconsciously, then, here—but in another poem soon to be discussed, not unconsciously—there sounds the humorous note in regard to men which dominates so many of women's relations with them. "The big child"—to some women, as we all know, man presents himself in that aspect chiefly. Pauline, remarking of her lover's "idea" that it was perhaps as unintelligible to him as to her, is a tender exponent of this view; the girl in *Youth and Art* is gayer and more ironic. Here we have a woman, successful though (as I read the poem) [12:1] *not* famous, recalling to a successful and famous sculptor the days when they lived opposite one another—she as a young student of singing, he as a budding statuary—

"We studied hard in our styles,
  Chipped each at a crust like Hindoos,
For air looked out on the tiles,
  For fun watched each other's windows.

* * * * *

And I—soon managed to find
  Weak points in the flower-fence facing,
Was forced to put up a blind
  And be safe in my corset-lacing.

* * * * *

No harm! It was not my fault
If you never turned your eyes' tail up
As I shook upon E in alt,
Or ran the chromatic scale up.

* * * * *

Why did you not pinch a flower
In a pellet of clay and fling it?
Why did I not put a power
Of thanks in a look, or sing it?"

* * * * *

I confess that this lyric, except for its penultimate verse, soon to be quoted, does not seem to me what Mr. Chesterton calls it—"delightful." Nothing, plainly, did bring these two together; she may have looked jealously at his models, and he at her piano-tuner (though even this, so far as "he" is concerned, I question), but they remained uninterested in one another—and why should they not? When at the end she cries—

"This could but have happened once,
And we missed it, lost it for ever"—

one's impulse surely is (mine is) to ask with some vexation what "this" was?

"Each life's unfulfilled, you see;
It hangs still, patchy and scrappy;
We have not sighed deep, laughed free,
Starved, feasted, despaired—been
happy."

Away from its irritating context, that stanza *is* delightful; with the context it is to me wholly meaningless. The boy and girl had not fallen in love —there is no more to say; and I heartily wish that Browning had not tried to say it. The whole lyric is based on nothingness, or else on a self-consciousness peculiarly unappealing. Kate Brown was evidently quite "safe in her corset-lacing" before she put up a blind. I fear that this confession of my dislike for *Youth and Art* is a betrayal of lacking humour; I can but face it out, and say that unhumorous is precisely what, despite its levity of manner, rhythm, and rhyme, *Youth and Art* seems to my sense. . . . I rejoice that we need not reckon this Kate among Browning's girls; she is introduced to us as married to her rich old lord, and queen of *bals-parés*. Thus we may console ourselves with the hope that life has vulgarised her, and that as a girl she was far less objectionable than she now represents herself to have been. We have only to imagine Evelyn Hope putting up a superfluous blind that she might be safe in her corset-lacing, to sweep the gamut of Kate Brown's commonness. . . . Let us remove her from a list which now offers us a figure more definitely and dramatically posed than any of those whom we have yet considered.

FOOTNOTES:

[12:1] Mr. Chesterton and Mrs. Orr both speak of Kate Brown as having succeeded in her art. I cannot find any words in the poem which justify this view. She is "queen at *bals-parés*," and she has married "a rich old lord," but

nothing in either condition predicates the successful cantatrice.

I

THE GIRL IN "COUNT GISMOND"

It is like a fairy tale, for there are three beautiful princesses, and the youngest is the heroine. The setting is French—a castle in Aix-en-Provence; it is the fourteenth century, for tourneys and hawking-parties are the amusements, and a birthday is celebrated by an award of crowns to the victors in the lists, when there are ladies in brave attire, thrones, canopies, false knight and true knight. . . . Here is the story.

Once upon a time there were three beautiful princesses, and they lived in a splendid castle. The youngest had neither father nor mother, so she had come to dwell with her cousins, and they had all been quite happy together until one day in summer, when there was a great tourney and prize-giving to celebrate the birthday of the youngest princess. She was to award the crowns, and her cousins dressed her like a queen for the ceremony. She was very happy; she laughed and "sang her birthday-song quite through," while she looked at herself, garlanded with roses, in the glass before they all three went arm-in-arm down the castle stairs. The throne and canopy were ready; troops of merry

friends had assembled. These kissed the cheek of the youngest princess, laughing and calling her queen, and then they helped her to stoop under the canopy, which was pierced by a long streak of golden sunshine. There, in the gleam and gloom, she took her seat on the throne. But for all her joy and pride, there came to her, as she sat there, a great ache of longing for her dead father and mother; and afterwards she remembered this, and thought that perhaps if her cousins had guessed that such sorrow was in her heart, even at her glad moment, they might not have allowed the thing to happen which did happen.

All eyes were on her, except those of her cousins, which were lowered, when the moment came for her to stand up and present the victor's crown.

Shy and proud and glad, she stood up, and as she did so, there stalked forth Count Gauthier—

". . . And he thundered 'Stay!'
And all stayed. 'Bring no crowns, I say!'

'Bring torches! Wind the penance-sheet
About her! Let her shun the chaste,
Or lay herself before their feet!
Shall she whose body I embraced
A night long, queen it in the day?
For Honour's sake no crowns, I say!'"

* * * * *

Some years afterwards she told the story of that birthday to a dear friend, and when she came to Count Gauthier's accusation, she had to stop speaking for an instant, because her voice was choked with tears.

Her friend asked her what she had answered, and she replied—

"I? What I answered? As I live
I never fancied such a thing
As answer possible to give;"

—for just as the body is struck dumb, as it were, when some monstrous engine of torture is directed upon it, so was her soul for one moment.

But only for one moment. For instantly another knight strode out—Count Gismond. She had never seen him face to face before, but now, so beholding him, she knew that she was saved. He walked up to Gauthier and gave him the lie in his throat, then struck him on the mouth with the back of a hand, so that the blood flowed from it—

". . . North, South,
East, West, I looked. The lie was dead
And damned, and truth stood up instead."

Recalling it now, with her friend Adela, she mused a moment; then said how her gladdest memory of that hour was that never for an instant had she felt any doubt of the event.

"God took that on him—I was bid
Watch Gismond for my part: I did.

Did I not watch him while he let
His armourer just brace his greaves,
Rivet his hauberk, on the fret
The while! His foot . . . my memory
leaves
No least stamp out, nor how anon
He pulled his ringing gauntlets on."

Before the trumpet's peal had died, the false knight lay, "prone as his lie," upon the ground; and Gismond flew at him, and drove his sword into the breast—

> "Cleaving till out the truth he clove.
>
> Which done, he dragged him to my feet
> And said 'Here die, but end thy breath
> In full confession, lest thou fleet
> From my first, to God's second death!
> Say, hast thou lied?' And, 'I have lied
> To God and her,' he said, and died."

Then Gismond knelt and said to her words which even to this dear friend she could not repeat. She sank on his breast—

> "Over my head his arm he flung
> Against the world . . ."

—and then and there the two walked forth, amid the shouting multitude, never more to return. "And so they were married, and lived happy ever after."

Gaiety, courage, trust: in this nameless Browning heroine we find the characteristic marks. On that birthday morning, almost her greatest joy was in the sense of her cousins' love—

> "I thought they loved me, did me grace
> To please themselves; 'twas all their
> deed"

—and never a thought of their jealousy had entered her mind. Both were beautiful—

". . . Each a queen
By virtue of her brow and breast;
Not needing to be crowned, I mean,
As I do. E'en when I was dressed,
Had either of them spoke, instead
Of glancing sideways with still head!

But no: they let me laugh and sing
My birthday-song quite through . . ."

and so, all trust and gaiety, she had gone down arm-in-arm with them, and taken her state on the "foolish throne," while everybody applauded her. Then had come the moment when Gauthier stalked forth; and from the older mind, now pondering on that infamy, a flash of bitter scorn darts forth—

"Count Gauthier, when he chose his post,
Chose time and place and company
To suit it . . ."

for with sad experience—"knowledge of the world"—to aid her, she can see that the whole must have been pre-concerted—

"And doubtlessly ere he could draw
All points to one, he must have
schemed!"

* * * * *

Her trust in the swiftly emerging champion and lover is comprehensible to us of a later day—that, and the joy she feels in watching him impatiently submit to be armed. Even so might one of us watch and listen to and keep for ever in memory the stamp of the foot, the sound of the "ringing gauntlets"—

reproduced as that must be for modern maids in some less heartening music! But, as the tale proceeds, we lose our sense of sisterhood; we realise that this girl belongs to a different age. When Gauthier's breast is torn open, when he is dragged to her feet to die, she knows not any shrinking nor compassion—can apprehend each word in the dialogue between slayer and slain—can, over the bleeding body, receive the avowal of his love who but now has killed his fellow-man like a dog—and, gathered to Gismond's breast, can, unmoved by all repulsion, feel herself smeared by the dripping sword that hangs beside him. . . . All this we women of a later day have "resigned"—and I know not if that word be the right one or the wrong; so many lessons have we conned since Gismond fought for a slandered maiden. We have learned that lies refute themselves, that "things come right in the end," that human life is sacred, that a woman's chastity may be sacred too, but is not her most inestimable possession —and, if it were, should be "able to take care of itself." Further doctrines, though not yet fully accepted, are being passionately taught: such, for example, as that Man—male Man—is the least protective of animals.

> "Over my head his arm he flung
> Against the world . . ."

I think we can see the princess, as she spoke those words, aglow and tremulous like the throbbing fingers in the Northern skies. Well, the "Northern Lights" recur, in our latitudes, at unexpected moments, at long intervals; but they do recur.

One thing vexes, yet solaces, me in this tale of Count Gismond. The Countess, telling Adela the story, has

reached the crucial moment of Gauthier's insult when, choked by tears as we saw, she stops speaking. While still she struggles with her sob, she sees, at the gate, her husband with his two boys, and at once is able to go on. She finishes the tale, prays a perfunctory prayer for Gauthier; then speaks of her sons, in both of whom, adoring wife that she is, she must declare a likeness to the father—

"Our elder boy has got the clear
Great brow; tho' when his brother's
black
Full eye shows scorn, it . . ."

With that "it" she breaks off; for Gismond has come up to talk with her and Adela. The first words we hear her speak to that loved husband are—fibbing words! The broken line is finished thus—

". . . Gismond here?
And have you brought my tercel back?
I just was telling Adela
How many birds it struck since May."

We, who have temporarily lost so many things, have at least gained this one—that we should not think it necessary to tell that fib. We should say nothing of what we had been "telling Adela." And some of us, perhaps, would reject the false rhyme as well as the false words.

II

"PIPPA PASSES"

I. DAWN: PIPPA

The whole of Pippa is emotion. She "passes" alone through the drama, except for one moment—only indirectly shown us—in which she speaks with some girls by the way. She does nothing, is nothing, but exquisite emotion uttering itself in song—quick lyrical outbursts from her joyous child's heart. The happiness-in-herself which this poor silk-winder possesses is something deeper than the gaiety of which I earlier spoke. Gay she can be, and is, but the spell that all unwittingly she exercises, derives from the profounder depth of which the Eastern poet thought when he said that "We ourselves are Heaven and Hell." . . . Innocent but not ignorant, patient, yet capable of a hearty little grumble at her lot, Pippa is "human to the red-ripe of the heart." She can threaten fictively her holiday, if it should ill-use her by bringing rain to spoil her enjoyment; but even this intimidation is of the very spirit of confiding love, for her threat is that if rain does fall, she will be sorrowful and depressed, instead of joyous and exhilarated, for the rest of the year during which she will be bound to her "wearisome silk-winding, coil on coil." Such a possibility, thinks Pippa's trustful heart, must surely be enough to cajole the weather into beauty and serenity.

It is New Year's Day, and sole holiday in all the twelve-month for silk-winders in the mills of Asolo. An oddly chosen time, one thinks—the short, cold festival! And it is notable that Browning, though he

acquiesces in the fictive date, yet conveys to us, so definitely that it must be with intention, the effect of summer weather. We find ourselves all through imagining mellow warmth and sunshine; nay, he puts into Pippa's mouth, as she anticipates the treasured outing, this lovely and assuredly not Janiverian forecast—

> "Thy long blue solemn hours serenely
> flowing. . . ."

Is it not plain from this that his artist's soul rejected the paltry fact? For "blue" the hours of New Year's Day may be in Italy, but as "*long* blue hours" they cannot, even there, be figured. I maintain that, whatever it may be called, it is really Midsummer's Day on which Pippa passes from Asolo through Orcana and Possagno, and back to Asolo again.

We see her first as she springs out of bed with the dawn's earliest touch on her "large mean airy chamber" at Asolo[24:1]—the lovely little town of Northern Italy which Browning loved so well. In that chamber, made vivid to our imagination by virtue of three consummately placed adjectives (note the position of "mean"), Pippa prepares for her one external happiness in the year.

> "Oh Day, if I squander a wavelet of thee,
> A mite of my twelve hours' treasure,
> The least of thy gazes or glances,
>
> * * * * *
>
> One of thy choices or one of thy chances,

* * * * *

—My Day, if I squander such labour or
leisure,
Then shame fall on Asolo, mischief on
me!"

I have omitted two lines from this eight-lined stanza, and omitted them because they illustrate all too forcibly Browning's chief fault as a lyric—and, in this case, as a dramatic—poet. Both of them are frankly parenthetic; both parentheses are superfluous; neither has any incidental beauty to redeem it; and, above all, we may be sure that Pippa did not think in parentheses. The agility and (it were to follow an indulgent fashion to add) the "subtlety" of Browning's mind too often led him into like excesses: I deny the subtlety here, for these clauses are so wholly uninteresting in thought that even as examples I shall not cite them. But their crowning distastefulness is in the certitude we feel that, whatever they had been, they never would have occurred to this lyrical child. The stanza without them is the stanza as Pippa felt it. . . . In the same way, the opening rhapsody on dawn which precedes her invocation to the holiday is out of character—impossible to regard its lavish and gorgeous images as those (however sub-conscious) of an unlettered girl.

But all carping is forgotten when we reach

"Thy long blue solemn hours serenely
flowing"—

a poet's phrase, it is true, yet in no way incongruous with what we can imagine Pippa to have thought, if

not, certainly, in such lovely diction to have been able to express. Thenceforward, until the episodical lines on the Martagon lily, the child and her creator are one. There comes the darling menace to the holiday—

". . . But thou must treat me not
As prosperous ones are treated . . .
For, Day, my holiday, if thou ill-usest
Me, who am only Pippa—old year's sorrow,
Cast off last night, will come again to-morrow:
Whereas, if thou prove gentle, I shall borrow
Sufficient strength of thee for new-year's sorrow.
All other men and women that this earth
Belongs to, who all days alike possess,
Make general plenty cure particular dearth,[26:1]
Get more joy one way, if another less:
Thou art my single day, God lends to leaven
What were all earth else, with a feel of heaven—
Sole light that helps me through the year, thy sun's!"

Having made her threat and her invocation, she falls to thinking of those "other men and women," and tells her Day about them, like the child she is. They, she declares, are "Asolo's Four Happiest Ones." Each is, in the event, to be vitally influenced by her song, as she "passes" at Morning, Noon, Evening, and Night; but this she knows not at the time, nor ever

knows.

The first Happy One is "that superb great haughty Ottima," wife of the old magnate, Luca, who owns the silk-mills. The New Year's morning may be wet—

". . . Can rain disturb
Her Sebald's homage? all the while thy rain
Beats fiercest on her shrub-house window-pane,
He will but press the closer, breathe more warm
Against her cheek: how should she mind the storm?"

Here we learn what later we are very fully to be shown—that Ottima's "happiness" is not in her husband.

The second Happy One is Phene, the bride that very day of Jules, the young French sculptor. They are to come home at noon, and though noon, like morning, should be wet—

". . . what care bride and groom
Save for their dear selves? 'Tis their marriage day;

* * * * *

Hand clasping hand, within each breast would be
Sunbeams and pleasant weather, spite of thee."

The third Happy One—or Happy Ones, for these two

Pippa cannot separate—are Luigi, the young aristocrat-patriot, and his mother. Evening is their time, for it is in the dusk that they "commune inside our turret"—

"The lady and her child, unmatched,
forsooth,
She in her age, as Luigi in his youth,
For true content . . ."

Aye—though the evening should be obscured with mist, *they* will not grieve—

". . . The cheerful town, warm,
close,
And safe, the sooner that thou art morose
Receives them . . ."

That is all the difference bad weather can make to such a pair.

The Fourth Happy One is Monsignor, "that holy and beloved priest," who is expected this night from Rome,

"To visit Asolo, his brother's home,
And say here masses proper to release
A soul from pain—what storm dares hurt
his peace?
Calm would he pray, with his own
thoughts to ward
Thy thunder off, nor want the angels'
guard."

And now the great Day knows all that the Four Happy Ones possess, besides its own "blue solemn hours serenely flowing"—for not rain at morning can

hurt Ottima with her Sebald, nor at noon the bridal pair, nor in the evening Luigi and his mother, nor at night "that holy and beloved" Bishop . . .

"But Pippa—just one such mischance
would spoil
Her day that lightens the next
twelvemonth's toil
At wearisome silk-winding, coil on coil."

All at once she realises that in thus lingering over her toilet, she is letting some of her precious time slip by for naught, and betakes herself to washing her face and hands—

"Aha, you foolhardy sunbeam caught
With a single splash from my ewer!
You that would mock the best pursuer,
Was my basin over-deep?

One splash of water ruins you asleep,
And up, up, fleet your brilliant bits.

* * * * *

Now grow together on the ceiling!
That will task your wits."

Here we light on a trait in Browning of which Mr. Chesterton most happily speaks—his use of "homely and practical images . . . allusions, bordering on what many would call the commonplace," in which he "is indeed true to the actual and abiding spirit of love," and by which he "awakens in every man the memories of that immortal instant when common

and dead things had a meaning beyond the power of any dictionary to utter." Mr. Chesterton, it is true, speaks of this "astonishing realism" in relation to Browning's love-poetry, and *Pippa Passes* is not a love-poem; but the insight of the comment is no less admirable when we use it to enhance a passage such as this. Who has not caught the sunbeam asleep in the mere washhand basin as water was poured out for the mere daily toilet—and felt that heartening gratitude for the symbol of captured joy, which made the instant typic and immortal? For these are the things that all may have, as Pippa had. The ambushing of that beam and the ordering it, in her sweet wayward imperiousness, to

> ". . . grow together on the ceiling.
> That will task your wits!"

—is one of the most enchanting moments in this lovely poem. The sunbeam settles by degrees (I wish that she had not been made to term it, with all too Browningesque agility, "the radiant cripple"), and finally lights on her Martagon lily, which is a lily with purple flowers. . . . Here again, for a moment, she ceases to be the lyrical child, and turns into the Browning (to cite Mr. Chesterton again) to whom Nature really meant such things as the basket of jelly-fish in *The Englishman in Italy*, or the stomach-cyst in *Mr. Sludge the Medium*—"the monstrosities and living mysteries of the sea." To me, these lines on the purple lily are not only ugly and grotesque—in that kind of ugliness which "was to Browning not in the least a necessary evil, but a quite unnecessary luxury, to be enjoyed for its own sake"—but are monstrously (more than any other instance I can recall) unsuited to the mind from which they are supposed to come.

"New-blown and ruddy as St. Agnes'
nipple,
Plump as the flesh-bunch on some Turk-
bird's poll!"

One such example is enough. We have once more been deprived of Pippa, and got nothing really worth the possession in exchange.

But Pippa is quickly retrieved, with her gleeful claim that *she* is the queen of this glowing blossom, for is it not she who has guarded it from harm? So it may laugh through her window at the tantalised bee (are there travelling bees in Italy on New-Year's Day? But this is Midsummer Day!), may tease him as much as it likes, but must

". . . in midst of thy glee,
Love thy Queen, worship me!"

There will be warrant for the worship—

". . . For am I not, this day,
Whate'er I please? What shall I please to-
day?

* * * * *

I may fancy all day—and it shall be so—
That I taste of the pleasures, am called by
the names,
Of the Happiest Four in our Asolo!"

So, as she winds up her hair (we may fancy), Pippa plays the not yet relinquished baby-game of Let's-pretend; but is grown-up in this—that she begins and ends with love, which children give and take

unconsciously.

> "Some one shall love me, as the world
> calls love:
> I am no less than Ottima, take warning!
> The gardens and the great stone house
> above,
> And other house for shrubs, all glass in
> front,
> Are mine; where Sebald steals, as he is
> wont,
> To court me, while old Luca yet reposes
> . . ."

But this earliest pretending breaks down quickly. What, after all, is the sum of those doings in the shrub-house? What would Pippa gain, were she in truth great haughty Ottima? She would but "give abundant cause for prate." Ottima, bold, confident, and not fully aware, can face that out, but Pippa knows, more closely than the woman rich and proud can know,

> "How we talk in the little town below."

So the first dream is over.

> "Love, love, love—there's better love, I
> know!"

—and the next pretending shall "defy the scoffer"; it shall be the love of Jules and Phene—

> "Why should I not be the bride as soon
> As Ottima?"

Moreover, last night she had seen the stranger-girl arrive—"if you call it seeing her," for it had been the

merest momentary glimpse—

". . . one flash
Of the pale snow-pure cheek and black
bright tresses,
Blacker than all except the black eyelash;
I wonder she contrives those lids no
dresses,
So strict was she the veil
Should cover close her pale
Pure cheeks—a bride to look at and scarce
touch,
Scarce touch, remember, Jules! For are
not such
Used to be tended, flower-like, every
feature,
As if one's breath would fray the lily of a
creature?

* * * * *

How will she ever grant her Jules a bliss
So startling as her real first infant kiss?
Oh, no—not envy, this!"

For, recalling the virgin dimness of that apparition, the slender gamut of that exquisite reserve, the little work-girl has a moment's pang of pity for herself, who has to trip along the streets "all but naked to the knee."

"Whiteness in us were wonderful indeed,"

she cries, who is pure gold if not pure whiteness, and in an instant shows herself to be at any rate pure innocence. It could not be envy, she argues, which pierced her as she thought of that immaculate

girlhood—

". . . for if you gave me
Leave to take or to refuse,
In earnest, do you think I'd choose
That sort of new love to enslave me?
Mine should have lapped me round from
the beginning;
As little fear of losing it as winning:
Lovers grow cold, men learn to hate their
wives,
And only parents' love can last our lives."

And she turns, thus rejecting the new love, to the "Son and Mother, gentle pair," who commune at evening in the turret: what prevents her being Luigi?

"Let me be Luigi! If I only knew
What was my mother's face—my father,
too!"

For Pippa has never seen either, knows not who either was, nor whence each came. And just because, thus ignorant, she cannot truly figure to herself such love, she now rejects in turn this third pretending—

"Nay, if you come to that, best love of all
Is God's;"

—and she will be Monsignor! To-night he will bless the home of his dead brother, and God will bless in turn

"That heart which beats, those eyes which
mildly burn
With love for all men! I, to-night at least,
Would be that holy and beloved priest."

Now all the weighing of love with love is over; she has chosen, and already has the proof of having chosen rightly, already seems to share in God's love, for there comes back to memory an ancient New-Year's hymn—

> "All service ranks the same with God."

No one can work on this earth except as God wills—

> ". . . God's puppets, best and worst,
> Are we; there is no last or first."

And we must not talk of "small events": none exceeds another in greatness. . . .

The revelation has come to her. Not Ottima nor Phene, not Luigi and his mother, not even the holy and beloved priest, ranks higher in God's eyes than she, the little work-girl—

> "I will pass each, and see their happiness,
> And envy none—being just as great, no
> doubt,
> Useful to men, and dear to God, as they!"

* * * * *

And so, laughing at herself once more because she cares "so mightily" for her one day, but still insistent that the sun shall shine, she sketches her outing—

> "Down the grass path grey with dew,
> Under the pine-wood, blind with boughs,
> Where the swallow never flew,
> Nor yet cicala dared carouse,
> No, dared carouse—"

But breaks off, breathless, in the singing for which through the whole region she is famed, leaves the "large mean airy chamber," enters the little street of Asolo—and begins her Day.

II. MORNING: OTTIMA

In the shrub-house on the hill-side are Ottima, the wife of Luca, and her German lover, Sebald. He is wildly singing and drinking; to him it still seems night. But Ottima sees a "blood-red beam through the shutter's chink," which proves that morning is come. Let him open the lattice and see! He goes to open it, and no movement can he make but vexes her, as he gropes his way where the "tall, naked geraniums straggle"; pushes the lattice, which is behind a frame, so awkwardly that a shower of dust falls on her; fumbles at the slide-bolt, till she exclaims that "of course it catches!" At last he succeeds in getting the window opened, and her only direct acknowledgment is to ask him if she "shall find him something else to spoil." But this imperious petulance, curiously as it contrasts with the patience which, a little later, she will display, is native to Ottima; she is not the victim of her nerves this morning, though now she passes without transition to a mood of sensuous cajolement—

> "Kiss and be friends, my Sebald! Is't full
> morning?
> Oh, don't speak, then!"

—but Sebald does speak, for in this aversion from the light of day he recognises a trait of hers which long has troubled him.

With *his* first words we perceive that "nerves" are uppermost, that the song and drink of the opening moment were bravado—that Sebald, in short, is close on a breakdown. He turns upon her with a gibe against her ever-shuttered windows. Though it is she who now has ordered the unwelcome light to be admitted, he overlooks this in his enervation, and says how, before ever they met, he had observed that her windows were always blind till noon. The rest of the little world of Asolo would be active in the day's employment; but her house "would ope no eye." "And wisely," he adds bitterly—

> "And wisely; you were plotting one thing there,
> Nature, another outside. I looked up—
> Rough white wood shutters, rusty iron bars,
> Silent as death, blind in a flood of light;
> Oh, I remember!—and the peasants laughed
> And said, 'The old man sleeps with the young wife.'
> This house was his, this chair, this window—his."

The last line gives us the earliest hint of what has been done: "This house *was* his. . . ." But Ottima, whether from scorn of Sebald's mental disarray, or from genuine callousness, answers this first moan of anguish not at all. She gazes from the open lattice: "How clear the morning is—she can see St. Mark's! Padua, blue Padua, is plain enough, but where lies Vicenza? They shall find it, by following her finger that points at Padua. . . ."

Sebald cannot emulate this detachment. Morning

seems to him "a night with a sun added"; neither dew nor freshness can he feel; nothing is altered with this dawn—the plant he bruised in getting through the lattice last night droops as it did then, and still there shows his elbow's mark on the dusty sill.

She flashes out one instant. "Oh, shut the lattice, pray!"

No: he will lean forth—

". . . I cannot scent blood
here,
Foul as the morn may be."

But his mood shifts quickly as her own—

". . . There, shut the
world out!
How do you feel now, Ottima? There,
curse
The world and all outside!"

and at last he faces her, literally and figuratively, with a wild appeal to let the truth stand forth between them—

". . . Let us throw off
This mask: how do you bear yourself?
Let's out
With all of it."

But no. Her instinct is never to speak of it, while his drives him to "speak again and yet again," for only so, he feels, will words "cease to be more than words." *His blood*, for instance—

". . . let those two words mean

'His blood';
And nothing more. Notice, I'll say them now:
'His blood.' . . ."

She answers with phrases, the things that madden him—she speaks of "the deed," and at once he breaks out again. *The deed*, and *the event*, and *their passion's fruit*—

". . . the devil take such cant!
Say, once and always, Luca was a wittol,
I am his cut-throat, you are . . ."

With extraordinary patience, though she there, wearily as it were, interrupts him, Ottima again puts the question by, and offers him wine. In doing this, she says something which sends a shiver down the reader's back—

". . . Here's wine!
I brought it when we left the house above,
And glasses too—wine of both sorts . . ."

He takes no notice; he reiterates—

"But am I not his cut-throat? What are you?"

Still with that amazing, that almost beautiful, patience—the quality of her defect of callousness—Ottima leaves this also without comment. She gazes now from the closed window, sees a Capuchin monk go by, and makes some trivial remarks on his immobility at church; then once more offers Sebald the flask—the "black" (or, as we should say, the

"red") wine.

Melodramatic and obvious in all he does and says, Sebald refuses the red wine: "No, the white—the white!"—then drinks ironically to Ottima's black eyes. He reminds her how he had sworn that the new year should not rise on them "the ancient shameful way," nor does it.

> "Do you remember last damned New
> Year's Day?"

* * * * *

The characters now are poised for us—in their national, as well as their individual, traits. Ottima, an Italian, has the racial matter-of-factness, callousness, and patience; Sebald, a German, the no less characteristic sentimentality and emotionalism. Her attitude remains unchanged until the critical moment; his shifts and sways with every word and action. No sooner has he drunk the white wine than he can brutally, for an instant, exult in the thought that Luca is not alive to fondle Ottima before his face; but with her instant answer (rejoicing as she does to retrieve the atmosphere which alone is native to her sense)—

> ". . . Do you
> Fondle me, then! Who means to take your
> life?"

—a new mood seizes on him. They have "one thing to guard against." They must not make much of one another; there must be no more parade of love than there was yesterday; for then it would seem as if he supposed she needed proofs that he loves her—

". . . yes, still love you, love
you,
In spite of Luca and what's come to him."

That would be a sure sign that Luca's "white sneering old reproachful face" was ever in their thoughts. Yes; they must even quarrel at times, as if they

". . . still could lose each other, were not
tied
By this . . ."

but on her responding cry of "Love!" he shudders back again: *Is* he so surely for ever hers?

She, in her stubborn patience, answers by a reminiscence of their early days of love—

". . . That May morning we two
stole
Under the green ascent of sycamores"

—and, thinking to reason with him, asks if, that morning, they had

". . . come upon a thing like
that,
Suddenly—"

but he interrupts with his old demand for the true word: she shall not say "a thing" . . . and at last that marvellous patience gives way, and in a superb flash of ironic rage she answers him—

"Then, Venus' body! had we come upon
My husband Luca Gaddi's murdered
corpse

Within there, at his couch-foot, covered
close"

—flinging him the "words" he has whimpered for in full measure, that so at last she may attain to asking if, that morning, he would have "pored upon it?" She knows he would not; then why pore upon it now? For him, it is here, as much as in the deserted house; it is everywhere.

". . . For me

(she goes on),

Now he is dead, I hate him worse: I hate
. . .
Dare you stay here? I would go back and
hold
His two dead hands, and say, 'I hate you
worse,
Luca, than——'"

And in her frenzy of reminiscent hatred and loathing for the murdered man, she goes to Sebald and takes *his* hands, as if to feign that other taking.

With the hysteria that has all along been growing in him, Sebald flings her back—

". . . Take your hands off mine;
'Tis the hot evening—off! oh, morning, is
it?"

—and she, restored to her cooler state by this repulse, and with a perhaps unconscious moving to some revenge for it, points out, with a profounder depth of callousness than she has yet displayed, that the body at the house will have to be taken away and

buried—

"Come in and help to carry"—

and with ghastly glee she adds—

". . . We may sleep
Anywhere in the whole wide house to-
night."

* * * * *

Now the dialogue sways between her deliberate sensuous allurement of the man and his deepening horror at what they have done. She winds and unwinds her hair—was it so that he once liked it? But he cannot look; he would give her neck and her splendid shoulders, "both those breasts of yours," if this thing could be undone. It is not the mere killing —though he would "kill the world so Luca lives again," even to fondle her as before—but the thought that he has eaten the dead man's bread, worn his clothes, "felt his money swell my purse." . . . *This* is the intolerable; "there's a recompense in guilt"—

"One must be venturous and fortunate:—
What is one young for else?"

and thus their passion is justified; but to have killed the man who rescued him from starvation by letting him teach music to his wife . . . why—

". . . He gave me
Life, nothing less"—

and if he did reproach the perfidy, "and threaten and do more," had he no right after all—what was there to wonder at?

"He sat by us at table quietly:
Why must you lean across till our cheeks
touched?"

In that base blaming of her alone we get the measure of Sebald as at this hour he is. He turns upon her with a demand to know how she now "feels for him." Her answer, wherein the whole of her nature (as, again, at this hour it is) reveals itself—callous but courageous, proud and passionate, cruel in its utter sensuality, yet with the force and honesty which attend on all simplicity, good or evil—her answer strikes a truer note than does anything which Sebald yet has said, or is to say. She replies that she loves him better now than ever—

"And best (*look at me while I speak to you*)
Best for the crime."

She is glad that the "affectation of simplicity" has fallen off—

". . . this naked crime of
ours
May not now be looked over: look it
down."

And were not the joys worth it, great as it is? Would he give up the past?

"Give up that noon I owned my love for
you?"

—and as, in her impassioned revocation of the sultry summer's day, she brings back to him the very sense of the sun-drenched garden, the man at last is conquered back to memory. The antiphon of sensual

love begins, goes on—the places, aspects, things, sounds, scents, that waited on their ecstasy, the fire and consuming force of hers, the passive, no less lustful, receptivity of his—and culminates in a chant to that "crowning night" in July (and "the day of it too, Sebald!") when all life seemed smothered up except their life, and, "buried in woods," while "heaven's pillars seemed o'erbowed with heat," they lay quiescent, till the storm came—

> "Swift ran the searching tempest overhead;
> And ever and anon some bright white
> shaft
> Burned thro' the pine-tree roof, here
> burned and there,
> As if God's messenger thro' the close wood
> screen
> Plunged and replunged his weapon at a
> venture,
> Feeling for guilty thee and me; then broke
> The thunder like a whole sea overhead
> . . ."

—while she, in a frenzy of passion—

> ". . . stretched myself upon
> you, hands
> To hands, my mouth to your hot mouth,
> and shook
> All my locks loose, and covered you with
> them—
> You, Sebald, the same you!"

But the flame of her is scorching the feeble lover; feebly he pleads, resists, begs pardon for the harsh words he has given her, yields, struggles . . . yields again at last, for hers is all the force of body and of

soul: it is his part to be consumed in her—

"I kiss you now, dear Ottima, now and
now!
This way? Will you forgive me—be once
more
My great queen?"

Glorious in her victory, she demands that the hair which she had loosed in the moment of recalling their wild joys he now shall bind thrice about her brow—

"Crown me your queen, your spirit's
arbitress,
Magnificent in sin. Say that!"

So she bids him; so he crowns her—

"My great white queen, my spirit's
arbitress,
Magnificent . . ."

—but ere the exacted phrase is said, there sounds without the voice of a girl singing.

"The year's at the spring,
And day's at the morn;
Morning's at seven;
The hill-side's dew-pearled;
The lark's on the wing;
The snail's on the thorn:
God's in his heaven—
All's right with the world!"

(*Pippa passes.*)

* * * * *

Like her own lark on the wing, she has dropped this song to earth, unknowing and unheeding where its beauty shall alight; it is the impulse of her glad sweet heart to carol out its joy—no more. She is passing the great house of the First Happy One, so soon rejected in her game of make-believe! If now she could know what part the dream-Pippa might have taken on herself. . . . But she does not know, and, lingering for a moment by the step, she bends to pick a pansy-blossom.

The pair in the shrub-house have been arrested in full tide of passion by her song. It strikes on Sebald with the force of a warning from above—

> "God's in his heaven! Do you hear that?
> Who spoke?
> You, you spoke!"—

but she, contemptuously—

> ". . . Oh, that little ragged girl!
> She must have rested on the step: we give
> them
> But this one holiday the whole year
> round.
> Did you ever see our silk-mills—their
> inside?
> *There are ten silk-mills now belong to you!*"

Enervated by the interruption, she calls sharply to the singer to be quiet—but Pippa does not hear, and Ottima then orders Sebald to call, for *his* voice will be sure to carry.

No: her hour is past. He is ruled now by that voice

from heaven. Terribly he turns upon her—

> "Go, get your clothes on—dress those
> shoulders!
> . . . Wipe off that paint! I hate you"—

and as she flashes back her "Miserable!" his hideous repulse sinks to a yet more hideous contemplation of her—

> "My God, and she is emptied of it now!
> Outright now!—how miraculously gone
> All of the grace—had she not strange
> grace once?
> Why, the blank cheek hangs listless as it
> likes,
> No purpose holds the features up together,
> Only the cloven brow and puckered chin
> Stay in their places: and the very hair
> That seemed to have a sort of life in it,
> Drops, a dead web!"

Poignant in its authenticity is her sole, piteous answer—

> ". . . Speak to me—not of me!"

But he relentlessly pursues the dread analysis of baffled passion's aspect—

> "That round great full-orbed face, where
> not an angle
> Broke the delicious indolence—all
> broken!"

Once more that cry breaks from her—

"To me—not of me!"

but soon the natural anger against his insolence possesses her; she whelms him with a torrent of recrimination. Coward and ingrate he is, beggar, her slave—

". . . a fawning, cringing lie,
A lie that walks and eats and drinks!"

—while he, as in some horrible trance, continues his cold dissection—

". . . My God!
Those morbid olive faultless shoulder-
blades—
I should have known there was no blood
beneath!"

For though the heaven-song have pierced him, not yet is Sebald reborn, not yet can aught of generosity involve him. Still he speaks "of her, not to her," deaf in the old selfishness and baseness. He can cry, amid his vivid recognition of another's guilt, that "the little peasant's voice has righted all again"—can be sure that *he* knows "which is better, vice or virtue, purity or lust, nature or trick," and in the high nobility of such repentance as flings the worst of blame upon the other one, will grant himself lost, it is true, but "proud to feel such torments," to "pay the price of his deed" (ready with phrases now, he also!), as, poor weakling, he stabs himself, leaving his final word to her who had been for him all that she as yet knew how to be, in—

"I hate, hate—curse you! God's in his
heaven!"

* * * * *

Now, at this crisis, we are fully shown what, in despite of other commentators,[49:1] I am convinced that Browning meant us to perceive from the first—that Ottima's is the nobler spirit of the two. Her lover has stabbed himself, but she, not yet realising it, flings herself upon him, wrests the dagger—

". . . Me!
Me! no, no, Sebald, not yourself—kill me!
Mine is the whole crime. Do but kill me—
then
Yourself—then—presently—first hear me
speak!
I always meant to kill myself—wait, you!
*Lean on my breast—not as a breast; don't
love me*
*The more because you lean on me, my own
Heart's Sebald!* There, there, both deaths
presently!"

* * * * *

Here at last is the whole woman. "Lean on my breast—not as a breast"; "Mine is the whole crime"; "I always meant to kill myself—wait, you!" She will relinquish even her sense of womanhood; no word of blame for him; she would die, that he might live forgetting her, but it is too late for that, so "There, there, both deaths presently." . . . And now let us read again the lamentable dying words of Sebald. It is even more than I have said: not only are we meant to understand that Ottima's is the nobler spirit, but (I think) that not alone the passing of Pippa with her song has drawn this wealth of beauty from the broken woman's soul. Always it was there; it needed

but the loved one's need to pour itself before him. "There, there, both deaths presently"—and in the dying, each is again revealed. He, all self—

> "*My* brain is drowned now—quite
> drowned: all *I* feel"

—and so on; while her sole utterance is—

> "Not me—to him, O God, be merciful!"

Pippa's song has, doubtlessly, saved them both, but Sebald as by direct intervention, Ottima as by the revelation of her truest self. Again, and yet again and again, we shall find in Browning this passion for "the courage of the deed"; and we shall find that courage oftenest assigned to women. For him, it was wellnigh the cardinal virtue to be brave—not always, as in Ottima, by the help of a native callousness, but assuredly always, as in her and in the far dearer women, by the help of an instinctive love for truth—

> "Truth is the strong thing—let man's life
> be true!"

Ottima's and Sebald's lives have not been "true"; but she, who can accept the retribution and feel no faintest impulse to blame and wound her lover—*she* can rise, must rise, to heights forbidden the lame wings of him who, in his anguish, can turn and strike the fellow-creature who has but partnered him in sin. Only Pippa, passing, could in that hour save Sebald; but by the tenderness which underlay her fierce and lustful passion, and which, in any later relation, some other need of the man must infallibly have called forth, Ottima would, I believe, without Pippa have saved herself. *Direct intervention*: not every soul

needs that. And—whether it be intentional or not, I feel unable to decide, nor does it lose, but rather gain, in interest, if it be unintentional—one of the most remarkable things in this remarkable artistic experiment, this drama in which the scenes "have in common only the appearance of one figure," is that by each of the Four Passings of Pippa, a man's is the soul rescued.

III. NOON: PHENE

A group of art-students is assembled at Orcana, opposite the house of Jules, a young French sculptor, who to-day at noon brings home his bride—that second Happiest One, the pale and shrouded beauty whom Pippa had seen alight at Asolo, and had envied for her immaculate girlhood. Very eagerly the youths are awaiting this arrival; there are seven, including Schramm, the pipe-smoking mystic, and Gottlieb, a new-comer to the group, who hears the reason for their excitement, and tender-hearted and imaginative as he is, provides the human element amid the theorising of Schramm, the flippancy of most of the rest, and the fiendish malice of the painter, Lutwyche, who has a grudge against Jules, because Jules (he has been told) had described him and his intimates as "dissolute, brutalised, heartless bunglers." Very soon after the bridal pair shall have alighted and gone in (so Lutwyche tells Gottlieb), something remarkable will happen; it is this which they are awaiting—Lutwyche, as the moving spirit, close under the window of the studio, that he may lose no word of the anticipated drama. But they must all keep well within call; everybody may be needed.

At noon the married pair arrive—the bridegroom

radiant, his hair "half in storm and half in calm—patted down over the left temple—like a frothy cup one blows on to cool it; and the same old blouse that he murders the marble in."[52:1] The bride is—"how magnificently pale!" Most of these young men have seen her before, and always it has been her pallor which has struck them, as it struck Pippa on seeing her alight at Asolo. She is a Greek girl from Malamocco,[52:2] fourteen years old at most, "white and quiet as an apparition," with "hair like sea-moss"; her name is Phene, which, as Lutwyche explains, means sea-eagle. . . . "How magnificently pale"—and how Jules gazes on her! To Gottlieb that gaze of the young, rapturous husband is torture. "Pity—pity!" he exclaims—but he alone of them all is moved to this: Schramm, ever ready with his theories of mysticism and beauty and the immortal idealism of the soul, is unconcerned with practice—theories and his pipe bound all for Schramm; while Lutwyche is close-set as any predatory beast upon his prey; and the rank and file are but the foolish, heartless boys of all time, all place, the "students," mere and transient, who may turn into decent men as they grow older.

Well, they pass in, the bridegroom and his snowflake bride, and we pass in with them—but not, like them, forget the group that lurked and loitered about the house as they arrived.

The girl is silent as she is pale, and she is so pale that the first words her husband speaks are as the utterance of a fear awakened by her aspect—

> "Do not die, Phene! I am yours now, you

Are mine now; let fate reach me how she
likes,
If you'll not die: so, never die!"

He leads her to the one seat in his workroom, then bends over her in worshipping love, while she, still speechless, lifts her white face slowly to him. He lays his own upon it for an instant, then draws back to gaze again, while she still looks into his eyes, until he feels that her soul is drawing his to such communion that—

". . . I could
Change into you, beloved! You by me,
And I by you; this is your hand in mine,
And side by side we sit: all's true. Thank
God!"

But her silence is unbroken, and now he needs her voice—

"I have spoken: speak you!"

—yet though he thus claims her utterance, his own bliss drives him onward in eager speech. "O my life to come"—the life with her . . . and yet, how shall he work!

"Will my mere fancies live near you, their
truth—
The live truth, passing and re-passing me,
Sitting beside me?"

Still she is silent; he cries again "Now speak!"—but in a new access of joy accepts again that silence, for she must see the hiding-place he had contrived for her letters—in the fold of his Psyche's robe, "next her

skin"; and now, which of them all will drop out first?

"Ah—this that swam down like a first
moonbeam
Into my world!"

In his gladness he turns to her with that first treasure in his hand. She is not looking. . . . But there is nothing strange in that—all the rest is new to her; naturally she is more interested in the new things, and adoringly he watches her as—

". . . Again those eyes complete
Their melancholy survey, sweet and slow,
Of all my room holds; to return and rest
On me, with pity, yet some wonder too
. . ."

But pity and wonder are natural in her—is she not an angel from heaven? Yet he would bring her a little closer to the earth she now inhabits; so—

"What gaze you at? Those? Books I told
you of;
Let your first word to me rejoice them
too."

Eagerly he displays them, but soon reproves himself: he has shown first a tiny Greek volume, and of course Homer's should be the Greek—

"First breathed me from the lips of my
Greek girl!"

So out comes the Odyssey, and a flower finds the place; he begins to read . . . but she responds not, again the dark deep eyes are off "upon their search." Well, if the books were not its goal, the statues must

be—and *they* will surely bring the word he increasingly longs for. That of the "Almaign Kaiser," one day to be cast in bronze, is not worth lingering at in its present stage, but this—*this*? She will recognise this of Hippolyta—

"Naked upon her bright Numidian horse,"

for this is an imagined likeness, before he saw her, of herself. But no, it is unrecognised; so they move to the next, which she cannot mistake, for was it not done by her command? She had said he was to carve, against she came, this Greek, "feasting in Athens, as our fashion was," and she had given him many details, and he had laboured ardently to express her thought. . . . But still no word from her—no least, least word; and, tenderly, at last he reproaches her—

"But you must say a 'well' to that—say
'well'!"

—for alarm is growing in him, though he strives to think it only fantasy; she gazes too like his marble, she is too like marble in her silence—marble is indeed to him his "very life's-stuff," but now he has found "the real flesh Phene . . ." and as he rhapsodises a while, hardly able to sever this breathing vision from the wonders of his glowing stone, he turns to her afresh and beholds her whiter than before, her eyes more wide and dark, and the first fear seizes him again—

"Ah, you will die—I knew that you would
die!"—

and after that, there falls a long silence.

Then she speaks. "Now the end's coming"—that is

what she says for her first bridal words.

> "Now the end's coming: to be sure it must
> Have ended some time!"

—and while he listens in the silence dreadfully transferred from her to him, the tale of Lutwyche's revenge is told at last.

We know it before Phene speaks, for Lutwyche, telling Gottlieb, has told us; but Jules must glean it from her puzzled, broken utterance, filled with allusions that mean nothing until semi-comprehension comes through the sighs of tortured soul and heart from her who still is, as it were, in a trance. And this dream-like state causes her, now and then, to say the wrong words—the words *he* spoke—instead of those which had "cost such pains to learn . . ."

This is the story she tries to tell. Lutwyche had hated Jules for long. There were many reasons, but the chief was that reported judgment of the "crowd of us," as "dissolute, brutalised, heartless bunglers." Greatly, and above all else, had Jules despised their dissoluteness: how could they be other than the poor devils they were, with those debasing habits which they cherished? "He could never," had said Lutwyche to Gottlieb, "be supercilious enough on that matter. . . . *He* was not to wallow in the mire: *he* would wait, and love only at the proper time, and meanwhile put up with statuary." So Lutwyche had resolved that precisely "on that matter" should his malice concentrate. He happened to hear of a young Greek girl at Malamocco, "white and quiet as an apparition, and fourteen years old at farthest." She was said to be a daughter of the "hag Natalia"—said,

that is, by the hag herself to be so, but Natalia was, in plain words, a procuress. "We selected," said Lutwyche, "this girl as the heroine of our jest"; and he and his gang set to work at once. Jules received, first, a mysterious perfumed letter from somebody who had seen his work at the Academy and profoundly admired it: she would make herself known to him ere long. . . . "Paolina, my little friend of the Fenice," who could transcribe divinely, had copied this letter—"the first moonbeam!"—for Lutwyche; and she copied many more for him, the letters which Psyche, at the studio, was to keep in the fold of her robe.

In his very earliest answer, Jules had proposed marriage to the unknown writer. . . . How they had laughed! But Gottlieb, hearing, could not laugh. "I say," cried he, "you wipe off the very dew of his youth." Schramm, however, had had his pipe forcibly taken from his mouth, and then had pronounced that "nothing worth keeping is ever lost in this world"; so, Gottlieb silenced, Lutwyche went on with the story. The letters had gone to Jules, and the answers had come from him, two, three times a day; Lutwyche himself had concocted nearly all the mysterious lady's, which had said she was in thrall to relatives, that secrecy must be observed—in short, that Jules must wed her on trust, and only speak to her when they were indissolubly united.

But that, when accomplished, was not the whole of Lutwyche's revenge, nor of his activity. To get the full savour of his malice, the victim must be undeceived in such a way that there could be no mistaking the hand which had struck; and this could best be achieved by writing a copy of verses which should reveal their author at the end. Nor should

these be given Phene to hand Jules, for so Lutwyche would lose the delicious actual instant of the revelation. No; they should be taught her, line by line and word by word (since she could not read), and taught her by the hag Natalia, that not a subtle pang be spared the "strutting stone-squarer." Thus, listening beneath the window, Lutwyche could enjoy each word, each moan, and when Jules should burst out on them in a fury (but he must not be suffered to hurt his bride: she was too valuable a model), they would all declare, with one voice, that this was their revenge for his insults, they would shout their great shout of laughter; and, next day, Jules would depart alone—"oh, alone indubitably!"—for Rome and Florence, and they would be quits with him and his "coxcombry."

That is the plan, but Phene does not know it. All she knows is that Natalia said that harm would come unless she spoke their lesson to the end. Yet, despite this threat, when Jules has fallen silent in his terror at her "whitening cheek and still dilating eyes," she feels at first that that foolish speech need not be spoken. She has forgotten half of it; she does not care now for Natalia or any of them; above all, she wants to stay where Jules' voice has lifted her, by just letting it go on. "But can it?" she asks piteously—for with that transferring of silence a change had come; the music once let fall, even Jules does not seem able to take up its life again—"no, or you would!" . . . So trust, we see, is born in her: if Jules could do what she desires, Phene knows he would. But since he cannot, they'll stay as they are—"above the world."

"Oh, you—what are you?" cries the child, who never till to-day has heard such words or seen such looks as his. But she has heard other words, seen other looks —

"The same smile girls like me are used to
bear,
But never men, men cannot stoop so low
. . ."

Yet, watching those friends of Jules who came with the lesson she was to learn, the strangest thing of all had been to see how, speaking of him, they had used *that* smile—

"But still Natalia said they were your
friends,
And they assented though they smiled the
more,
And all came round me—that thin
Englishman
With light lank hair, seemed leader of the
rest;
He held a paper"

—and from that paper he read what Phene had got by heart.

But oh, if she need not say it! if she could look up for ever to those eyes, as now Jules lets her!

". . . I believe all sin,
All memory of wrong done, suffering
borne,
Would drop down, low and lower, to the
earth
Whence all that's low comes, and there

touch and stay
—Never to overtake the rest of me,
All that, unspotted, reaches up to you,
Drawn by those eyes!"

But even as she gazes, she sees that the eyes "are altering—altered!" She knows not why, she never has understood this sudden, wondrous happening of her marriage, but the eyes to which she trusts are altering—altered—and what can she do? . . . With heartrending pathos, what she does is to clutch at his words to her, the music which had lifted her, and now perhaps will lift him too by its mere sound. "I love you, love" . . . but what does love mean? She knows not, and her "music" is but ignorant echo; if she did know, she could prevent this change, but the change is not prevented, so it cannot have been just the words—it must have been in the tone that his power lay to lift her, and *that* she cannot find, not understanding. So in the desperate need to see and hear him as he was at first, she turns to her last device—

". . . Or stay! I will repeat
Their speech, if that contents you. Only
change
No more"—

and thus to him, but half aware as yet, sure only that she is not the dream-lady from afar, Phene speaks the words that Lutwyche wrote, and now waits outside to hear.

"I am a painter who cannot paint;
In my life, a devil rather than saint;
In my brain, as poor a creature too;
No end to all I cannot do!

Yet do one thing at least I can—
Love a man or hate a man
Supremely: thus my lore began . . ."

The timid voice goes on, saying the lines by rote as Phene had learned them—and hard indeed they must have been to learn! For, as Lutwyche had told his friends, it must be "something slow, involved, and mystical," it must hold Jules long in doubt, and lure him on until at innermost—

"Where he seeks sweetness' soul, he may
find—this!"

And truly it is so "involved," that, in the lessons at Natalia's, it had been thought well to tutor Phene in the probable interruptions from her audience of one. There was an allusion to "the peerless bride with her black eyes," and *here* Jules was almost certain to break in, saying that assuredly the bride was Phene herself, and so, could she not tell him what it all meant?

"And I am to go on without a word."

She goes on—on to the analysis, utterly incomprehensible to her, of Lutwyche's plan for intertwining love and hate; and with every word the malice deepens, becomes directer in its address. If any one should ask this painter who can hate supremely, *how* his hate can "grin through Love's rose-braided mask," and *how*, hating another and having sought, long and painfully, to reach his victim's heart and pierce to the quick of it, he might chance to have succeeded in that aim—

"Ask this, my Jules, and be answered

straight,
By thy bride—how the painter Lutwyche
can hate!"

* * * * *

Phene has said her lesson, but it too has failed. He still is changed. He is not even thinking of her as she ceases. The name upon his lips is Lutwyche, not her own. He mutters of "Lutwyche" and "all of them," and "Venice"; yes, them he will meet at Venice, and it will be their turn. But with that word—"meet"—he remembers her; he speaks to her—

". . . You I shall not meet:
If I dreamed, saying this would wake me."

Now Phene is again the silent one. We figure to ourselves the dark bent head, the eyes that dare no more look up, the dreadful acquiescence as he gives her money. So many others had done that; she had not thought *he* would, but she has never understood, and if to give her money is his pleasure—why, she must take it, as she had taken that of the others. But he goes on. He speaks of selling all his casts and books and medals, that the produce may keep her "out of Natalia's clutches"; and if he survives the meeting with the gang in Venice, there is just one hope, for dimly she hears him say—

"We might meet somewhere, since the
world is wide . . ."

Just that one vague, far hope, and for her *how* wide the world is, how very hard to compass! But she stands silent, in her well-learnt patience; and he is about to speak again, when suddenly from outside a

girl's voice is heard, singing.

> "Give her but a least excuse to love me!
> When—where—
> How—can this arm establish her above
> me,
> If fortune fixed her as my lady there,
> There already, to eternally reprove me?"

It is the song the peasants sing of "Kate the Queen"[64:1] and the page who loved her, and pined "for the grace of her so far above his power of doing good to"—

> "'She never could be wronged, be poor,' he
> sighed,
> 'Need him to help her!' . . ."

Pippa, going back towards Asolo, carols it out as she passes; and Jules listens to the end. It was bitter for the page to know that his lady was above all need of him; yet men are wont to love so. But why should they always choose the page's part? *He* had not, in his dreams of love. . . . And all at once, as he vaguely ponders the song, the deep mysterious import of its sounding in this hour dawns on him.

> "Here is a woman with utter need of me—
> I find myself queen here, it seems! How
> strange!"

He turns and looks again at the white, quiet child who stands awaiting her dismissal. Her soul is on her silent lips—

> "Look at the woman here with the new
> soul . . .

This new soul is mine!"

And then, musing aloud, he comes upon the truth of it—

"Scatter all this, my Phene—this mad
dream!
What's the whole world except our love,
my own!"

To-night (he told her so, did he not?), aye, even before to-night, they will travel for her land, "some isle with the sea's silence on it"; but first he must break up these paltry attempts of his, that he may begin art, as well as life, afresh. . . .

"Some unsuspected isle in the far seas!

* * * * *

And you are ever by me while I gaze,
—Are in my arms as now—as now—as
now!
Some unsuspected isle in the far seas!
Some unsuspected isle in far-off seas!"

That is what Lutwyche, under the window, hears for his revenge.

In this Passing of Pippa, silence and song have met and mingled into one another, for Phene is silence, as Pippa is song. Phene will speak more when Jules and she are in their isle together—but never will she speak much: she *is* silence. Her need of him indeed was utter—she had no soul until he touched her into life: it is the very Pygmalion and Galatea. But Jules' soul, no less, had needed Pippa's song to waken to its

truest self: once more the man is the one moved by the direct intervention. Not that Phene, like Ottima, could have saved herself; there *was* no self to save—she had that awful, piercing selflessness of the used flesh and ignored soul. If Pippa had not passed, if Jules had gone, leaving money in her hand . . . I think that Phene would have killed herself—like Ottima, yet how unlike! For Phene (but one step upon the way) would have died for her own self's sake only, because till now she had never known it, but in that strangest, dreadfullest, that least, most, sacred of offerings-up, had "lived for others"—the others of the smile which girls like her are used to bear,

"But never men, men cannot stoop so low."

Were ever scorn and irony more blasting, was ever pity more profound, than in that line which Browning sets in the mouth of silence?

IV. EVENING; NIGHT: THE ENDING OF THE DAY

Our interest now centres again upon Pippa—partly because the Evening and Night episodes are little touched by other feminine influence, but also (and far more significantly) because the dramatic aspect of the work here loses nearly all of its peculiar beauty. The story, till now so slight yet so consummately sufficient, henceforth is involved with "plot"—that natural enemy of spontaneity and unity, and here most eminently successful in blighting both. Indeed, the lovely simplicity of the earlier plan seems actually to aid the foe in the work of destruction, by cutting, as it were, the poem into two or even three divisions: first, the purely lyric portions—those at the

beginning and the end—where Pippa is alone in her room; second, the Morning and Noon episodes, where the dramas are absolutely unconnected with the passing girl; third, these Evening and Night scenes, where, on the contrary, all is forced into more or less direct relation with the little figure whose most exquisite magic has hitherto resided in the fusion of her complete personal loneliness with her potent influence upon the lives and characters of those who hear her sing.

Mr. Chesterton claims to have been the first to point out "this gross falsification of the whole beauty of *Pippa Passes*"—a glaring instance, as he says, of the definite literary blunders which Browning could make. But though that searching criticism were earliest in declaring this, I think that few of us can have read the poem without being vaguely and discomfortably aware of it. From the moment of the direct introduction of Bluphocks[68:1] (whose very name, with its dull and pointless punning, is an offence), that sense of over-ingenuity, of "tiresomeness," which is the prime stumbling-block to whole-hearted Browning worship, becomes perceptible, and acts increasingly upon our nerves until the Day is over, and Pippa re-enters her "large, mean, airy chamber."

On her return to Asolo from Orcana, she passes the ruined turret wherein Luigi and his mother—those Third Happiest Ones whom in her thoughts she had not been able to separate—are wont to talk at evening. Some of the Austrian police are loitering near, and with them is an Englishman, "lusty, blue-

eyed, florid-complexioned"—one Bluphocks, who is on the watch in a double capacity. He is to point out Luigi to the police, in whose pay he is, and to make acquaintance with Pippa in return for money already given by a private employer—for Bluphocks is the creature of anyone's purse.

As Pippa reaches the turret, a thought of days long, long before it fell to ruin makes her choose from her store of songs that which tells how—

> "A king lived long ago,
> In the morning of the world
> When earth was nigher heaven than now;"

and coming to be very old, was so serene in his sleepy mood, "so safe from all decrepitude," and so beloved of the gods—

> "That, having lived thus long, there
> seemed
> No need the king should ever die."

Her clear note penetrates to the spot where Luigi and his mother are talking, as so often before. He is bound this night for Vienna, there to kill the hated Emperor of Austria, who holds his Italy in thrall; for Luigi is a Carbonarist, and has been chosen for this "lesser task" by his leaders. His mother is urging him not to go. First she had tried the direct appeal, but this had failed; then argument, but this failed too; and as she stood at end of her own resources, the one hope that remained was her son's delight in living—that sense of the beauty and glory of the world which was so strong in him that he felt

> "God must be glad one loves his world so

much."

This joy breaks out at each turn of the mother's discourse. While Luigi is striving to make plain to her the "grounds for killing," he thinks to hear the cuckoo, and forgets all his array of facts; for April and June are coming! The mother seizes at once on this, and joins to it a still more powerful persuasion. In June, not only summer's loveliness, but Chiara, the girl he is to marry, is coming: she who gazes at the stars as he does—and how her blue eyes lift to them

"As if life were one long and sweet
surprise!"

In June she comes—and with the reiteration, Luigi falters, for he recollects that in this June they were to see together "the Titian at Treviso." . . . His mother has almost won, when a "low noise" outside, which Luigi has first mistaken for the cuckoo, next for the renowned echo in the turret . . . that low noise is heard again—"the voice of Pippa, singing."

And, listening to the song which tells what kings were in the morning of the world, Luigi cries—

"No need that sort of king should ever
die!"

And she begins again—

"Among the rocks his city was:
Before his palace, in the sun,
He sat to see his people pass,
And judge them every one"

—and as she tells the manner of his judging, Luigi

again exclaims:

> "That king should still judge, sitting in the
> sun!"

But the song goes on—

> "His councillors, to left and right,
> Looked anxious up—but no surprise
> Disturbed the king's old smiling eyes,
> Where the very blue had turned to white";

and those eyes kept their tranquillity even when, as legend tells, a Python one day "scared the breathless city," but coming, "with forked tongue and eyes on flame," to where the king sat, and seeing the sweet venerable goodness of him, did not dare

> "Approach that threshold in the sun,
> Assault the old king smiling there . . .
> Such grace had kings when the world
> begun!"
>
> "And such grace have they, now that the
> world ends!"

cries Luigi bitterly, for at Vienna the Python *is* the king, and brave men lurk in corners "lest they fall his prey." . . . He hesitates no more—

"'Tis God's voice calls: how could I stay?
Farewell!"

and rushes from the turret, resolute for Vienna.

By going he escapes the police, for it had been decided that if he stayed at Asolo that night he should be arrested at once. He still may lose his life, for he will try to kill the Emperor; but he will then have been true to his deepest convictions—and thus Pippa's passing, Pippa's song, have for the third time helped a soul to know itself.

Unwitting as before, she goes on to the house near the Duomo Santa Maria, where the Fourth Happiest One, the Monsignor of her final choice, "that holy and beloved priest," is to stay to-night. And now, for the first time, we are to see her, though only for the barest instant, come into actual contact with some fellow-creatures.

Four "poor girls" are sitting on the steps of the Santa Maria. We hear them talk with one another before Pippa reaches them: they are playing a "wishing game," originated by one who, watching the swallows fly towards Venice, yearns for their wings. She is not long from the country; her dreams are still of new milk and apples, and

". . . the farm among
The cherry-orchards, and how April
snowed
White blossom on her as she ran."

So says one of her comrades scornfully, and tells her how of course the home-folk have been careful to blot out all memories of one who has come to the town to lead the life *she* leads. She may be sure the old people have rubbed out the mark showing how tall she was on the door, and have

> "Twisted her starling's neck, broken his
> cage,
> Made a dung-hill of her garden!"

She acquiesces mournfully, but loses herself again in memories: of her fig-tree that curled out of the cottage wall—

> "They called it mine, I have forgotten
> why"

—and the noise the wasps made, eating the long papers that were strung there to keep off birds in fruit-time. . . . As she murmurs thus to herself, her mouth twitches, and the same girl who had laughed before, laughs now again: "Would I be such a fool!"—and tells *her* wish. The country-goose wants milk and apples, and another girl could think of nothing better than to wish "the sunset would finish"; but Zanze has a real desire, something worth talking about! It is that somebody she knows, somebody "greyer and older than her grandfather," would give her the same treat he gave last week—

> "Feeding me on his knee with fig-peckers,
> Lampreys and red Breganze wine;"

while she had stained her fingers red by

> "Dipping them in the wine to write bad

words with
On the bright table: how he laughed!"

And as she recalls that night, she sees a burnished beetle on the ground before her, sparkling along the dust as it makes its slow way to a tuft of maize, and puts out her foot and kills it. The country girl recalls a superstition connected with these bright beetles—that if one was killed, the sun, "his friend up there," would not shine for two days. They said it in her country "when she was young"; and one of the others scoffs at the phrase, but looking at her, exclaims that indeed she *is* no longer young: how thin her plump arms have got—does Cecco beat her still? But Cecco doesn't matter, nor the loss of her young freshness, so long as she keeps her "curious hair"—

"I wish they'd find a way to dye our hair
Your colour . . .
. . . The men say they are sick of
black."

A girl who now speaks for the first and last time retorts upon this one that very likely "the men" are sick of *her* hair, and does she pretend that *she* has tasted lampreys and ortolans . . . but in the midst of this new speaker's railing, the girl with wine-stained fingers exclaims—

"Why there! Is not that Pippa
We are to talk to, under the window—
quick— . . ."

The country girl thinks that if it were Pippa, she would be singing, as they had been told.

"Oh, you sing first," retorts the other—

"Then if she listens and comes close . . . I'll
tell you,
Sing that song the young English noble
made
Who took you for the purest of the pure,
And meant to leave the world for you—
what fun!"

So, not the country girl, but she whose black hair discontents her, sings, and Pippa "listens and comes close," for the song has words as sweet as any of her own . . . and the red-fingered one calls to her to come closer still, they won't eat her—why, she seems to be "the very person the great rich handsome Englishman has fallen so violently in love with." She shall hear all about it; and on the steps of the church Pippa is told by this creature, Zanze, how a foreigner, "with blue eyes and thick rings of raw silk-coloured hair," had gone to the mills at Asolo a month ago and fallen in love with Pippa. Pippa, however, will not keep him in love with her, unless she takes more care of her personal appearance—she must "pare her nails pearlwise," and buy shoes "less like canoes" for her small feet; *then* she may hope to feast upon lampreys and drink Breganze, as Zanze does. . . . And now Pippa sings one of her songs, and it might have been chosen expressly to please the country girl. It begins—

"Overhead the tree-tops meet,
Flowers and grass spring 'neath our feet;
There was nought above me, and nought
below
My childhood had not learned to know"

—a little story of an innocent girl's way of making out for herself only the sweetness of the world, the

majesty of the heavens . . . and just when all seemed on the verge of growing clear, and out of the "soft fifty changes" of the moon, "no unfamiliar face" could look, the sweet life was cut short—

"Suddenly God took me . . ."

As Pippa sang those words, she passed on. She had heard enough of the four girls' talk, even were they not now interrupted by a sudden clatter inside Monsignor's house—a sound of calling, of quick heavy feet, of cries and the flinging down of a man, and then a noise as of dragging a bound prisoner out. . . . Monsignor appeared for an instant at the window as she, coming from the Duomo, passed his house. His aspect disappointed her—

"No mere mortal has a right
To carry that exalted air;
Best people are not angels quite . . ."

and with that one look at him, she passed on to Asolo.

What was the noise that broke out as Pippa finished her song? The loud call which came first was Monsignor's, summoning his guards from an outer chamber to gag and bind his steward. This steward had been supping alone with the Bishop, who had come not only (as Pippa said in the morning, choosing him as the ideal person for her pretending) "to bless the home of his dead brother," but also to take possession of that brother's estate. . . . He knows the steward to be a rascal; but he himself, the "holy

and beloved priest," is a good deal of a rascal too; he has connived at his brother's death, and had connived at his mode of life. Now the steward is preparing to blackmail the Bishop, as he had blackmailed the Bishop's brother. Both are aware that the dead man had a child; Monsignor believes that this child was murdered by the steward at the instigation of a younger brother, who wished to succeed to the estates. He urges the man to confess; otherwise he shall be arrested by Monsignor's people who are in the outer room. "Did you throttle or stab my brother's infant—come now?"[77:1]

But the steward has yet another card to play; moreover, so many enemies now surround him that his life is probably forfeited anyhow, so he will tell the truth. And the truth is that the child was not murdered by him or anyone else. The child—the girl—is close at hand; he sees her every day, he saw her this morning. Now, shall he make away with her for Monsignor? Not "the stupid obvious sort of killing . . . of course there is to be no killing; but at Rome the courtesans perish off every three years, and he can entice her thither, has begun operations already"—making use of a certain Bluphocks, an Englishman. Monsignor will not *formally* assent, of course . . . but will he give the steward time to cross the Alps? The girl is "but a little black-eyed pretty singing Felippa,[77:2] gay silk-winding girl"; some women are to pass off Bluphocks as a somebody, and once Pippa entangled—it will be best accomplished through her singing. . . . Well, Monsignor has listened; Monsignor conceives—is it a bargain?

It was precisely as the steward asked that question that Pippa finished her song of a maiden's lesson and its ending, and Monsignor leaped up and shouted to

his guards. . . . The singing by which "little black-eyed pretty Felippa" was to be entangled had rescued instead the soul of her Fourth Happiest One from this deep infamy.

The great Day is over. Pippa, back in her room, finds horribly uppermost among her memories the talk of those lamentable four girls. It had spoilt the sweetness of her day; it spoils now, for a while, her own sweetness. Her comments on it have none of the wayward charm of her morning fancies, for Pippa is very human—she can envy and decry, swinging loose from the central steadiness of her nature like many another of us, obsessed like her by some vile happening of the hours. Just as we might find our whole remembrance of a festival thus overlaid by malice and ugliness, *she* finds it; she can only think "how pert that girl was," and how glad she is not to be like her. Yet, all the same, she does not see why she should not have been told who it was that "passed that jest upon her" of the Englishman in love —no foreigner had come to the mills that she recollects. . . . And perhaps, after all, if Luca raises the wage, she may be able to buy shoes next year, and not look any worse than Zanze.

But gradually the atmosphere of her mind seems restored; the fogs of envy and curiosity begin to clear off—she goes over the game of make-believe, how she was in turn each of the Four . . . but no! the miasma is still in the air, and she's "tired of fooling," and New Year's Day is over, and ill or well, *she* must be content. . . . Even her lily's asleep, but she will wake it up, and show it the friend she has plucked

for it—the flower she gathered as she passed the house on the hill. . . . Alas! even the flower seems infected. She compares it, "this pampered thing," this double hearts-ease of the garden, with the wild growth, and once more Zanze comes to mind—isn't she like the pampered blossom? And if there were a king of the flowers, "and a girl-show held in his bowers," which would he like best, the Zanze or the Pippa? . . . No: nothing will conquer her dejection; fancies will not do, awakening sleepy lilies will not do—

> "Oh what a drear dark close to my poor
> day!
> How could that red sun drop in that black
> cloud?"

and despairingly she accepts the one truth that seems to confront her: "Day's turn is over, now arrives the night's;" the larks and thrushes and blackbirds have had their hour; owls and bats and such-like things rule now . . . and listlessly she begins to undress herself. She is so alone; she has nothing but fancies to play with—this morning's, for instance, of being anyone she liked. She had played her game, had kept it up loyally with herself all day—what was the good?

> "Now, one thing I should like to really
> know:
> How near I ever might approach all those
> I only fancied being, this long day:
> Approach, I mean, so as to touch them, so
> As to . . . in some way . . . move them—if
> you please,
> Do good or evil to them some slight way.
> For instance, if I wind

Silk to-morrow, my silk may bind
And border Ottima's cloak's hem . . ."

Sitting on her bed, undressed, the solitary child thus broods. No nearer than that can she get—her silk might border Ottima's cloak's hem. . . . But she cannot endure this dejection: back to her centre of gaiety, trust, and courage Pippa must somehow swing—and how shall she achieve it? There floats into her memory the hymn which she had murmured in the morning—

"All service ranks the same with God."

But even this can help her only a little—

"True in some sense or other, I suppose
. . ."

She lies down; she can pray no more than that; the hymn no doubt is right, "some way or other," and with its message thus almost mocking in her ears, she falls asleep—the lonely little girl who has saved four souls to-day, and does not know, will never know; but will be again, to-morrow perhaps, when that sad talk on the church steps is faded from her memory, the gay, brave, trustful spirit who, by merely being that, had sung her Four Happiest Ones up toward "God in his heaven."

FOOTNOTES:

[24:1] Asolo, in the Trevisan, is a very picturesque mediæval fortified town, the ancient Acelum. It lies at the foot of a hill

which is surrounded by the ruins of an old castle; before it stretches the great plain of the rivers Brenta and Piave, where Treviso, Vicenza, and Padua may be clearly recognised. The Alps encircle it, and in the distance rise the Euganean Hills. Venice can be discerned on the extreme eastern horizon, which ends in the blue line of the Adriatic. The village of Asolo is surrounded by a wall with mediæval turrets.—BERDOE, *Browning Cyclopædia*, p. 50.

[26:1] Another line that I should like to omit, for the following words, wholly in character, say all that the ugly ones have boomed at us so incredibly. But here the rhyme-scheme provides a sort of unpardonable excuse.

[49:1] Dr. Berdoe and Mrs. Orr.

[52:1] All the talk between the students is in prose.

[52:2] The long shoaly island in the Lagoon, immediately opposite Venice.

[64:1] This song refers to Catherine of Cornaro, the last Queen of Cyprus, who came to her castle at Asolo when forced to resign her kingdom to the Venetians in 1489. "She lived for her people's welfare, and won their love by her goodness and grace."

[68:1] "The name means *Blue-Fox*, and is a skit on the *Edinburgh Review*, which is bound in blue and fox" (Dr. Furnivall).

[77:1] The dialogue between Monsignor and the steward is in prose.

[77:2] Having made her Monsignor's niece, observes Mr. Chesterton, "Browning might just as well have made Sebald her long-lost brother, and Luigi a husband to whom she was secretly

married."

III

MILDRED TRESHAM

IN "A BLOT IN THE 'SCUTCHEON"

I have said that, to my perception, the most characteristic mark in Browning's portrayal of women is his admiration for dauntlessness and individuality; and this makes explicable to me the failure which I constantly perceive in his dramatic presentment of her whose "innocence" (as the term is conventionally accepted) is her salient quality. The type, immortal and essential, is one which a poet must needs essay to show; and Browning, when he showed it through others, or in his own person hymned it, found words for its delineation which lift the soul as it were to morning skies. But when words are further called upon for its *expression*, when such a woman, in short, has to speak for herself, he rarely makes her do so without a certain consciousness of that especial trait in her—and hence her speech must of necessity ring false, for innocence knows nothing of itself.

So marked is this failure, to my sense, that I cannot refuse the implication which comes along with it: that only theoretically, only as it were by deference to others, did the attribute, in that particular

apprehension of it, move him to admiration. I do not, of course, mean anything so inconceivable as that he questioned the loveliness of the "pure in heart"; I mean merely that he questioned the artificial value which has been set upon physical chastity—and that when departure from this was the *circumstance* through which he had to show the more essential purity, his instinctive scepticism drove him to the forcing of a note which was not really native to his voice. For always (to my sense) when he presents dramatically a girl or woman in the grip of this circumstance, he gives her words, and feelings to express through them, which only the French *mièvre* can justly describe. He does not, in short, reveal her as she is, but only as others see her—and, among those others, not himself.

In Browning this might seem the stranger because he was so wholly untouched by cynicism; but here we light upon a curious paradox—the fact that the more "worldly" the writer, the better can he (as a general rule and other things being equal) display this type. It may be that such a writer can regard it analytically, can see what are the elements which make it up; it may be that the deeper reverence felt for it by the idealist is precisely that which draws him toward exaggeration—that his fancy, brooding with closed eyes upon the "thing enskied and sainted," thus becomes inclined to mawkishness . . . it *may* be, I say, but at the bottom of my heart I do not feel that that is the explanation. One with which I am better satisfied emerges from a line of verse already quoted:

> "For each man kills the thing he loves";

and the man most apt for such "killing" is precisely

he who appraises most shrewdly the thing he kills. As the cool practised libertine is oftenest attracted by the immature girl, so the ardent inexperienced man of any age will be drawn to the older woman; and the psychology of this matter of everyday experience is closely akin to the paradox in artistic creation of which I now speak.

Browning, who saw woman so clearly as a creature with her definite and justified demand upon life, saw, by inevitable consequence, that for woman to "depart from innocence" (again, in the conventional sense of the words) is not her most significant error; and this conviction necessarily reacted upon his presentment of those in whom such purity is the most salient quality—a type of which, as I have said, the poet is bound to attempt the portrayal. Browning's instinctive questioning of the "man-made" value then betrays itself—he exaggerates, he loses grasp, for he is singing in a mode not native to his temperament.

The character of Mildred in *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon* is a striking example of this. She is a young girl who has been drawn by her innocent passion into complete surrender to her lover. He, after this surrender, seeks her in marriage from her brother, who stands in the place of both parents to the orphan girl. The brother consents, unknowing; but after his consent, learns from a servant that Mildred has yielded herself to a man—he learns not *whom*. She, accused, makes no denial, gives no name, and to her brother's consternation, proposes thus to marry her suitor, whom Tresham thinks to be in ignorance of

her error. Tresham violently repudiates her; then, meeting beneath her window the cloaked lover, attacks him, forces him to reveal himself, learns that he and the accepted suitor are one and the same, and kills him—Mertoun (the lover) making no defence. Tresham goes to Mildred and tells her what he has done; she dies of the hearing, and he, having taken poison after the revelation of Mertoun's identity, dies also.

The defects in this story are so obvious that I need hardly point them out. Most prominent of all is the difficulty of reconciling Earl Mertoun's conduct with that of a rational being. He is all that in Mildred's suitor might be demanded, yet, loving her deeply and so loved by her, he has feared to ask her brother for her hand, because of his reverence for this Earl Tresham.

> ". . . I was young,
> And your surpassing reputation kept me
> So far aloof . . ."

Thus he explains himself. He feared to ask for her hand, yet did not fear to seduce her! The thing is so absurd that it vitiates all the play, which indeed but once or twice approaches aught that we can figure to ourselves of reality in any period of history. "Mediæval" is a strange adjective, used by Mrs. Orr to characterise a work of which the date is placed by Browning himself in the eighteenth century.

Mildred is but fourteen: an age at which, with our modern sense of girlhood as, happily, in this land we now know it, we find ourselves unable to apprehend her at all. Instinctively we assign to her at least five years more, since even these would leave her still a

child—though not at any moment in the play does she actually so affect us, for Mildred is never a child, never even a young girl. Immature indeed she is, but it is with the immaturity which will not develop, which has nothing to do with length of years. To me, the failure here is absolute; she never comes to life. Every student of Browning knows of the enthusiasm which Dickens expressed for this piece and this character:

> "Browning's play has thrown me into a perfect passion of sorrow. To say that there is anything in its subject save what is lovely, true, deeply affecting . . . is to say that there is no light in the sun, and no heat in the blood. . . . I know nothing that is so affecting, nothing in any book I have ever read, as Mildred's recurrence to that 'I was so young—I had no mother.'"

Such ardour well might stir us to agreement, were it not that Dickens chose for its warmest expression the very centre of our disbelief: Mildred's *recurrence* to that cry. . . . The cry itself—I cannot be alone in thinking—rings false, and the recurrence, therefore, but heaps error upon error. When I imagine an ardent girl in such a situation, almost anything she could have been made to say would to me seem more authentic than this. The first utterance, moreover, occurs before she knows that Tresham has learnt the truth—it occurs, in soliloquy, immediately after an interview with her lover.

> "I was so young, I loved him so, I had
> No mother, God forgot me, and I fell."

I fell . . . No woman, in any extremity, says that; that

is what is said by others of her. And *God forgot me*—is this the thought of one who "loves him so"? . . . The truth is that we have here the very commonplace of the theatre: the wish to have it both ways, to show, yet not to reveal—the "dramatic situation," in short, set out because it *is* dramatic, not because it is true. We cannot suppose that Browning meant Earl Mertoun for a mere seducer, ravishing from a maiden that which she did not desire to give—yet the words he here puts in Mildred's mouth bear no other interpretation. Either she is capable of passion, or she is not. If she *is*, sorrow for the sorrow that her recklessness may cause to others will indeed put pain and terror in her soul, but she will not, can not, say that "God forgot her": those words are alien to the passionate. If she is *not*, if Mertoun is the mere seducer . . . but the suggestion is absurd. We know that he is like herself, as herself should have been shown us, young love incarnate, rushing to its end mistakenly—wrong, high, and pure. These errors are the errors of quick souls, of souls that, too late realising all, yet feel themselves unstained, and know that not God forgot them, but they this world in which we dwell.

In her interview with Tresham after the servant's revelation, I find the same untruth. He delivers a long rhapsody on brothers' love, saying that it exceeds all other in its unselfishness. Her sole rejoinder—and here she does for one second attain to authenticity—is the question: "What is this for?" He, after some hesitation, tells her what he knows, calls upon her to confess, she standing silent until, at end of the arraignment, he demands the lover's name. Listen to her answer:

. . . Thorold, do you devise

Fit expiation for my guilt, if fit
There be! 'Tis nought to say that I'll
endure
And bless you—that my spirit yearns to
purge
Her stains off in the fierce renewing fire:
But do not plunge me into other guilt!
Oh, guilt enough . . ."

She of course refuses the name. He tells her to pronounce, then, her own punishment.

Again her answer, in the utter falseness to all truth of its abasement, well-nigh sickens the soul:

"Oh, Thorold, you must never tempt me
thus!
To die here in this chamber, by that
sword,
Would seem like punishment; so should I
glide
Like an arch-cheat, into extremest bliss!"

Comment upon that seems to me simply impossible. This is the woman to whom, but a page or two back, young Mertoun has sung the exquisite song, known to most readers of Browning's lyrics:

"There's a woman like a dewdrop, she's so
purer than the purest,
And her noble heart's the noblest, yes, and
her sure faith's the surest" . . .

Already in that hour with her, Mertoun must have learnt that some of those high words were turned to slighter uses when they sang of Mildred Tresham. In that hour he has spoken of the "meeting that

appalled us both" (namely, the meeting with her brother, when he was to ask for her hand), saying that it is over and happiness begins, "such as the world contains not." When Mildred answers him with, "This will not be," we could accept, believingly, were only the sense of doom what her reply brought with it. But "this will not be," because they do not "deserve the whole world's best of blisses."

"Sin has surprised us, so will punishment."

And how strange, how sad for a woman is it, to see with what truth and courage Browning can make Mertoun speak! Each word that *he* says can be brave and clear for all its recognition of their error; no word that *she* says. . . . Her creator does not understand her; almost, thus, we do feel Mildred to be real, so quick is our resentment of the unrealities heaped on her. Imagining beforehand the moment when she shall receive in presence of them all "the partner of my guilty love" (is not here the theatre in full blast?), the deception she must practise—called by her, in the vein so cruelly assigned her, "this planned piece of deliberate wickedness" . . . imagining all this, she foresees herself unable to pretend, pouring forth "all our woeful story," and pictures them aghast, "as round some cursed fount that should spirt water and spouts blood." . . . "I'll not!" she cries—

". . . 'I'll not affect a grace
That's gone from me—gone once, and
gone for ever!'"

"Gone once, and gone for ever." True, when the grace *is* gone; but surely not from her, in any real sense,

had it gone—and would she not, in the deep knowledge of herself which comes with revelation to the world, have felt that passionately? There are accusations of ourselves which indeed arraign ourselves, yet leave us our best pride. To me, not the error which made her prey to penitence was Mildred Tresham's "fall," but those crude cries of shame.

We take refuge in her immaturity, and in the blighting influence of her brother—that prig of prigs, that "monomaniac of family pride and conventional morality,"[90:1] Thorold, Earl Tresham; but not thus can we solace ourselves for Browning's failure. What a girl he might have given us in Mildred, had he listened only to himself! But, not yet in full possession of that self, he set up as an ideal the ideal of others, trying dutifully to see it as they see it, denying dutifully his deepest instinct; and, thus apostate, piled insincerity on insincerity, until at last no truth is anywhere, and we read on with growing alienation as each figure loses all of such reality as it ever had, and even Gwendolen, the "golden creature"—his own dauntless, individual woman, seeing and feeling truly through every fibre of her being—is lost amid the fog, is stifled in the stifling atmosphere, and only at the last, when Mildred and her brother are both dead, can once more say the word which lights us back to truth:

> "Ah, Thorold, we can but—remember
> you!"

It was indeed all *they* could do; but we, more fortunate, can forget him, imaging to ourselves the Mildred that Browning could have given us—the Mildred of whom her brother is made to say:

"You cannot know the good and tender
heart,
Its girl's trust and its woman's constancy,
How pure yet passionate, how calm yet
kind,
How grave yet joyous, how reserved yet
free
As light where friends are . . ."

There she is, as Browning might have shown her! "Control's not for this lady," Tresham adds—the sign-manual of a Browning woman. As I have said, he can display this lovely type through others, can sing it in his own person, as in the exquisite dewdrop lyric; but once let her speak for herself—he obeys the world and its appraisals, and the truth departs from him; we have the Mildred Tresham of the theatre, of "the partner of my guilty love," of "Oh, Thorold, you must never tempt me thus!" of (in a later scene) "I think I might have urged some little point in my defence to Thorold"; of that last worst unreality of all, when Thorold has told her of his murder of her lover, and she cries:

". . . I—forgive not,
But bless you, Thorold, from my soul of
souls!
There! Do not think too much upon the
past!
The cloud that's broke was all the same a
cloud
While it stood up between my friend and
you;
You hurt him 'neath its shadow: but is that
So past retrieve? I have his heart, you
know;
I may dispose of it: I give it you!

It loves you as mine loves!"

True, she is to die, and so is to rejoin her lover; but, thus rejoined, will "blots upon the 'scutcheon" seem to them the all-sufficient claim for Thorold's deed—Thorold who dies with these words on his lips:

". . . You hold our 'scutcheon
up.
Austin, no blot on it! You see how blood
Must wash one blot away; the first blot
came
And the first blood came. To the vain
world's eye
All's gules again: no care to the vain world
From whence the red was drawn!"

And on Austin's cry that "no blot shall come!" he answers:

"I said that: yet it did come. Should it
come,
Vengeance is God's, not man's. Remember
me!"

Vengeance: how do they who are met again in the spirit-world regard that word, that "God"?

FOOTNOTES:

[90:1] Berdoe. *Browning Cyclopædia.*

IV

BALAUSTION

IN "BALAUSTION'S ADVENTURE" AND "ARISTOPHANES' APOLOGY"

To me, Balaustion is the queen of Browning's women —nay, I am tempted to proclaim her queen of every poet's women. For in her meet all lovelinesses, and to make her dearer still, some are as yet but in germ (what a mother she will be, for example); so that we have, with all the other beauties, the sense of the unfolding rose—"enmisted by the scent it makes," in a phrase of her creator's which, though in the actual context it does not refer to her, yet exquisitely conveys her influence on these two works. "Rosy Balaustion": she is that, as well as "superb, statuesque," in the admiring apostrophes from Aristophanes, during the long, close argument of the *Apology*. In that piece, the Bald Bard himself is made to show her to us; and though it follows, not precedes, the *Adventure*, I shall steal from him at once, presenting in his lyric phrases our queen before we crown her.

He comes to her home in Athens on the night when Balaustion learns that her adored Euripides is dead. She and her husband, Euthukles, are "sitting silent in the house, yet cheerless hardly," musing on the tidings, when suddenly there come torch-light and knocking at the door, and cries and laughter: "Open, open, Bacchos[94:1] bids!"—and, heralded by his chorus and the dancers, flute-boys, all the "banquet-

band," there enters, "stands in person, Aristophanes." Balaustion had never seen him till that moment, nor he her:

> "Forward he stepped: I rose and fronted
> him";

and as thus for the first time they meet, he breaks into a pæan of admiration:

> "'You, lady? What, the Rhodian? Form and
> face,
> Victory's self upsoaring to receive
> The poet? Right they named you . . . some
> rich name,
> Vowel-buds thorned about with
> consonants,
> Fragrant, felicitous, rose-glow enriched
> By the Isle's unguent: some diminished
> end
> In *ion*' . . ."

and trying to recall that name "in *ion*," he guesses two or three at random, seizing thus the occasion to express her effect on him:

> "'Phibalion, for the mouth split red-fig-
> wise,
> Korakinidion, for the coal-black hair,
> Nettarion, Phabion, for the darlingness?'"

But none of these is right; "it was some fruit-flower"; and at last it comes: *Balaustion*, Wild-Pomegranate-Bloom, and he exclaims in ecstasy, "Thanks, Rhodes!"—for her fellow-countrymen had found this name for her, so apt in every way that her real name was forgotten, and as Balaustion she shall live and

die.

"Nettarion, Phabion, for the darlingness"; and for all her intellect and ardour, it is greatly *this* that makes Balaustion queen—the lovely eager sweetness, the tenderness, the "darlingness": Aristophanes guessed almost right!

How did she win the name of Wild-Pomegranate-Flower? We learn it from herself in the *Adventure*. Let us hear: let us feign ourselves members of the little band of friends, all girls, with their charming, chiming names: "Petalé, Phullis, Charopé, Chrusion"—to whom she cries in the delightful opening:

> "About that strangest, saddest, sweetest
> song
> I, when a girl, heard in Kameiros once,
> And after, saved my life by? Oh, so glad
> To tell you the adventure!"

Part of the adventure is historical. In the second stage of the Peloponnesian War (that famous contention between the Athenians and the inhabitants of Peloponnesus which began on May 7, 431 B.C. and lasted twenty-seven years), the Athenian General, Nikias, had suffered disaster at Syracuse, and had given himself up, with all his army, to the Sicilians. But the assurances of safety which he had received were quickly proved false. He was no sooner in the hands of the enemy than he was shamefully put to death with his naval ally, Demosthenes; and his troops were sent to the quarries, where the plague and the hard labour

lessened their numbers and increased their miseries. When this bad news reached Rhodes, the islanders rose in revolt against the supremacy of Athens, and resolved to side with Sparta. Balaustion[96:1] was there, and she passionately protested against this decision, crying to "who would hear, and those who loved me at Kameiros"[96:2]:

> ". . . No!
> Never throw Athens off for Sparta's sake—
> Never disloyal to the life and light
> Of the whole world worth calling world at all!
>
> * * * * *
>
> To Athens, all of us that have a soul,
> Follow me!"

and thus she drew together a little band, "and found a ship at Kaunos," and they turned

> "The glad prow westward, soon were out at sea,
> Pushing, brave ship with the vermilion cheek,
> Proud for our heart's true harbour."

But they were pursued by pirates, and, fleeing from these, drove unawares into the harbour of that very Syracuse where Nikias and Demosthenes had perished, and in whose quarries their countrymen were slaves. The inhabitants refused them admission, for they had heard, as the ship came into harbour, Balaustion singing "that song of ours which saved at Salamis." She had sprung upon the altar by the mast, and carolled it forth to encourage the oarsmen; and

now it was vain to tell the Sicilians that these were Rhodians who had cast in their lot with the Spartan League, for the Captain of Syracuse answered:

> "Ay, but we heard all Athens in one ode
> . . .
> You bring a boatful of Athenians here";

and Athenians they would not have at Syracuse, "with memories of Salamis" to stir up the slaves in the quarry.

No prayers, no blandishments, availed the Rhodians; they were just about to turn away and face the pirates in despair, when somebody raised a question, and

> ". . . 'Wait!'
> Cried they (and wait we did, you may be sure).
> 'That song was veritable Aischulos,
> Familiar to the mouth of man and boy,
> Old glory: how about Euripides?
> Might you know any of his verses too?'"

Browning here makes use of the historical fact that Euripides was reverenced far more by foreigners and the non-Athenian Greeks than by the Athenians—for Balaustion, "the Rhodian," had been brought up in his worship, though she knew and loved the other great Greek poets also; and already it was known to our voyagers that the captives in the quarries had found that those who could "teach Euripides to Syracuse" gained indulgence far beyond what any of the others could obtain. Thus, when the question sounded, "Might you know any of his verses too?" the captain of the vessel cried:

"Out with our Sacred Anchor! Here she
stands,
Balaustion! Strangers, greet the lyric girl!

* * * * *

Why, fast as snow in Thrace, the voyage
through,
Has she been falling thick in flakes of him,

* * * * *

And so, although she has some other
name,
We only call her Wild-Pomegranate-
Flower,
Balaustion; since, where'er the red bloom
burns

* * * * *

You shall find food, drink, odour all at
once."

He called upon her to save their little band by singing a strophe. But she could do better than that —she could recite a whole play:

"That strangest, saddest, sweetest song of
his,
ALKESTIS!"

Only that very year had it reached "Our Isle o' the Rose"; she had seen it, at Kameiros, played just as it was played at Athens, and had learnt by heart "the perfect piece." Now, quick and subtle for all her enthusiasm, she remembers to tell the Sicilians how, besides "its beauty and the way it makes you weep,"

it does much honour to their own loved deity:

> "Herakles, whom you house i' the city here
> Nobly, the Temple wide Greece talks
> about;
> I come a suppliant to your Herakles!
> Take me and put me on his temple-steps
> To tell you his achievement as I may."

"Then," she continues, in a passage which rings out again in the *Apology*:

> "Then, because Greeks are Greeks, and
> hearts are hearts,
> And poetry is power—they all outbroke
> In a great joyous laughter with much love:
> 'Thank Herakles for the good holiday!
> Make for the harbour! Row, and let voice
> ring:
> *In we row bringing in Euripides!*'"

So did the Rhodians land at Syracuse. And the whole city, hearing the cry "In we row," which was taken up by the crowd around the harbour-quays, came rushing out to meet them, and Balaustion, standing on the topmost step of the Temple of Herakles, told the play:

> "Told it, and, two days more, repeated it,
> Until they sent us on our way again
> With good words and great wishes."

That was her Adventure. Three things happened in it "for herself": a rich Syracusan brought her a whole talent as a gift, and she left it on the tripod as thank-offering to Herakles; a band of the captives—"whom their lords grew kinder to, Because they called the

poet countryman"—sent her a crown of wild-pomegranate-flower; and the third thing . . . Petalé, Phullis, Charopé, Chrusion, hear of this also—of the youth who, all the three days that she spoke the play, was found in the gazing, listening audience; and who, when they sailed away, was found in the ship too, "having a hunger to see Athens"; and when they reached Piræus, once again was found, as Balaustion landed, beside her. February's moon is just a-bud when she tells her comrades of this youth; and when that moon rounds full:

"We are to marry. O Euripides!"

* * * * *

Everyone who speaks of *Balaustion's Adventure* will quote to you that ringing line, for it sums up the high, ardent girl who, even in the exultation of her love, must call upon the worshipped Master. It is this passion for intellectual beauty which sets Balaustion so apart, which makes her so complete and stimulating. She has a mind as well as a heart and soul; she is priestess as well as goddess—Euthukles will have a wife indeed! Every word she speaks is stamped with the Browning marks of gaiety, courage, trust, and with how many others also: those of high-heartedness, deep-heartedness, the true patriotism that cherishes most closely the soul of its country; and then generosity, pride, ardour—all enhanced by woman's more peculiar gifts of gentleness, modesty, tenderness, insight, gravity . . . for Balaustion is like many women in having, for all her gaiety, more sense of happiness than sense of humour. It often comes to me as debatable if this be not the most attractive of deficiencies! Certainly Balaustion persuades us of its power; for in the *Apology*, her

refusal of the Aristophanic Comedy is firm-based upon that imputed lack in women. No man, thus poised, could have convinced us of his reality; while she convinces us not only of her reality, but of her rightness. Again, we must applaud our poet's wisdom in choosing woman for the Bald Bard's accuser; she is as potent in this part as in that of Euripides' interpreter.

But what a girl Balaustion is, as well as what a woman! Let us see her with the little band of friends about her, as in the exquisite revocation (in the *Apology*) of the first adventure's telling:

> ". . . O that Spring,
> That eve I told the earlier[101:1] to my friends!
> Where are the four now, with each red-ripe mouth
> I wonder, does the streamlet ripple still,
> Outsmoothing galingale and watermint?
>
> * * * * *
>
> Under the grape-vines, by the streamlet-side,
> Close to Baccheion; till the cool increase,
> And other stars steal on the evening star,
> And so, we homeward flock i' the dusk, we five!"

Then, in the *Adventure*, comes the translation by Browning of the *Alkestis* of Euripides, which Balaustion is feigned to have spoken upon the temple steps at Syracuse. With this we have here no business, though so entire is his "lyric girl," so fully and perfectly by him conceived, that not a word of

the play but might have been Balaustion's own. This surely is a triumph of art—to imagine such a speaker for such a piece, and to blend them both so utterly that the supreme Greek dramatist and this girl are indivisible. What a woman was demanded for such a feat, and what a poet for both! May we not indeed say now that Browning was our singer? Whom but he would have done this—so crowned, so trusted, us, and so persuaded men that women can be great?

"Its beauty, and the way it makes you weep": yes—and the way it makes you thrill with love for Herakles, never before so god-like, because always before too much the apotheosis of mere physical power. But read of him in the *Alkestis* of Euripides, and you shall feel him indeed divine—"this grand benevolence." . . . We can hear the voice of Balaustion deepen, quiver, and grow grave with gladdened love, as Herakles is fashioned for us by these two men's noble minds.

When she had told the "perfect piece" to her girl-friends, a sudden inspiration came to her:

> "I think I see how . . .
> You, I, or anyone might mould a new
> Admetos, new Alkestis";

and saying this, a flood of gratitude for the great gift of poetry comes full tide across her soul:

> ". . . Ah, that brave
> Bounty of poets, the one royal race
> That ever was, or will be, in this world!
> They give no gift that bounds itself and

ends
I' the giving and the taking: theirs so
breeds
I' the heart and soul o' the taker, so
transmutes
The man who only was a man before,
That he grows god-like in his turn, can
give—
He also; share the poet's privilege,
Bring forth new good, new beauty from
the old.
. . . So with me:
For I have drunk this poem, quenched my
thirst,
Satisfied heart and soul—yet more
remains!
Could we too make a poem? Try at least,
Inside the head, what shape the rose-mists
take!"

And, trying thus, Balaustion, Feminist, portrays the perfect marriage.

Admetos, in Balaustion's and Browning's *Alkestis*, will not let his wife be sacrificed for him:

"Never, by that true word Apollon spoke!
All the unwise wish is unwished, oh wife!"

and he speaks, as in a vision, of the purpose of Zeus in himself.

"This purpose—that, throughout my
earthly life,
Mine should be mingled and made up
with thine—
And we two prove one force and play one

part
And do one thing. Since death divides the
pair,
'Tis well that I depart and thou remain
Who wast to me as spirit is to flesh:
Let the flesh perish, be perceived no more,
So thou, the spirit that informed the flesh,
Bend yet awhile, a very flame above
The rift I drop into the darkness by—
And bid remember, flesh and spirit once
Worked in the world, one body, for man's
sake.
Never be that abominable show
Of passive death without a quickening life
—
Admetos only, no Alkestis now!"

It is so that the man speaks to and of the woman, in Balaustion's and Browning's *Alkestis*.

And the woman, answering, declares that the reality of their joint existence lies not in her, but in him:

". . . 'What! thou soundest in my
soul
To depths below the deepest, reachest
good
By evil, that makes evil good again,
And so allottest to me that I live,
And not die—letting die, not thee alone,
But all true life that lived in both of us?
Look at me once ere thou decree the lot!'

* * * * *

Therewith her whole soul entered into his,
He looked the look back, and Alkestis

died."

But when she reaches the nether world—"the downward-dwelling people"—she is rejected as a deceiver: "This is not to die," says the Queen of Hades, for her death is a mockery, since it doubles the life of him she has left behind:

> "'Two souls in one were formidable odds:
> Admetos must not be himself and thou!'
>
> * * * * *
>
> And so, before the embrace relaxed a
> whit,
> The lost eyes opened, still beneath the
> look;
> And lo, Alkestis was alive again."

How do our little squabbles—the "Sex-War"—look to us after this?

When next we meet with Balaustion, in *Aristophanes' Apology*, she is married to her Euthukles, and they are once more speeding across the waters—this time back to Rhodes, from Athens which has fallen.

Many things have happened in the meantime, and Balaustion, leaving her adoptive city, with "not sorrow but despair, not memory but the present and its pang" in her deep heart, feels that if she deliberately invites the scene, if she embodies in words the tragedy of Athens, she may free herself from anguish. Euthukles shall write it down for her, and they will go back to the night they heard

Euripides was dead: "One year ago, Athenai still herself." Together she and Euthukles had mused, together glorified their poet. Euthukles had met the audience flocking homeward from the theatre, where Aristophanes had that night won the prize which Euripides had so seldom won. They had stopped him to hear news of the other poet's death: "Balaustion's husband, the right man to ask"—but he had refused them all satisfaction, and scornfully rated them for the crown but now awarded. "Appraise no poetry," he had cried: "price cuttlefish!"

Balaustion had seen, since she had come to live in Athens, but one work of Aristophanes, the *Lysistrata*; and now, in breathless reminiscent anger, recalls the experience. It had so appalled her, "that bestiality so beyond all brute-beast imagining," that she would never see again a play by him who in the crowned achievement of this evening had drawn himself as Virtue laughingly reproving Vice, and Vice . . . Euripides! Such a piece it was which had "gained the prize that day we heard the death."

Yet, musing on that death, her wrath had fallen from her.

> "I thought, 'How thoroughly death alters
> things!
> Where is the wrong now, done our dead
> and great?'"

Euthukles, divining her thought, told her that the mob had repented when they learnt the news. He had heard them cry: "Honour him!" and "A statue in the theatre!" and "Bring his body back,[106:1] bury him in Piræus—Thucydides shall make his epitaph!"

But she was not moved to sympathy with the general cry.

> "Our tribute should not be the same, my
> friend.
> Statue? Within our hearts he stood, he
> stands!"

and, for his mere mortal body:

> "Why, let it fade, mix with the elements
> There where it, falling, freed Euripides!"

She knew, that night, a better way to hail his soul's new freedom. This, by

> "Singing, we two, its own song back again
> Up to that face from which flowed beauty
> —face
> Now abler to see triumph and take love
> Than when it glorified Athenai once."

Yes: they two would read together *Herakles*, the play of which Euripides himself had given her the tablets, in commemoration of the Adventure at Syracuse. After that, on her first arrival in Athens, she had gone to see him, "held the sacred hand of him, and laid it to my lips"; she had told him "how Alkestis helped," and he, on bidding her farewell, had given her these tablets, with the stylos pendant from them still, and given her, too, his own psalterion, that she might, to its assisting music, "croon the ode bewailing age."

All was prepared for the reading, when (as we earlier learnt) there came the torch-light and the knocking at their door, and Aristophanes, fresh from his triumph, entered with the banquet-band, to hail the

"house, friendly to Euripides."

He knew, declared Aristophanes, that the Rhodian hated him most of mortals, but he would not blench. The others blenched—no word could they utter, nor one laugh laugh. . . . So he drove them out, and stood alone confronting

> "Statuesque Balaustion pedestalled
> On much disapprobation and mistake."

He babbled on for a while, defiantly and incoherently, and at length she turned in dumb rebuke, which he at once understood.

> "True, lady, I am tolerably drunk";

for it was the triumph-night, and merriment had reigned at the banquet, reigned and increased

> "'Till something happened' . . .
> Here he strangely
> paused";

but soon went on to tell the way in which the news had reached them there. . . . While Aristophanes spoke, Balaustion searched his face; and now (recalling, on the way to Rhodes, that hour to Euthukles), she likens the change which she then saw in it to that made by a black cloud suddenly sailing over a stretch of sparkling sea—such a change as they are in this very moment beholding.

> "Just so, some overshadow, some new care
> Stopped all the mirth and mocking on his
> face,
> And left there only such a dark surmise—

No wonder if the revel disappeared,
So did his face shed silence every side!
I recognised a new man fronting me."

At once he perceived her insight, and answered it: "So you see myself? Your fixed regard can strip me of my 'accidents,' as the sophists say?" But neither should this disconcert him:

"Thank your eyes' searching; undisguised I
stand:
The merest female child may question me.
Spare not, speak bold, Balaustion!"

She, searching thus his face, had learnt already that "what she had disbelieved most proved most true." Drunk though he was,

"There was a mind here, mind a-
wantoning
At ease of undisputed mastery
Over the body's brood, those appetites.
Oh, but he grasped them grandly!"

It was no "ignoble presence": the broad bald brow, the flushed cheek, great imperious fiery eyes, wide nostrils, full aggressive mouth, all the pillared head:

"These made a glory, of such insolence—
I thought—such domineering deity . . .
Impudent and majestic . . ."

Instantly on her speaking face the involuntary homage had shown; and it was to this that Aristophanes, keen of sight as she, had confidently addressed himself when he told her to speak boldly. And in the very spirit of her face she did speak:

"Bold speech be—welcome to this
honoured hearth,
Good Genius!"

Here sounds the essential note of generous natures. Proved mistaken, their instant impulse is to rejoice in defeat, if defeat means victory for the better thing. Thus, as Balaustion speaks, her ardour grows with every word. He is greater than she had supposed, and so she must even rhapsodise—she must crowd praise on praise, until she ends with the exultant cry:

"O light, light, light, I hail light
everywhere!
No matter for the murk that was—
perchance
That will be—certes, never should have
been
Such orb's associate!"

Mark that Aristophanes has not yet *said* anything to justify her change of attitude: the seeing of him is enough to draw from her this recantation—for she trusts her own quick insight, and so, henceforth trusts him.

Now begins the long, close argument between them which constitutes *Aristophanes' Apology*. It is (from him) the defence of comedy as he understands and practises it—broad and coarse when necessary; violent and satiric against those who in any way condemn it. Euripides had been one of these, and Balaustion now stands for him. . . . In the long run, it is the defence of "realism" against "idealism," and, as such, involves a whole philosophy of life. We cannot follow it here; all we may do is to indicate the points

at which it reveals, as she speaks in it, the character of Balaustion, and the growing charm which such revelation has for her opponent.

At every turn of his argument, Aristophanes is sure of her comprehension. He knows that he need not adapt himself to a feebler mind: "You understand," he says again and again. At length he comes, in his narration, to the end of their feast that night, and tells how, rising from the banquet interrupted by the entrance of Sophocles with tidings of Euripides dead, he had cried to his friends that they must go and see

> "The Rhodian rosy with Euripides! . . .
> And here you stand with those warm
> golden eyes!
> Maybe, such eyes must strike conviction,
> turn
> One's nature bottom-upwards, show the
> base . . .
> Anyhow, I have followed happily
> The impulse, pledged my genius with
> effect,
> Since, come to see you, I am shown—
> myself!"

She instantly bids him, as she has honoured him, that he do honour to Euripides. But, seized by perversity, he declares that if she will give him the *Herakles* tablets (which he has discerned, lying with the other gifts of Euripides), he will prove to her, by this play alone, the "main mistake" of her worshipped Master.

She warmly interrupts, reproving him. Their house *is* the shrine of that genius, and he has entered it, "fresh from his worst infamy"—yet she has withheld the words she longs to speak, she has inclined, nay

yearned, to reverence him:

> "So you but suffer that I see the blaze
> And not the bolt—the splendid fancy-fling,
> Not the cold iron malice, the launched
> lie."

If he does *this*, if he shows her

> "A mere man's hand ignobly clenched
> against
> Yon supreme calmness,"

she will interpose:

> "Such as you see me! Silk breaks
> lightning's blow!"

But Aristophanes, at that word of "calmness," exclaims vehemently. Death is the great unfairness! Once a man dead, the survivors croak, "Respect him." And so one must—it is the formidable claim, "immunity of faultiness from fault's punishment." That is why *he*, Aristophanes, has always attacked the living; he knew how they would hide their heads, once dead! Euripides had chosen the other way; "men pelted him, but got no pellet back"; and it was not magnanimity but arrogance that prompted him to such silence. Those at whom Aristophanes or he should fling mud were by that alone immortalised—and Euripides, "that calm cold sagacity," knew better than to do them such service.

As he speaks thus, Balaustion's "heart burns up within her to her tongue." She exclaims that the baseness of Aristophanes' attack, of his "mud-volleying" at Euripides, consists in the fact that both men had, at bottom, the same ideals; they both

extended the limitations of art, both were desirous from their hearts that truth should triumph—yet Aristophanes, thus desiring, poured out his supremacy of power against the very creature who loved all that *he* loved! And she declares that such shame cuts through all his glory. Comedy is in the dust, laid low by him:

> "Balaustion pities Aristophanes!"

Now she has gone too far—she has spoken too boldly.

> "Blood burnt the cheek-bone, each black
> eye flashed fierce:
> 'But this exceeds our license!'"

—so he exclaims; but then, seizing his native weapon, stops ironically to search out an excuse for her. He finds it soon. She and her husband are but foreigners; they are "uninstructed"; the born and bred Athenian needs must smile at them, if he do not think a frown more fitting for such ignorance. But strangers are privileged: Aristophanes will condone. They want to impose their squeamishness on sturdy health: that is at the bottom of it all. Their Euripides had cried "Death!"—deeming death the better life; he, Aristophanes, cries "Life!" If the Euripideans condescend to happiness at all, they merely "talk, talk, talk about the empty name," while the thing itself lies neglected beneath their noses; they

> "think out thoroughly how youth
> should pass—
> Just as if youth stops passing, all the
> same!"

* * * * *

As he proceeds, in the superb defence of his own methods, he sees Balaustion grow ever more indignant. But he conjures her to wait a moment ere she "looses his doom" on him—and at last, drawing to an end, declares that after all the ground of difference between him and her is slight. In so far as it does exist, however, he claims to have won. Euripides, for whom she stands, is beaten in this contest, yet he, Aristophanes, has not even put forth all his power! If she will not acknowledge final defeat:

> "Help him, Balaustion! Use the rosy
> strength!"

—and he urges her to use it all, to "let the whole rage burst in brave attack."

It is evident how he has been moved, despite his boasting—how eagerly he awaits her use of the rosy strength. . . . But she begins meekly enough. She is a woman, she says, and claims no quality "beside the love of all things lovable"; in *that*, she does claim to stand pre-eminent. But men may use, justifiably, different methods from those which women most admire, and so far and because she is a foreigner, as he reminds her, she may be mistaken in her blame of him. Yet foreigners, strangers, will in the ultimate issue be the judges of this matter, and shall they find Aristophanes any more impeccable than she does? (She now begins to put forth the rosy strength!) What is it that he has done? He did not invent comedy! Has he improved upon it? No, she declares. One of his aims is to discredit war. That was an aim of Euripides also; and has Aristophanes yet written

anything like the glorious Song to Peace in the *Cresphontes*?

> "Come, for the heart within me dies away,
> So long dost thou delay!"

She gives this forth, in the old "Syracusan" manner, and is well aware that he can have no answer for her. Again (she proceeds), Euripides discredited war by showing how it outrages the higher feelings: by what method has Aristophanes discredited it? By the obscene allurements of the *Lysistrata*! . . . Thus she takes him through his works, and finally declares that only in "more audaciously lying" has he improved upon the earlier writers of comedy. He has genius—she gladly grants it; but he has debased his genius. The mob indeed has awarded him the crowns: is such crowning the true guerdon?

> "Tell him, my other poet—where thou
> walk'st
> Some rarer world than e'er Ilissos
> washed!"

But as to the immortality of either, who shall say? And is even *that* the question? No: the question is—did both men wish to waft the white sail of good and beauty on its way? Assuredly. . . . And so she cries at the last: "Your nature too is kingly"; and this is for her the sole source of ardour—she "trusts truth's inherent kingliness"; and the poets are of all men most royal. She never would have dared approach this poet so:

> "But that the other king stands suddenly,
> In all the grand investiture of death,
> Bowing your knee beside my lowly head

—Equals one moment!
—Now arise and go.
Both have done homage to Euripides!"

But he insists that her defence has been oblique—it has been merely an attack on himself. She must defend her poet more directly, or Aristophanes will do no homage. At once she answers that she will, that she has the best, the only, defence at hand. She will read him the *Herakles*, read it as, at Syracuse, she spoke the *Alkestis*.

"Accordingly I read the perfect piece."

It ends with the lament of the Chorus for the departure of Herakles:

"The greatest of all our friends of yore
We have lost for evermore!"

and when Balaustion has chanted forth that strophe, there falls a long silence, on this night of losing a friend.

Aristophanes breaks it musingly. "'Our best friend'—who has been the best friend to Athens, Euripides or I?" And he answers that it is himself, for he has done what he knew he *could* do, and thus has charmed "the Violet-Crowned"; while Euripides had challenged failure, and had failed. Euripides, he cries, remembering an instance, has been like Thamyris of Thrace, who was blinded by the Muses for daring to contend with them in song; *he*, Aristophanes, "stands heart-whole, no Thamyris!" He seizes the psalterion —Balaustion must let him use it for once—and sings the song, from Sophocles, of Thamyris marching to his doom.

He gives some verses,[117:1] then breaks off in laughter, having, as he says, "sung content back to himself," since he is *not* Thamyris, but Aristophanes. . . . They shall both be pleased with his next play; it shall be serious, "no word more of the old fun," for "death defends," and moreover, Balaustion has delivered her admonition so soundly! Thus he departs, in all friendliness:

> "Farewell, brave couple! Next year,
> welcome me!"

It is "next year," and Balaustion and Euthukles are fleeing across the water to Rhodes from Athens. This year has seen the death of Sophocles; and the greatest of all the Aristophanic triumphs in the *Frogs*. It was all *him*, Balaustion says:

> "There blazed the glory, there shot black
> the shame"

—it showed every facet of his genius, and in it Bacchos himself was "duly dragged through the mire," and Euripides, after all the promises, was more vilely treated than ever before.

> "So, Aristophanes obtained the prize,
> And so Athenai felt she had a friend
> Far better than her 'best friend,' lost last
> year."

But then, what happened? The great battle of Ægos Potamos was fought and lost, and Athens fell into the hands of the Spartans. The conqueror's first words were, "Down with the Piræus! Peace needs no bulwarks." At first the stupefied Athenians had been ready to obey—but when the next decree came forth,

"No more democratic government; *we* shall appoint your oligarchs!" the dreamers were stung awake by horror; they started up a-stare, their hands refused their office.

"Three days they stood, stared—stonier
than their walls."

Lysander, the Spartan general, angered by the dumb delay, called a conference, issued decree. Not the Piræus only, but all Athens should be destroyed; every inch of the "mad marble arrogance" should go, and so at last should peace dwell there.

Balaustion stands, recalling this to Euthukles, who writes her words . . . and now, though she does not name it so, she tells the third "supreme adventure" of her life. When that decree had sounded, and the Spartans' shout of acquiescence had died away:

"Then did a man of Phokis rise—O
heart! . . .
Who was the man of Phokis rose and flung
A flower i' the way of that fierce foot's
advance"

—the "choric flower" of the *Elektra*, full in the face of the foe?

"You flung that choric flower, my
Euthukles!"

—and, gazing down on him from her proud rosy height, while he sits gazing up at her, she chants

again the words she spoke to her girl-friends at the Baccheion:

> "So, because Greeks are Greeks, and hearts
> are hearts,
> And poetry is power, and Euthukles
> Had faith therein to, full-face, fling the
> same—
> Sudden, the ice-thaw! The assembled foe,
> Heaving and swaying with strange
> friendliness,
> Cried 'Reverence Elektra!'—cried
> . . . 'Let stand
> Athenai'! . . ."

—and Athens was saved through Euripides,

> "Through Euthukles, through—more than
> ever—me,
> Balaustion, me, who, Wild-Pomegranate-
> Flower,
> Felt my fruit triumph, and fade proudly
> so!"

* * * * *

But next day, Sparta woke from the spell. Harsh Lysander decreed that though Athens might be saved, the Piræus should not. Comedy should destroy the Long Walls: the flute-girls should lead off in the dance, should time the strokes of spade and pickaxe, till the pride of the Violet-Crowned lay in the dust. "Done that day!" mourns Balaustion:

> "The very day Euripides was born."

But *they* would not see the passing of Athenai; they

would go, fleeing the sights and sounds,

> "And press to other earth, new heaven, by
> sea
> That somehow ever prompts to 'scape
> despair"

—and wonderfully, at the harbour-side they found that old grey mariner, whose ship she had saved in the first Adventure! The ship was still weather-wise: it should

> "'Convey Balaustion back to Rhodes, for
> sake
> Of her and her Euripides!' laughed he,"

—and they embarked. It should be Rhodes indeed: to Rhodes they now are sailing.

Euripides lies buried in the little valley "laughed and moaned about by streams,"

> "Boiling and freezing, like the love and
> hate
> Which helped or harmed him through his
> earthly course.
> They mix in Arethusa by his grave."

But, just as she had known, this revocation *has* consoled her. Now she will be able to forget. Never again will her eyes behold Athenai, nor in imagination see "the ghastly mirth that mocked her overthrow"; but she and Euthukles are exiles from the dead, not from the living, Athens:

> "That's in the cloud there, with the new-
> born star!"

There is no despair, there can be none; for does not the soul anticipate its heaven here on earth:

> "Above all crowding, crystal silentness,
> Above all noise, a silver solitude . . .
> Hatred and cark and care, what place
> have they
> In yon blue liberality of heaven?
> How the sea helps! How rose-smit earth
> will rise
> Breast-high thence, some bright morning,
> and be Rhodes!"

They are entering Rhodes now, and every wave and wind seems singing out the same:

> "All in one chorus—what the master-word
> They take up? Hark! 'There are no gods,
> no gods!
> Glory to GOD—who saves Euripides!'"

. . . There she is, Wild-Pomegranate-Flower, Balaustion—and Triumphant Woman. What other man has given us this?—and even Browning only here. Nearly always, for man's homage, woman must in some sort be victim: she must suffer ere he can adore. But Balaustion triumphs, and we hail her—and we hail her poet too, who dared to make her great not only in her love, but in her own deep-hearted, ardent self.

"This mortal shall put on individuality." Of all men Browning most wished women to do that.

FOOTNOTES:

[94:1] I follow Browning's spellings throughout.

[96:1] The character of Balaustion is wholly imaginary.

[96:2] A town of the island of Rhodes.

[101:1] In the *Apology*, she tells "the second supreme adventure": her interview with Aristophanes, and the recital to him of the *Herakles* of Euripides.

[106:1] Euripides died at the Court of Archelaus, King of Macedonia.

[117:1] Browning never finished his translation of this splendid song.

V

POMPILIA

IN "THE RING AND THE BOOK"

I said, in writing of Balaustion: "Nearly always, for man's homage, woman must in some sort be victim: she must suffer ere he can adore."

I should have said that this *has been* so: for the tendency to-day is to demonstrate rather the power than the weakness of woman. True that in the "victim," that weakness was usually shown to be the very source of that power: through her suffering not

only she, but they who stood around and saw the anguish, were made perfect. That this theory of the outcome of suffering is an eternal verity I am not desirous to deny; but I do deplore that, in literature, women should be made so disproportionately its exemplars; and I deplore it not for feminist reasons alone. Once we regard suffering in this light of a supreme uplifting influence, we turn, as it were, our weapons against ourselves—we exclaim that men too suffer in this world and display the highest powers of endurance: why, then, do they so frequently, in their imaginative works, present themselves as makers of women's woes? For women make men suffer often; yet how relatively seldom men show this! Thus, paradoxically enough, we may come to declare that it is to themselves that men are harsh, and to us generous. "Chivalry from women!"—how would that sound as a war-cry?

Not all in jest do I so speak, though such recognition of male generosity leaves existent a certain sense of weariness which assails me—and if me, then probably many another—when I find myself reading of the immemorial "victim." It is this which makes Balaustion supreme for my delight. There is a woman with every noble attribute of womanhood at its highest, who suffers at no hands but those of the Great Fates, as one might say—the fates who rule the destiny of nations. . . . We turn now to her direct antithesis in this regard of suffering—we turn to Pompilia, victim first of the mediocre, ignorant, small-souled, then of the very devil of malignant baseness; such a victim, moreover, first and last, for the paltriest of motives—money. And money in no large, imaginative sense, but in the very lowest terms in which it could be at all conceived as a theme for tragedy. A dowry, and a tiny one: *this* created "that

old woe" which "steps on the stage" again for us in *The Ring and the Book*.

> "Another day that finds her living yet,
> Little Pompilia, with the patient brow
> And lamentable smile on those poor lips,
> And, under the white hospital-array,
> A flower-like body, to frighten at a bruise
> You'd think, yet now, stabbed through and
> through again,
> Alive i' the ruins. 'Tis a miracle.
> It seems that when her husband struck her
> first,
> She prayed Madonna just that she might
> live
> So long as to confess and be absolved;
> And whether it was that, all her sad life
> long
> Never before successful in a prayer,
> This prayer rose with authority too dread
> —
> Or whether because earth was hell to her,
> By compensation when the blackness
> broke,
> She got one glimpse of quiet and the cool
> blue,
> To show her for a moment such things
> were,"

—the prayer was granted her.

So, musing on the murder of the Countess Franceschini by her husband; and her four days' survival of her wounds, does one half of Rome express itself—"The Other Half" in contrast to the earliest commentator on the crime: "Half-Rome." This Other-Half is wholly sympathetic to the seventeen-

yeared child who lies in the hospital-ward at St. Anna's. "Why was she made to learn what Guido Franceschini's heart could hold?" demands the imagined spokesman; and, summing up, he exclaims:

> "Who did it shall account to Christ—
> Having no pity on the harmless life
> And gentle face and girlish form he found,
> And thus flings back. Go practise if you
> please
> With men and women. Leave a child alone
> For Christ's particular love's sake!"

Then, burning with pity and indignation, he proceeds to tell the story of Pompilia as he sees it, feels it—and as Browning, in the issue, makes us see and feel it too.

In *The Ring and the Book*, Browning tells us this story—this "pure crude fact" (for fact it actually is)—*ten times over*, through nine different persons, Guido Franceschini, the husband, speaking twice. Stated thus baldly, the plan may sound almost absurd, and the prospect of reading the work appear a tedious one; but once begin it, and neither impression survives for a moment. Each telling is at once the same and new—for in each the speaker's point of view is altered. We get, first of all, Browning's own summary of the "pure crude fact"; then the appearance of that fact to:

1. Half-Rome, antagonistic to Pompilia.
2. The Other Half, sympathetic to her.
3. "Tertium Quid," neutral.
4. Count Guido Franceschini, at his trial.

5. Giuseppe Caponsacchi (the priest with whom Pompilia fled), at the trial.

6. Pompilia, on her death-bed.

7. Count Guido's counsel, preparing his speech for the defence.

8. The Public Prosecutor's speech.

9. The Pope, considering his decision on Guido's appeal to him after the trial.

10. Guido, at the last interview with his spiritual advisers before execution.

Only the speeches of the two lawyers are wholly tedious; the rest of the survey is absorbing. Not a point which can be urged on any side is omitted, as that side presents itself; yet in the event, as I have said, one overmastering effect stands forth—the utter loveliness and purity of Pompilia. "She is the heroine," says Mr. Arthur Symons,[126:1] "as neither Guido nor Caponsacchi can be called the hero. . . . With hardly [any] consciousness of herself, [she] makes and unmakes the lives and characters of those about her"; and in this way he compares her story with Pippa's: "the mere passing of an innocent child."

And so, here, have we not indeed the victim? But though I spoke of weariness, I must take back the words; for here too we have indeed the beauty and the glory of suffering, and here the beauty and the glory of manhood. Guido, like all evil things, is Nothingness: he serves but to show forth what purity and love, in Pompilia, could be; what bravery and love, in Caponsacchi, the "warrior-priest," could do. This girl has not the Browning-mark of gaiety, but she has both the others—this "lady young, tall,

beautiful, strange, and sad," who answered without fear the call of the unborn life within her, and trusted without question "the appointed man."

The "pure crude fact," detailed by Browning, was found in the authentic legal documents bound together in an old, square, yellow parchment-covered volume, picked up by him, "one day struck fierce 'mid many a day struck calm," on a stall in the Piazza San Lorenzo of Florence. He bought the pamphlet for eightpence, and it gave to him and us the great, unique achievement of this wonderful poem:

> "Gold as it was, is, shall be evermore,
> Prime nature with an added artistry."

Pompilia, called Comparini, was in reality "nobody's child." This, which at first sight may seem of minor importance to the issue, is actually at the heart of all; for, as I have said, it was the question of her dowry which set the entire drama in motion. The old Comparini couple, childless, of mediocre class and fortunes, had through silly extravagance run into debt, and in 1679 were hard pressed by creditors. They could not draw on their capital, for it was tied up in favour of the legal heir, an unknown cousin. But if they had a child, that disability would be removed. Violante Comparini, seeing this, resolved upon a plan. She bought beforehand for a small sum the expected baby of a disreputable woman, giving herself out to her husband, Pietro, and their friends as almost miraculously pregnant—for she was past fifty. In due time she became the apparent mother of a girl, Pompilia. This girl was married at thirteen to

Count Guido Franceschini, an impoverished nobleman, fifty years old, of Arezzo. He married her for her reported dowry, and she was sold to him for the sake of his rank. Both parties to the bargain found themselves deceived (Pompilia was, of course, a mere chattel in the business), for there was no dowry, and Guido, though he *had* the rank, had none of the appurtenances thereof which had dazzled the fancy of Violante. Pietro too was tricked, and the marriage carried through against his will. The old couple, reduced to destitution by extracted payment of a part of the dowry, were taken to the miserable Franceschini castle at Arezzo, and there lived wretchedly, in every sense, for a while; but soon fled back to Rome, leaving the girl-wife behind to aggravated woes. About three years afterwards she also fled, intending to rejoin the Comparini at Rome. She was about to become a mother. The organiser and companion of her flight was a young priest, Giuseppe Caponsacchi, who was a canon at Arezzo. Guido followed them, caught them at Castelnuovo, a village on the outskirts of Rome, and caused both to be arrested. They were confined in the "New Prisons" at Rome, and tried for adultery. The result was a compromise—they were pronounced guilty, but a merely nominal punishment ("the jocular piece of punishment," as the young priest called it) was inflicted on each. Pompilia was relegated for a time to a convent; Caponsacchi was banished for three years to Civita Vecchia. As the time for Pompilia's confinement drew near, she was permitted to go to her reputed parents' home, which was a villa just outside the walls of the city. A few months after her removal there, she became the mother of a son, whom the old people quickly removed to a place of concealment and safety. A fortnight later—on the

second day of the New Year—Count Guido, with four hired assassins, came to the villa, and all three occupants were killed: Pietro and Violante Comparini, and Pompilia his wife. For these murders, Guido and his hirelings were hanged at Rome on February 22, 1698.

But now we must return upon our steps, if we would know "the truth of this."

When the old Comparini reached Rome, after their flight from Arezzo, the Pope had just proclaimed jubilee in honour of his eightieth year, and absolution for any sin was to be had for the asking—atonement, however, necessarily preceding. Violante, remorseful for the sacrifice of their darling, and regarding the woe as retribution for her original lie about the birth, resolved to confess; but since absolution was granted only if atonement preceded it, she must be ready to restore to the rightful heir that which her pretended motherhood had taken from him. She therefore confessed to Pietro first, and he instantly seized the occasion for revenge on Guido, though that was not (or at any rate, according to the Other Half-Rome, may not have been) his only motive.

"What? All that used to be, may be again?

* * * * *

What, the girl's dowry never was the girl's,
And unpaid yet, is never now to pay?
Then the girl's self, my pale Pompilia child
That used to be my own with her great
eyes—
Will she come back, with nothing changed

at all?"

He repudiated Pompilia publicly, and with her, of course, all claims from her husband. Taken into Court, the case (also bound up in the square yellow book) was, after appeals and counter-appeals, left undecided.

It was this which loosed all Guido's fury on Pompilia. He had already learned to hate her for her shrinking from him; now, while he still controlled her person, and wreaked the vilest cruelties and basenesses upon it, he at the same time resolved to rid himself of her in any fashion whatsoever which should leave him still a legal claimant to the disputed dowry.[130:1] There was only one way thus to rid himself, and that was to prove her guilty of adultery. He concentrated on it. First, his brother, the young Canon Girolamo, who lived at the castle, was incited to pursue her with vile solicitations. She fled to the Archbishop of Arezzo and implored his succour. He gave none. Then she went to the Governor: he also "pushed her back." She sought out a poor friar, and confessed her "despair in God"; he promised to write to her parents for her, but afterwards flinched, and did nothing. . . . Guido's plan was nevertheless hanging fire; a supplementary system of persecution must be set up. She was hourly accused of "looking love-lures at theatre and church, in walk, at window"; but this, in the apathy which was descending on her, she baffled by "a new game of giving up the game."[131:1] She abandoned theatre, church, walk, and window; she "confounded him with her gentleness and worth," he "saw the same stone strength of white despair":

> "How does it differ in aught, save degree,
> From the terrible patience of God?"

—and more and more he hated her.

But at last, at the theatre one night, Pompilia—

> "Brought there I knew not why, but now
> know well"[131:2]

—saw, for the first time, Giuseppe Caponsacchi, "the young frank personable priest"[131:3]—and seeing him as rapt he gazed at her, felt

> ". . . Had there been a man like that,
> To lift me with his strength out of all strife
> Into the calm! . . .
> Suppose that man had been instead of
> this?"

* * * * *

Caponsacchi had hitherto been very much "the courtly spiritual Cupid" that Browning calls him. His family, the oldest in Arezzo and once the greatest, had wide interest in the Church, and he had always known that he was to be a priest. But when the time came for "just a vow to read!" he stopped awestruck. Could he keep such a promise? He knew himself too weak. But the Bishop smiled. There were two ways of taking that vow, and a man like Caponsacchi, with "that superior gift of making madrigals," need not choose the harder one.

> "Renounce the world? Nay, keep and give
> it us!"

He was good enough for *that*, thought Caponsacchi, and in this spirit he took the vows. He did his formal duties, and was equally diligent "at his post where beauty and fashion rule"—a fribble and a coxcomb,

in short, as he described himself to the judges at the murder-trial. . . . After three or four years of this, he found himself, "in prosecution of his calling," at the theatre one night with fat little Canon Conti, a kinsman of the Franceschini. He was in the mood proper enough for the place, amused or no . . .

> "When I saw enter, stand, and seat herself
> A lady young, tall, beautiful, strange and
> sad"

—and it was (he remembered) like seeing a burden carried to the Altar in his church one day, while he "got yawningly through Matin-Song." The burden was unpacked, and left—

> "Lofty and lone: and lo, when next I
> looked
> There was the Rafael!"

Fat little Conti noticed his rapt gaze, and exclaimed that he would make the lady respond to it. He tossed a paper of comfits into her lap; she turned,

> "Looked our way, smiled the beautiful sad
> strange smile;"

and thought the thought that we have learned—for instinctively and surely she felt that whoever had thrown the comfits, it was not "that man":

> ". . . Silent, grave,
> Solemn almost, he saw me, as I saw him."

Conti told Caponsacchi who she was, and warned him to look away; but promised to take him to the castle if he could. At Vespers, next day, Caponsacchi

heard from Conti that the husband had seen that gaze. *He* would not signify, but there was Pompilia:

> "Spare her, because he beats her as it is,
> She's breaking her heart quite fast
> enough."

It was the turning-point in Caponsacchi's life. He had no thought of pursuing her; wholly the contrary was his impulse—he felt that he must leave Arezzo. All that hitherto had charmed him there was done with —the social successes, the intrigue, song-making; and his patron was already displeased. These things were what he was there to do, and he was going to church instead! "Are you turning Molinist?" the patron asked. "I answered quick" (says Caponsacchi in his narrative)

> "Sir, what if I turned Christian?"

—and at once announced his resolve to go to Rome as soon as Lent was over. One evening, before he went, he was sitting thinking how his life "had shaken under him"; and

> "Thinking moreover . . . oh, thinking, if
> you like,
> How utterly dissociated was I
> A priest and celibate, from the sad strange
> wife
> Of Guido . . .
> . . . I had a whole store of
> strengths
> Eating into my heart, which craved
> employ,
> And she, perhaps, need of a finger's help—
> And yet there was no way in the wide

world
To stretch out mine."

Her smile kept glowing out of the devotional book he was trying to read, and he sat thus—when suddenly there came a tap at the door, and on his summons, there glided in "a masked muffled mystery," who laid a letter on the open book, and stood back demurely waiting.

It was Margherita, the "kind of maid" of Count Guido, and the letter purported to be from Pompilia, offering her love. Caponsacchi saw through the trick at once: the letter was written by Guido. He answered it in such a way that it would save *her* from all anger, and at the same time infuriate the "jealous miscreant" who had written it:

". . . What made you—may one
ask?—
Marry your hideous husband?"

But henceforth such letters came thick and fast. Caponsacchi was met in the street, signed to in church; slips were found in his prayer-book, they dropped from the window if he passed. . . . At length there arrived a note in a different manner. This warned him *not* to come, to avoid the window for his life. At once he answered that the street was free—he should go to the window if he chose, and he would go that evening at the Ave. His conviction was that he should find the husband there, not the wife—for though he had seen through the trick, it did not occur to him that it was more than a device of jealousy to trap them, already suspected after that mutual gaze at the theatre. What it really was, he never guessed at all.

Meanwhile—turning now to Pompilia's dying speech to the nuns who nursed her—the companion persecution had been going on at the castle. Day after day, Margherita had dinned the name of Caponsacchi into the wife's ears. How he loved her, what a paragon he was, how little she owed fidelity to the Count who used *her*, Margherita, as his pastime—ought she not at least to see the priest and warn him, if nothing more? Guido might kill him! Here was a letter from him; and she began to impart it:

> "I know you cannot read—therefore, let
> me!
> '*My idol*'" . . .

The letter was not from Caponsacchi, and Pompilia, divining this as surely as she had divined that he did not throw the comfits, took it from the woman's hands and tore it into shreds. . . . Day after day such moments added themselves to all the rest of the misery, and at last, at end of her strength, she swooned away. As she was coming to again, Margherita stooped and whispered *Caponsacchi*. But still, though the sound of his name was to the broken girl as if, drowning, she had looked up through the waves and seen a star . . . still she repudiated the servant's report of him: had she not that once beheld him?

> "Therefore while you profess to show him
> me,
> I ever see his own face. Get you gone!"

But the swoon had portended something; and on "one vivid daybreak," half through April, Pompilia learned what that something was. . . . Going to bed

the previous night, the last sound in her ears had been Margherita's prattle. "Easter was over; everyone was on the wing for Rome—even Caponsacchi, out of heart and hope, was going there." Pompilia had heard it, as she might have heard rain drop, thinking only that another day was done:

> "How good to sleep and so get nearer
> death!"

But with the daybreak, what was the clear summons that seemed to pierce her slumber?

> ". . . Up I sprang alive,
> Light in me, light without me, everywhere
> Change!"

The exquisite morning was there—the broad yellow sunbeams with their "myriad merry motes," the glittering leaves of the wet weeds against the lattice-panes, the birds—

> "Always with one voice—where are two
> such joys?—
> The blessed building-sparrow! I stepped
> forth,
> Stood on the terrace—o'er the roofs such
> sky!
> My heart sang, 'I too am to go away,
> I too have something I must care about,
> Carry away with me to Rome, to Rome!
>
> * * * * *
>
> Not to live now would be the
> wickedness.'"[137:1]

Pope Innocent XII—"the great good old Pope," as Browning calls him in the summary of Book I—when in his turn he speaks to us, gives his highest praise, "where all he praises," to this trait in her whom he calls "My rose, I gather for the breast of God."

> "Oh child, that didst despise thy life so
> much
> When it seemed only thine to keep or lose,
> How the fine ear felt fall the first low
> word
> 'Value life, and preserve life for My sake!'
>
> * * * * *
>
> Thou, at first prompting of what I call
> God,
> And fools call Nature, didst hear,
> comprehend,
> Accept the obligation laid on thee,
> Mother elect, to save the unborn child.
> . . . Go past me,
> And get thy praise—and be not far to seek
> Presently when I follow if I may!"

"Now" (says the sympathetic Other Half-Rome), "begins the tenebrific passage of the tale." As we have seen, Pompilia had tried all other means of escape, even before the great call came to her. Her last appeal had been made to two of Guido's kinsmen, on the wing for Rome like everyone else—Conti being one. Both had refused, but Conti had referred her to Caponsacchi—not evilly like Margherita, but jestingly, flippantly. Nevertheless, that name had come to take a half-fateful sense to her ears . . . and the Other Half-Rome thus images the moment in which she resolved to appeal to him.

"If then, all outlets thus secured save one,
At last she took to the open, stood and
stared
With her wan face to see where God might
wait—
And there found Caponsacchi wait as well
For the precious something at perdition's
edge,
He only was predestinate to save . . .

* * * * *

Whatever way in this strange world it was,
Pompilia and Caponsacchi met, in fine,
She at her window, he i' the street
beneath,
And understood each other at first look."

For suddenly (she tells us) on that morning of Annunciation, she turned on Margherita, ever at her ear, and said, "Tell Caponsacchi he may come!" "How plainly" (says Pompilia)—

"How plainly I perceived hell flash and
fade
O' the face of her—the doubt that first
paled joy,
Then final reassurance I indeed
Was caught now, never to be free again!"

But she cared not; she felt herself strong for everything.

"After the Ave Maria, at first dark,
I will be standing on the terrace, say!"

She knew he would come, and prayed to God all day.

At "an intense throe of the dusk" she started up—she "dared to say," in her dying speech, that she was divinely pushed out on the terrace—and there he waited her, with the same silent and solemn face, "at watch to save me."

He had come, as he defiantly had said, and not the husband met him, but, at the window, with a lamp in her hand, "Our Lady of all the Sorrows." He knelt, but even as he knelt she vanished, only to reappear on the terrace, so close above him that she could almost touch his head if she bent down—"and she did bend, while I stood still as stone, all eye, all ear."

First she told him that she could neither read nor write, but that the letters said to be from him had been read to her, and seemed to say that he loved her. She did not believe that he meant that as Margherita meant it; but "good true love would help me now so much" that at last she had resolved to see him. Her whole life was so strange that this but belonged to the rest: that an utter stranger should be able to help her—he, and he alone! She told him her story. There was a reason now at last why she must fly from "this fell house of hate," and she would take from Caponsacchi's love what she needed: enough to save her life with—

> ". . . Take me to Rome!
> Take me as you would take a dog, I think,
> Masterless left for strangers to maltreat:
> Take me home like that—leave me in the house
> Where the father and mother are" . . .

She tells his answer thus:

> "He replied—
> The first word I heard ever from his lips,
> All himself in it—an eternity
> Of speech, to match the immeasurable
> depth
> O' the soul that then broke silence—'I am
> yours.'"

* * * * *

But when he had left her, irresolution swept over him. First, the Church seemed to rebuke—the Church who had smiled on his silly intrigues! Now she changed her tone, it appeared:—

> "Now, when I found out first that life and
> death
> Are means to an end, that passion uses
> both,
> Indisputably mistress of the man
> Whose form of worship is self-sacrifice."

But that soon passed: the word was God's; this was the true self-sacrifice. . . . But might it not injure her—scandal would hiss about her name. Would not God choose His own way to save her? And *he* might pray. . . . Two days passed thus. But he must go to counsel and to comfort her—was he not a priest? He went. She was there, leaning over the terrace; she reproached him: why did he delay the help his heart yearned to give? He answered with his fears for her, but she broke in, never doubting him though he should doubt himself:

> "'I know you: when is it that you will

come?'"

"To-morrow at the day's dawn," he replied; and all was arranged—the place, the time; she came, she did not speak, but glided into the carriage, while he cried to the driver:

". . . 'By San Spirito,
To Rome, as if the road burned
underneath!'"

When she was dying of Guido's twenty-two dagger-thrusts, this was how Pompilia thought of that long flight:

"I did pray, do pray, in the prayer shall
die:
'Oh, to have Caponsacchi for my guide!'
Ever the face upturned to mine, the hand
Holding my hand across the world . . ."

And he, telling the judges of it at the murder-trial, cried that he never could lie quiet in his grave unless he "mirrored them plain the perfect soul Pompilia."

"You must know that a man gets drunk
with truth
Stagnant inside him. Oh, they've killed
her, Sirs!
Can I be calm?"

But he must be calm: he must show them that soul.

"The glory of life, the beauty of the world,
The splendour of heaven . . . well, Sirs,
does no one move?
Do I speak ambiguously? The glory, I say,

And the beauty, I say, and splendour, still
say I" . . .

—for thus he flings defiance at them. Why do they not smile as they smiled at the earlier adultery-trial, when they gave him "the jocular piece of punishment," now that he stands before them "in this sudden smoke from hell"?

"Men, for the last time, what do you want
with me?"

For if they had but seen *then* what Guido Franceschini was! If they would but have been serious! Pompilia would not now be

"Gasping away the latest breath of all,
This minute, while I talk—not while you
laugh?"

How can the end of this deed surprise them? Pompilia and he had shown them what its beginning meant—but all in vain. He, the priest, had left her to "law's watch and ward," and now she is dying —"there and thus she lies!" Do they understand *now* that he was not unworthy of Christ when he tried to save her? His part is done—all that he had been able to do; he wants no more with earth, except to "show Pompilia who was true"—

"The snow-white soul that angels fear to
take
Untenderly . . . Sirs,
Only seventeen!"

Then he begins his story of

". . . Our flight from dusk to clear,
Through day and night and day again to
night
Once more, and to last dreadful dawn of
all."

Thinking how they sat in silence, both so fearless and so safe, waking but now and then to consciousness of the wonder of it, he cries:

"You know this is not love, Sirs—it is
faith,
The feeling that there's God."

By morning they had passed Perugia; Assisi was opposite. He met her look for the first time since they had started. . . . At Foligno he urged her to take a brief rest, but with eyes like a fawn's,

"Tired to death in the thicket, when she
feels
The probing spear o' the huntsman,"

she had cried, "On, on to Rome, on, on"—and they went on. During the night she had a troubled dream, waving away something with wild arms; and Caponsacchi prayed (thinking "Why, in my life I never prayed before!") that the dream might go, and soon she slept peacefully. . . . When she woke, he answered her first look with the assurance that Rome was within twelve hours; no more of the terrible journey. But she answered that she wished it could last for ever: to be "with no dread"—

"Never to see a face nor hear a voice—
Yours is no voice; you speak when you are
dumb;

Nor face, I see it in the dark" . . .

—such tranquillity was such heaven to her!

"This one heart" (she said on her death-bed):

"This one heart gave me all the spring!
I could believe himself by his strong will
Had woven around me what I thought the world
We went along in . . .
For, through the journey, was it natural
Such comfort should arise from first to last?"

As she looks back, new stars bud even while she seeks for old, and all is Caponsacchi:

"Him I now see make the shine everywhere."

Best of all her memories—"oh, the heart in that!"—was the descent at a little wayside inn. He tells of it thus. When the day was broad, he begged her to descend at the post-house of a village. He told the woman of the house that Pompilia was his sister, married and unhappy—would she comfort her as women can? And then he left them together:

"I spent a good half-hour, paced to and fro
The garden; just to leave her free awhile . . .
I might have sat beside her on the bench
Where the children were: I wish the thing had been,
Indeed: the event could not be worse, you know:
One more half-hour of her saved! She's

dead now, Sirs!"

As they again drove forward, she asked him if, supposing she were to die now, he would account it to be in sin? The woman at the inn had told her about the trees that turn away from the north wind with the nests they hold; she thought she might be like those trees. . . . But soon, half-sleeping again, and restless now with returning fears, she seemed to wander in her mind; once she addressed him as "Gaetano." . . . Afterwards he knew that this name (the name of a newly-made saint) was that which she destined for her child, if she was given a son:

"One who has only been made a saint—
how long?
Twenty-five years: so, carefuller, perhaps,
To guard a namesake than those old saints
grow,
Tired out by this time—see my own five
saints!"[146:1]

For "little Pompilia" had been given five names by her pretended parents:

". . . so many names for one poor
child
—Francesca Camilla Vittoria Angela
Pompilia Comparini—laughable!"[146:1]
. . .

But now Caponsacchi himself grew restless, nervous: here was Castelnuovo, as good as Rome:

"Say you are saved, sweet lady!"

She awoke. The sky was fierce with the sunset

colours—suddenly she cried out that she must not die:

> "'Take me no farther, I should die: stay
> here!
> I have more life to save than mine!' She
> swooned.
> We seemed safe: what was it foreboded
> so?"

He carried her,

> "Against my heart, beneath my head
> bowed low,
> As we priests carry the paten,"

into the little inn and to a couch, where he laid her, sleeping deeply. The host urged him to leave her in peace till morn.

"Oh, my foreboding! But I could not
choose."

All night he paced the passage, throbbing with fear from head to foot, "filled with a sense of such impending woe" . . . and at the first pause of night went to the courtyard, ordered the horses—the last moment came, he must awaken her—he turned to go:

". . . And there
Faced me Count Guido."

Oh, if he had killed him then! if he had taken the throat in "one great good satisfying gripe," and abolished Guido with his lie! . . . But while he mused on the irony of such a miscreant calling *her* his wife,

"The minute, oh the misery, was gone;"

—two police-officers stood beside, and Guido was ordering them to take her.

Caponsacchi insisted that *he* should lead them to the room where she was sleeping. He was a priest and privileged; when they came there, if the officer should detect

"Guilt on her face when it meets mine,
then judge
Between us and the mad dog howling
there!"

They all went up together. There she lay,

"O' the couch, still breathless, motionless,

sleep's self,
Wax-white, seraphic, saturate with the sun
That filled the window with a light like
blood."

At Guido's loud order to the officers, she started up, and stood erect, face to face with the husband: "the opprobrious blur against all peace and joy and light and life"—for he was standing against the window a-flame with morning. But in her terror, that seemed to her the flame from hell, since *he* was in it—and she cried to him to stand away, she chose hell rather than "embracing any more."

Caponsacchi tried to go to her, but now the room was full of the rabble pouring in at the noise—he was caught—"they heaped themselves upon me." . . . Then, when she saw "my angel helplessly held back," then

"Came all the strength back in a sudden
swell,"

—and she sprang at her husband, seized the sword that hung beside him,

"Drew, brandished it, the sunrise burned
for joy
O' the blade. 'Die,' cried she, 'devil, in
God's name!'
Ah, but they all closed round her, twelve
to one
. . . Dead-white and disarmed
she lay."

She said, dying, that this, her first and last resistance, had been invincible, for she had struck at the lie in

Guido; and thus not "the vain sword nor weak speech" had saved her, but Caponsacchi's truth:—

> "You see, I will not have the service fail!
> I say the angel saved me: I am safe! . . .
> What o' the way to the end?—the end
> crowns all"

—for even though she now was dying, there had been the time at the convent with the quiet nuns, and then the safety with her parents, and then:

> "My babe was given me! Yes, he saved my
> babe:
> It would not have peeped forth, the bird-
> like thing,
> Through that Arezzo noise and trouble . . .
> But the sweet peace cured all, and let me
> live
> And give my bird the life among the
> leaves
> God meant him! Weeks and months of
> quietude,
> I could lie in such peace and learn so
> much,
> Know life a little, I should leave so soon.
> Therefore, because this man restored my
> soul
> All has been right . . .
> For as the weakness of my time drew nigh,
> Nobody did me one disservice more,
> Spoke coldly or looked strangely, broke
> the love
> I lay in the arms of, till my boy was born,
> Born all in love, with nought to spoil the
> bliss
> A whole long fortnight: in a life like mine

A fortnight filled with bliss is long and
much."

For, thinking of her happy childhood before the marriage, already she has said that only that childhood, and the prayer that brought her Caponsacchi, and the "great fortnight" remain as real: the four bad years between

"Vanish—one quarter of my life, you
know."

In that room in the inn they parted. They were borne off to separate cells of the same ignoble prison, and, separate, thence to Rome.

"Pompilia's face, then and thus, looked on
me
The last time in this life: not one sight
more,
Never another sight to be! And yet
I thought I had saved her . . .
It seems I simply sent her to her death.
You tell me she is dying now, or dead."

But then it flashes to his mind that this may be a trick to make him confess—it would be worthy of them; and the great cry breaks forth:

"No, Sirs, I cannot have the lady dead!
That erect form, flashing brow, fulgurant
eye,
That voice immortal (oh, that voice of
hers!)
That vision in the blood-red daybreak—
that
Leap to life of the pale electric sword

Angels go armed with—that was not the last
O' the lady! Come, I see through it, you find—
Know the manœuvre! . . .
Let me see for myself if it be so!"

* * * * *

But it is true. Twenty-two dagger-thrusts—

"Two days ago, when Guido, with the right,
Hacked her to pieces" . . .

Oh, should they not have seen at first? That very flight proved the innocence of the pair who thus fled: these judges should have recognised the accepted man, the exceptional conduct that rightly claims to be judged by exceptional rules. . . . But it is all over. She is dying—dead perhaps. He has done with being judged—he is guiltless in thought, word, and deed; and she . . .

". . . For Pompilia—be advised,
Build churches, go pray! You will find me there,
I know, if you come—and you will come, I know.
Why, there's a judge weeping! Did not I say
You were good and true at bottom? You see the truth—
I am glad I helped you: she helped me just so."

Once more he flashes forth in her defence, in rage

against Guido—but the image of her, "so sweet and true and pure and beautiful," comes back to him:

> "Sirs, I am quiet again. You see we are
> So very pitiable, she and I,
> Who had conceivably been otherwise"

—and at the thought of *how* "otherwise," of what life with such a woman were for a free man, and of his life henceforth, a priest, "on earth, as good as out of it," with the memory of her, only the memory . . . for she is dying, dead perhaps . . . the whole man breaks down, and he goes from the place with one wild, anguished call to heaven:

> "Oh, great, just, good God! Miserable me!"

I have chosen to reveal Pompilia chiefly through Caponsacchi's speech for two reasons. First, because there is nothing grander in our literature than that passionate and throbbing monologue; second, because to show this type of woman *through* another speaker is the way in which Browning always shows her best. As I said when writing of Mildred Tresham, directly such a woman speaks for herself, in Browning's work, he forces the note, he takes from her (unconsciously) a part of the beauty which those other speakers have shown forth. So with Pompilia, though not in the same degree as with Mildred, for here the truth *is* with us—Pompilia is a living soul, not a puppet of the theatre. Yet even here the same strange errors recur. She has words indeed that reach the inmost heart—poignant, overpowering in tenderness and pathos; but she has, also, words that cause the brows to draw together, the mind to pause uneasily, then to cry "Not so!" Of such is the analysis of her own blank ignorance with regard to the

marriage-state. This, wholly acceptable while left unexplained, loses its verisimilitude when comparisons are found in her mouth with which to delineate it; and the particular one chosen—of marriage as a coin, "a dirty piece would purchase me the praise of those I loved"—is actually inept, since the essence of her is that she does not know anything at all about the "coin," so certainly does not know that it is or may be "dirty."

Again, here is an ignorant child, whose deep insight has come to her through love alone. She feels, in the weakness of her nearing death, and the bliss of spiritual tranquillity, that all the past with Guido is a terrific dream: "It is the good of dreams—so soon they go!" Beautiful: but Browning could not leave it in that beautiful and true simplicity. She must philosophise:

> "This is the note of evil: for good lasts" . . .

Pompilia was incapable of that: she could "say" the thing, as she says it in that image of the dream—but she would have left it alone, she would have made no maxim out of it. And the maxim, when it *is* made, says no more than the image had said.

Once again: her plea for Guido. That she should forgive him was essential, but the pardon should have been blind pardon. No reason can confirm it; and we should but have loved her more for seeking none. To put in her mouth the plea that Guido had been deceived in his hope of enrichment by marriage, and that his anger, thus to some extent justified, was aggravated by her "blindness," by her not knowing "whither he sought to drive" her with his charges of light conduct,

"So unaware, I only made things worse"
. . .

—this is bad through and through; this is the excess of ingenuity which misled Browning so frequently. There is no loveliness of pardon here; but something that we cannot suffer for its gross humility. The aim of Guido, in these charges, was filthiest evil: it revolts to hear the victim, now fully aware—for the plea is based on her awareness—blame herself for not "apprehending his drift" (could *she* have used that phrase?), and thus, in the madness of magnanimity, seem to lose all sense of good and evil. It is over-subtle; it is not true; it has no beauty of any kind. But Browning could not "leave things alone"; he had to analyse, to subtilise—and this, which comes so well when it is analytic and subtle minds that address us, makes the defect of his work whenever an innocent and ignorant girl is made to speak in her own person.

I shall not multiply instances; my aim is not destructive. But I think the unmeasured praise of Browning by some of his admirers has worked against, not for, him. It irritates to read of the "perfection" of this speech—which has beauties so many and so great that the faults may be confessed, and leave it still among the lovely things of our literature.

I turn now gladly to those beauties. Chief is the pride and love of the new-made mother—never more exquisitely shown, and here the more poignantly shown because she is on her death-bed, and has not seen her little son again since the "great fortnight." She thinks how well it was that he had been taken from her before that awful night at the Villa:

"He was too young to smile and save
himself;"

—for she does not dream, not then remembering the "money" which was at the heart of all her woe, that *he* would have been spared for that money's sake. . . . But she had not seen him again, and now will never see him. And when he grows up and comes to be her age, he will ask what his mother was like, and people will say, "Like girls of seventeen," and he will think of some girl he knows who titters and blushes when he looks at her. . . . That is not the way for a mother!

"Therefore I wish someone will please to
say
I looked already old, though I was young;"

—and she begs to be told that she looks "nearer twenty." Her name too is not a common one—that may help to keep apart

"A little the thing I am from what girls
are."

But how hard for him to find out anything about her:

"No father that he ever knew at all,
Nor never had—no, never had, I say!"

—and a mother who only lived two weeks, and Pietro and Violante gone! Only his saint to guard him—that was why she chose the new one; *he* would not be tired of guarding namesakes. . . . After all, she hopes her boy will come to disbelieve her history, as herself almost does. It is dwindling fast to that:

"Sheer dreaming and impossibility—
Just in four days too! All the seventeen

years,
Not once did a suspicion visit me
How very different a lot is mine
From any other woman's in the world.
The reason must be, 'twas by step and step
It got to grow so terrible and strange.
These strange woes stole on tip-toe, as it
were . . .
Sat down where I sat, laid them where I
lay,
And I was found familiarised with fear."

First there was the amazement of finding herself disowned by Pietro and Violante. Then:

"So with my husband—just such a
surprise,
Such a mistake, in that relationship!
Everyone says that husbands love their
wives,
Guard them and guide them, give them
happiness;
'Tis duty, law, pleasure, religion: well—
You see how much of this comes true with
me!"

Next, "there is the friend." . . . People will not ask her about him; they smile and give him nicknames, and call him her lover. "Most surprise of all!" It is always that word: how he loves her, how she loves him . . . yet he is a priest, and she is married. It all seems unreal, like the childish game in which she and her little friend Tisbe would pretend to be the figures on the tapestry:—

"You know the figures never were
ourselves.

. . . Thus all my
life."

Her life is like a "fairy thing that fades and fades."

"—Even to my babe! I thought when he
was born,
Something began for me that would not
end,
Nor change into a laugh at me, but stay
For evermore, eternally, quite mine."

And hers he is, but he is gone, and it is all so confused that even *he* "withdraws into a dream as the rest do." She fancies him grown big,

"Strong, stern, a tall young man who
tutors me,
Frowns with the others: 'Poor imprudent
child!
Why did you venture out of the safe
street?
Why go so far from help to that lone
house?
Why open at the whisper and the knock?'"

* * * * *

That New Year's Day, when she had been allowed to get up for the first time, and they had sat round the fire and talked of him, and what he should do when he was big—

"Oh, what a happy, friendly eve was that!"

And next day, old Pietro had been packed off to church, because he was so happy and would talk so

much, and Violante thought he would tire her. And then he came back, and was telling them about the Christmas altars at the churches—none was so fine as San Giovanni—

". . . When, at the
door,
A tap: we started up: you know the rest."

Pietro had done no harm; Violante had erred in telling the lie about her birth—certainly that was wrong, but it was done with love in it, and even the giving her to Guido had had love in it . . . and at any rate it is all over now, and Pompilia has just been absolved, and thus there "seems not so much pain":

"Being right now, I am happy and colour
things.
Yes, everybody that leaves life sees all
Softened and bettered; so with other
sights:
To me at least was never evening yet
But seemed far beautifuller than its day,
[158:1]
For past is past."

Then she falls to thinking of that real mother, who had sold her before she was born. Violante had told her of it when she came back from the nuns, and was waiting for her boy to come. That mother died at her birth:

"I shall believe she hoped in her poor
heart
That I at least might try be good and pure
. . .
And oh, my mother, it all came to this?"

Now she too is dying, and leaving her little one behind. But *she* is leaving him "outright to God":

"All human plans and projects come to
nought:
My life, and what I know of other lives
Prove that: no plan nor project! God shall
care!"

She will lay him with God. And her last breath, for gratitude, shall spend itself in showing, now that they will really listen and not say "he was your lover" . . . her last breath shall disperse the stain around the name of Caponsacchi.

". . . There,
Strength comes already with the
utterance!"

* * * * *

Now she tells what we know; some of it we have learnt already from her lips. She goes back over the years in "that fell house of hate"; then, the seeing of him at the theatre, the persecution with the false letters, the Annunciation-morning, the summons to him, the meeting, the escape:

"No pause i' the leading and the light!

* * * * *

And this man, men call sinner? Jesus
Christ!"

But once more, mother-like, she reverts to her boy:

". . . We poor

Weak souls, how we endeavour to be
strong!
I was already using up my life—
This portion, now, should do him such a
good,
This other go to keep off such an ill.
The great life: see, a breath, and it is
gone!"

Still, all will be well: "Let us leave God alone." And now she will "withdraw from earth and man to her own soul," will "compose herself for God" . . . but even as she speaks, the flood of gratitude to her one friend again sweeps back, and she exclaims,

"Well, and there is more! Yes, my end of
breath
Shall bear away my soul in being true!
[159:1]
He is still here, not outside with the
world,
Here, here, I have him in his rightful
place!

* * * * *

I feel for what I verily find—again
The face, again the eyes, again, through
all,
The heart and its immeasurable love
Of my one friend, my only, all my own,
Who put his breast between the spears
and me.
Ever with Caponsacchi!*nbsp;. . .
O lover of my life, O soldier-saint,
No work begun shall ever pause for death!
Love will be helpful to me more and more

I' the coming course, the new path I must
tread—
My weak hand in thy strong hand, strong
for that!

* * * * *

Not one faint fleck of failure! Why
explain?
What I see, oh, he sees, and how much
more!

* * * * *

Do not the dead wear flowers when
dressed for God?
Say—I am all in flowers from head to foot!
Say—not one flower of all he said and did,
But dropped a seed, has grown a balsam-
tree
Whereof the blossoming perfumes the
place
At this supreme of moments!"

She has recognised the truth. This *is* love—but how different from the love of the smilings and the whisperings, the "He is your lover!" He is a priest, and could not marry; but she thinks he would not have married if he could:

"Marriage on earth seems such a
counterfeit,

* * * * *

In heaven we have the real and true and
sure."

In heaven, where the angels "know themselves into one"; and are never married, no, nor given in marriage:

". . . They are man and wife at once
When the true time is . . .
So, let him wait God's instant men call years;
Meantime hold hard by truth and his great soul,
Do out the duty! Through such souls alone
God, stooping, shows sufficient of his light
For us i' the dark to rise by. And I rise."

* * * * *

Who would analyse this child would tear a flower to pieces. Pompilia is no heroine, no character; but indeed a "rose gathered for the breast of God":

"Et, rose, elle a vécu ce que vivent les roses,
L'espace d'un matin."

FOOTNOTES:

[126:1] *Introduction to the Study of Browning*, 1886, p. 152.

[130:1] Abandoning for the moment intermediate events, it was *this* which moved Guido to the triple murder: for once the old couple and Pompilia dead, with the question of his claim to the dowry still undecided as it was, his child, the new-born babe, might

inherit all.

[131:1] Guido's second speech, wherein he tells the truth, in the hope that his "impenitence" may defer his execution.

[131:2] Her dying speech.

[131:3] Browning's summary. Book I.

[137:1] Mrs. Orr, commenting on this passage, says: "The sudden rapturous sense of maternity which, in the poetic rendering of the case, becomes her impulse to self-protection, was beyond her age and culture; it was not suggested by the facts"—for Mrs. Orr, who had read the documents from which Browning made the poem, says: "Unless my memory much deceives me, her physical condition plays no part in the historical defence of her flight. . . . The real Pompilia was a simple child, who lived in bodily terror of her husband, and had made repeated efforts to escape from him." And, as she later adds, though for many readers this character is, in its haunting pathos, the most exquisite of Browning's creations, "for others, it fails in impressiveness because it lacks the reality which habitually marks them." But (she goes on) "it was only in an idealised Pompilia that the material for poetical creation, in this 'murder story,' could have been found." These remarks will be seen partly to agree with some of my own.

[146:1] Her dying speech.

[158:1] How wonderfully is the wistful nature of the girl summed up in these two lines!

[159:1] Caponsacchi uses almost the same words of her: he will "burn his soul out in showing you the truth."

PART II



THE GREAT LADY

"MY LAST DUCHESS," AND "THE FLIGHT OF THE DUCHESS"

For a mind so subtle, frank, and generous as that of Browning, the perfume which pervades the atmosphere of "high life" was no less obvious than the miasma. His imagination needed not to free itself of all things adventitious to its object ere it could soar; in a word, for Browning, even a "lady" could be a woman—and remain a woman, even though she be turned to a "great" lady, that figure once so gracious, now so hunted from the realm of things that may be loved! Of narrowness like this our poet was incapable. He could indeed transcend the class-distinction, but that was not, with him, the same as trampling it under foot. And especially he loved to set a young girl in those regions where material cares prevail not—where, moving as in an upper air, she joys or suffers "not for bread alone."

"Was a lady such a lady, cheeks so round
and lips so red—
On her neck the small face buoyant, like a
bell-flower on its bed,
O'er the breast's superb abundance, where
a man might base his head?"

He could grant her to be "such a lady," yet grant, too, that her soul existed. True, that in *A Toccata of Galuppi's*,[166:1] the soul *is* questioned:

"Dust and ashes, dead and done with,
Venice spent what Venice earned.
The soul, doubtless, is immortal—where a
soul can be discerned."

But this is not our crude modern refusal of "reality" in any lives but those of toil and privation. It is rather the sad vision of an entire social epoch—the eighteenth century; and the eighteenth century in Venice, who was then at the final stage of her moral death. And despite the denial of soul in these Venetians, there is no contempt, no facile "simplification" of a question whose roots lie deep in human nature, since even the animals and plants we cultivate into classes! The sadness is for the mutability of things; and among them, that lighthearted, brilliant way of life, which had so much of charm amid its folly.

"Well, and it was graceful of them—they'd
break talk off and afford
—She, to bite her mask's black velvet, he,
to finger on his sword,
While you sat and played toccatas, stately
at the clavichord."

The music trickled then through the room, as it trickles now for the listening poet: with its minor cadences, the "lesser thirds so plaintive," the "diminished sixths," the suspensions, the solutions: "Must we die?"—

> "Those commiserating sevenths—'Life
> might last! we can but try!'"

The question of questions, even for "ladies and gentlemen"! And then come the other questions: "Hark, the dominant's persistence till it must be answered to."

> "So an octave struck the answer. Oh, they
> praised you, I dare say!
> 'Brave Galuppi, that was music! Good
> alike at grave and gay!
> I can always leave off talking when I hear
> a master play.'
> Then they left you for their pleasure; till
> in due time, one by one,
> Some with lives that came to nothing,
> some with deeds as well undone,
> Death stepped tacitly and took them
> where they never see the sun."

. . . The "cold music" has seemed to the modern listener to say that *he*, learned and wise, shall not pass away like these:

> ". . . You know physics,
> something of
> geology,
> Mathematics are your pastime; souls shall
> rise in their degree;

Butterflies may dread extinction—you'll
not die, it cannot be!
As for Venice and her people, merely born
to bloom and drop,
Here on earth they bore their fruitage,
mirth and folly were the crop:
What of soul was left, I wonder, when the
kissing had to stop?" . . .

Yet while it seems to say this, the saying brings him no solace. What, "creaking like a ghostly cricket," it intends, he must perceive, since he is neither deaf nor blind:

"But although I take your meaning, 'tis
with such a heavy mind! . . .
'Dust and ashes!' So you creak it, and I
want the heart to scold.
Dear dead women, with such hair, too—
what's become of all the gold
Used to hang and brush their bosoms? I
feel chilly and grown old."

After all, the pageant of life has value! We need not *only* the wise men. And even the wise man creeps through every nerve when he listens to that music. "Here's all the good it brings!"

None the less, there is trouble other than that of its passing in this pageant. Itself has the seed of death within it. All that beauty, riches, ease, can do, shall leave some souls unsatisfied—nay, shall kill some souls. . . . This too Browning could perceive and show; and once more, loved to show in the person of

a girl. There is something in true womanhood which transcends all *morgue*: it seems almost his foible to say that, so often does he say it! In Colombe, in the Queen of *In a Balcony* (so wondrously contrasted with Constance, scarcely less noble, yet half-corroded by this very rust of state and semblance); above all, in the exquisite imagining of that "Duchess," the girl-wife who twice is given us, and in two widely different environments—yet is (to my feeling) *one* loved incarnation of eager sweetness. He touched her first to life when she was dead, if one may speak so paradoxically; then, unsatisfied with that posthumous awaking, brought her resolutely back to earth—in *My Last Duchess* and *The Flight of the Duchess* respectively. Let us examine the two poems, and I think we shall agree, in reading the second, that Browning, like Caponsacchi, could not have the lady dead.

First, then, comes a picture—the mere portrait, "painted on the wall," of a dead Italian girl.

> "That's my last Duchess painted on the
> wall,
> Looking as if she were alive. I call
> That piece a wonder, now: Frà Pandolf's
> hands
> Worked busily a day, and there she stands.
> Will 't please you sit and look at her? I
> said
> Frà Pandolf by design: for never read
> Strangers like you that pictured
> countenance,
> The depth and passion of its earnest
> glance,
> But to myself they turned (since none puts
> by

The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)
And seemed as they would ask me, if they
durst,
How such a glance came there; so, not the
first
Are you to turn and ask thus."

The Duke, a Duke of Ferrara, owner of "a nine-hundred-years-old name," is showing the portrait, with an intention in the display, to the envoy from a Count whose daughter he designs to make his next Duchess. He is a connoisseur and collector of the first rank, but his pride is deeplier rooted than in artistic knowledge and possessions. Thanks to that nine-hundred-years-old name, he is something more than the passionless art-lover: he is a man who has killed a woman by his egotism. But even now that she is dead, he does not know that it was he who killed her—nor, if he did, could feel remorse. For it is not possible that *he* could have been wrong. This Duchess—it would have been idle to "make his will clear" to such an one; the imposition, not the exposition, of that will was all that he could show to her (or any other lesser being) without stooping—"and I choose never to stoop." Her error had been precisely the "depth and passion of that earnest glance" which Frà Pandolf had so wonderfully caught. Does the envoy suppose that it was only her husband's presence which called that "spot of joy" into her cheek? It had *not* been so. The mere painting-man, the mere Frà Pandolf, may have paid her some tribute of the artist—may have said, for instance, that her mantle hid too much of her wrist, or that the "faint half-flush that died along her throat" was beyond the power of paint to reproduce.

". . . Such

stuff
Was courtesy, she thought, and cause
enough
For calling up that spot of joy."

As the envoy still seems strangely unenlightened, the Duke is forced to the "stooping" implied in a more explicit statement:

". . . She had
A heart—how shall I say?—too soon made
glad,
Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er
She looked on, and her looks went
everywhere."

Even now it does not seem that the listener is in full possession and accord; more stooping, then, is necessary, for the hint must be clearly conveyed:

"Sir, 'twas all one! My favour at her breast,
The dropping of the daylight in the west,
The bough of cherries some officious fool
Broke in the orchard for her, the white
mule
She rode with round the terrace—all and
each
Would draw from her alike the approving
speech,
Or blush, at least. . . ."

We, like the envoy, sit in mute amazement and repulsion, listening to the Duke, looking at the Duchess. We can see the quivering, glad, tender

creature as though we also were at gaze on Frà Pandolf's picture. . . . I call *this* piece a wonder, now! Scarce one of the monologues is so packed with significance; yet it is by far the most lucid, the most "simple"—even the rhymes are managed with such consummate art that they are, as Mr. Arthur Symons has said, "scarcely appreciable." Two lives are summed up in fifty-six lines. First, the ghastly Duke's; then, hers—but hers, indeed, is finally gathered into one. . . . Everything that came to her was transmuted into her own dearness—even his favour at her breast. We can figure to ourselves the giving of that "favour"—the high proprietary air, the loftily anticipated gratitude: Sir Willoughby Patterne by intelligent anticipation. But then, though the approving speech and blush were duly paid, would come the fool with his bough of cherries—and speech and blush were given again! Absurder still, the spot of joy would light for the sunset, the white mule . . .

> "Who'd stoop to blame
> This sort of trifling?"

Even if he had been able to make clear to "such an one" the crime of ranking his gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name "with anybody's gift"—even if he had plainly said that this or that in her "disgusted" him, and she had allowed herself to be thus lessoned (but she might not have allowed it; she might have set her wits to his, forsooth, and made excuse) . . . even so (this must be impressed upon the envoy), it would have meant some stooping, and the Duke "chooses never to stoop."

Still the envoy listens, with a thought of his own, perhaps, for the next Duchess! . . . More and more

raptly he gazes; his eyes are glued upon that "pictured countenance"; and still the peevish voice is sounding in his ear—

". . . Oh, Sir, she smiled, no
doubt,
Whene'er I passed her; but who passed
without
Much the same smile? This grew; I gave
commands;
Then all smiles stopped together."

There falls a curious, throbbing silence. The envoy still sits gazing. There she stands, *looking as if she were alive*. . . . And almost he starts to hear the voice echo his thought, but with so different a meaning—

". . . There she stands
As if alive"

—the picture is a wonder!

Still the visitor sits dumb. Was it from human lips that those words had just now sounded: "*Then all smiles stopped together*"?

She stands there—smiling . . . But the Duke grows weary of this pause before Frà Pandolf's piece. It is a wonder; but he has other wonders. Moreover, the due hint has been given, and no doubt, though necessarily in silence, taken: the next Duchess will be instructed beforehand in the proper way to "thank men." He intimates his will to move away:

"Will't please you rise? We'll meet
The company below, then."

The envoy rises, but not shakes off that horror of

repulsion. Somewhere, as he stands up and steps aside, a voice seems prating of "the Count his master's known munificence," of "just pretence to dowry," of the "fair daughter's self" being nevertheless the object. . . . But in a hot resistless impulse, he turns off; one must remove one's self from such proximity. Same air shall not be breathed, nor same ground trod. . . . Still the voice pursues him, sharply a little now for his lack of the due deference:

". . . Nay, we'll go
Together down, sir,"

—and slowly (since a rupture must not be brought about by *him*) the envoy acquiesces. They begin to descend the staircase. But the visitor has no eyes for "wonders" now—he has seen the wonder, has heard the horror. . . . His host is all unwitting. Strange, that the guest can pass these glories, but everybody is not a connoisseur. One of them, however, must be pointed out:

". . . Notice Neptune,
though,
Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,
Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze
for me."

. . . Something else getting "stopped"! The envoy looks.

But lo, she is alive again! This time she is in distant Northern lands, or *was*, for now (and, strangely, we

thank Heaven for it) we know not where she is. Wherever it is, she is happy. She has been saved, as by flame; has been snatched from *her* Duke, and borne away to joy and love—by an old gipsy-woman! No lover came for her: it was Love that came, and because she knew Love at first sight and sound, she saved herself.

The old huntsman of her husband's Court tells the story to a traveller whom he calls his friend.

> "What a thing friendship is, world without
> end!"

It happened thirty years ago; the huntsman and the Duke and the Duchess all were young—if the Duke was ever young! He had not been brought up at the Northern castle, for his father, the rough hardy warrior, had been summoned to the Kaiser's court as soon as his heir was born, and died there,

> "At next year's end, in a velvet suit . . .
> Petticoated like a herald,
> In a chamber next to an ante-room
> Where he breathed the breath of page and
> groom,
> What he called stink, and they perfume."

The "sick tall yellow Duchess" soon took the boy to Paris, where she belonged, being (says our huntsman) "the daughter of God knows who." So the hall was left empty, the fire was extinguished, and the people were railing and gibing. But in vain they railed and gibed until long years were past, "and back came our Duke and his mother again."

> "And he came back the pertest little ape

That ever affronted human shape;
Full of his travel, struck at himself.
You'd say, he despised our bluff old ways?
—Not he!"

—for in Paris it happened that a cult of the Middle Ages was in vogue, and the Duke had been told there that the rough North land was the one good thing left in these evil days:

"So, all that the old Dukes had been,
without knowing it,
This Duke would fain know he was,
without being it."

It was a renaissance in full blast! All the "thoroughly worn-out" usages were revived:

"The souls of them fumed-forth, the hearts
of them torn-out."

The "chase" was inevitably one thing that must be reconstructed from its origins; and the Duke selected for his own mount a lathy horse, all legs and length, all speed, no strength:

"They should have set him on red Berold,
Mad with pride, like fire to manage! . . .
With the red eye slow consuming in fire,
And the thin stiff ear like an abbey spire!"

Thus he lost for ever any chance of esteem from our huntsman. He preferred "a slim four-year-old to the big-boned stock of mighty Berold"; he drank "weak French wine for strong Cotnar" . . . anything in the way of futility might be expected after these two manifestations.

"Well, such as he was, he must marry, we
heard:
And out of a convent, at the word,
Came the lady in time of spring.
—Oh, old thoughts, they cling, they cling!"

Spring though it was, the retainers must cut a figure, so they were clad in thick hunting-clothes, fit for the chase of wild bulls or buffalo:

"And so we saw the lady arrive;
My friend, I have seen a white crane
bigger!
She was the smallest lady alive,
Made in a piece of Nature's madness,
Too small, almost, for the life and
gladness
That over-filled her."

She rode along, the retinue forming as it were a lane to the castle, where the Duke awaited her.

"Up she looked, down she looked, round
at the mead,
Straight at the castle, that's best indeed
To look at from outside the walls"

—and her eager sweetness lavished itself already on the "serfs and thralls," as of course they were styled. She gave our huntsman a look of gratitude because he patted her horse as he led it; she asked Max, who rode on her other hand, the name of every bird that flew past: "Was that an eagle? and was the green-and-grey bird on the field a plover?"

Thus happily hearing, happily looking (how like the Italian duchess—but she *is* the same!), the little lady

rode forward:

> "When suddenly appeared the Duke."

She sprang down, her small foot pointed on the huntsman's hand. But the Duke, stiffly and as though rebuking her impetuosity, "stepped rather aside than forward, and welcomed her with his grandest smile." The sick tall yellow Duchess, his mother, stood like a north wind in the background; the rusty portcullis went up with a shriek, and, like a sky sullied by a chill wind,

> "The lady's face stopped its play,
> As if her first hair had grown grey;
> For such things must begin some one day."

But the brave spirit survived. In a day or two she was well again, as if she could not believe that God did not mean her to be content and glad in His sight. "So, smiling as at first went she." She was filled to the brim with energy; there never was such a wife as she would have made for a shepherd, a miner, a huntsman—and this huntsman, who has *had* a beloved wife, knows what he is saying.

> "She was active, stirring, all fire—
> Could not rest, could not tire—
> To a stone she might have given life! . . .
> And here was plenty to be done,
> And she that could do it, great or small,
> She was to do nothing at all."

For the castle was crammed with retainers, and the Duke's plan permitted a wife, at most, to meet his eye with the other trophies in the hall and out of it:

"To sit thus, stand thus, see and be seen
At the proper place, in the proper minute,
And die away the life between."

The little Duchess, with her warm heart and her smile like the Italian girl's that "went everywhere," broke every rule at first. It was amusing enough (the old huntsman remembers)—but for the grief that followed after. For she did not submit easily. Having broken the rules, she would find fault with them! She would advise and criticise, and "being a fool," instruct the wise, and deal out praise or blame like a child. But "the wise" only smiled. It was as if a little mechanical toy should be contrived to make the motion of striking, and brilliantly *make* it. Thus, as a mechanical toy, was the only way to treat this minute critic, for like the Duke at Ferrara, this Duke (and his mother) did not choose to stoop. *He* would merely wear his "cursed smirk" as he nodded applause, but he had some trouble in keeping off the "old mother-cat's claws."

"So the little lady grew silent and thin,
Paling and ever paling."

Then all smiles stopped together . . . And the Duke, perceiving, said to himself that it was done to spite him, but that he would find the way to deal with it.

Like the envoy, our huntsman's friend is beginning to find the tale a little more than he can stand—but, unlike the envoy, he can express himself. The old man soothes him down: "Don't swear, friend!" and goes on to solace him by telling how the "old one" has been in hell for many a year,

"And the Duke's self . . . you shall hear."

"Well, early in autumn, at first winter-
warning,
When the stag had to break with his foot,
of a morning,
A drinking-hole out of the fresh, tender
ice,"

it chanced that the Duke, asking himself what pleasures were in season (he would never have known, unless "the calendar bade him be hearty"), found that a hunting party was indicated:

"Always provided, old books showed the
way of it!"

Poetry, painting, tapestries, woodcraft, all were consulted: how it was properest to encourage your dog, how best to pray to St. Hubert, patron saint of hunters. The serfs and thralls were duly dressed up,

"And oh, the Duke's tailor, he had a hot
time on't!"

But when all "the first dizziness of flap-hats and buff-coats and jack-boots" had subsided, the Duke turned his attention to the Duchess's part in the business, and, after much cogitation, somebody triumphantly announced that he had discovered her function. An old book stated it:

"When horns wind a mort and the deer is
at siege,
Let the dame of the castle prick forth on
her jennet,
And with water to wash the hands of her

liege
In a clean ewer with a fair toweling,
Let her preside at the disemboweling."

All was accordingly got ready: the towel, the most antique ewer, even the jennet, piebald, black-barred, cream-coated, pink-eyed—and only then, on the day before the party, was the Duke's pleasure signified to his lady.

And the little Duchess—paler and paler every day—said she would not go! Her eyes, that used to leap wide in flashes, now just lifted their long lashes, as if too weary even for *him* to light them; and she duly acknowledged his forethought for her,

"But spoke of her health, if her health
were worth aught,
Of the weight by day and the watch by
night,
And much wrong now that used to be
right;"

and, in short, utterly declined the "disemboweling."

But everything was arranged! The Duke was nettled. Still she persisted: it was hardly the time . . .

The huntsman knew what took place that day in the Duchess's room, because Jacynth, who was her tire-woman, was waiting within call outside on the balcony, and since Jacynth was like a June rose, why, the casement that Jacynth could peep through, an adorer of roses could peep through also.

Well, the Duke "stood for a while in a sultry smother," and then "with a smile that partook of the awful," turned the Duchess over to his mother to

learn her duty, and hear the truth. She learned it all, she heard it all; but somehow or other it ended at last; the old woman, "licking her whiskers," passed out, and the Duke, who had waited to hear the lecture, passed out after her, making (he hoped) a face like Nero or Saladin—at any rate, he showed a very stiff back.

However, next day the company mustered. The weather was execrable—fog that you might cut with an axe; and the Duke rode out "in a perfect sulkiness." But suddenly, as he looked round, the sun ploughed up the woolly mass, and drove it in all directions, and looking through the courtyard arch, he saw a troop of Gipsies on their march, coming with the annual gifts to the castle. For every year, in this North land, the Gipsies come to give "presents" to the Dukes—presents for which an equivalent is always understood to be forthcoming.

And marvellous the "presents" are! These Gipsies can do anything with the earth, the ore, the sand. Snaffles, whose side-bars no brute can baffle, locks that would puzzle a locksmith, horseshoes that turn on a swivel, bells for the sheep . . . all these are good, but what they can do with sand!

> "Glasses they'll blow you, crystal-clear,
> Where just a faint cloud of rose shall
> appear,
> As if in pure water you dropped and let
> die
> A bruised black-blooded mulberry."

And then that other sort, "their crowning pride, with long white threads distinct inside."

These are the things they bring, when you see them

trooping to the castle from the valley. So they trooped this morning; and when they reached the fosse, all stopped but one:

"The oldest Gipsy then above ground."

This witch had been coming to the castle for years; the huntsman knew her well. Every autumn she would swear must prove her last visit—yet here she was again, with "her worn-out eyes, or rather eye-holes, of no use now but to gather brine."

She sidled up to the Duke and touched his bridle, so that the horse reared; then produced her presents, and awaited the annual acknowledgment. But the Duke, still sulky, would scarcely speak to her; in vain she fingered her fur-pouch. At last she said in her "level whine," that as well as to bring the presents, she had come to pay her duty to "the new Duchess, the youthful beauty." As she said that, an idea came to the Duke, and the smirk returned to his sulky face. Supposing he set *this* old woman to teach her, as the other had failed? What could show forth better the flower-like and delicate life his fortunate Duchess led, than the loathsome squalor of this sordid crone? He turned and beckoned the huntsman out of the throng, and, as he was approaching, bent and spoke mysteriously into the Gipsy's ear. The huntsman divined that he was telling of the frowardness and ingratitude of the "new Duchess." And the Gipsy listened submissively. Her mouth tightened, her brow brightened—it was as if she were promising to give the lady a thorough frightening. The Duke just showed her a purse—and then bade the huntsman take her to the "lady left alone in her bower," that she might wile away an hour for her:

"Whose mind and body craved exertion,
And yet shrank from all better diversion."

And then the Duke rode off.

Now begins "the tenebrific passage of the tale." Or rather, now begins what we can make into such a passage if we will, but need not. We can read a thousand transcendental meanings into what now happens, or we can simply accept and understand it —leaving the rest to the "Browningites," of whom Browning declared that *he* was not.

The huntsman, turning round sharply to bid the old woman follow him—a little distrustful of her since that interview with the Duke—saw something that not only restored his trust, but afterwards made him sure that she had planned beforehand the wonders that now happened. She looked a head taller, to begin with, and she kept pace with him easily, no stooping nor hobbling—above all, no cringing! She was wholly changed, in short, and the change, "whatever the change meant," had extended to her very clothes. The shabby wolf-skin cloak she wore seemed edged with gold coins. Under its shrouding disguise, she was wearing (we may conjecture), for this foreseen occasion, her dress of tribal Queen. But most wonderful of all was the change in her "eye-holes." When first he saw her that morning, they had been, as it were, empty of all but brine; now, two unmistakable eye-points, live and aware, looked out from their places—as a snail's horns come out after rain. . . . He accepted all this, "quick and surprising" as it was, without spoken comment; and took the

Gipsy to Jacynth, standing duty at the lady's chamber-door.

> "And Jacynth rejoiced, she said, to admit
> any one,
> For since last night, by the same token,
> Not a single word had the lady spoken."

The two women went in, and our friend, on the balcony, "watched the weather."

Jacynth never could tell him afterwards *how* she came to fall soundly asleep all of a sudden. But she did so fall asleep, and so remained the whole time through. He, on the balcony, was following the hunt across the open country—for in those days he had a falcon eye—when, all in a moment, his ear was arrested by

> "Was it singing, or was it saying,
> Or a strange musical instrument playing?"

It came from the lady's room; and, pricked by curiosity, he pushed the lattice, pulled the curtain, and—first—saw Jacynth "in a rosy sleep along the floor with her head against the door." And in the middle of the room, on the seat of state,

> "Was a queen—the Gipsy woman late!"

She was bending down over the lady, who, coiled up like a child, sat between her knees, clasping her hands over them, and with her chin set on those hands, was gazing up into the face of the old woman. That old woman now showed large and radiant eyes, which were bent full on the lady's, and seemed with every instant to grow wider and more shining. She

was slowly fanning with her hands, in an odd measured motion—and the huntsman, puzzled and alarmed, was just about to spring to the rescue, when he was stopped by perceiving the expression on the lady's face.

"For it was life her eyes were drinking . . .
Life's pure fire, received without
shrinking,
Into the heart and breast whose heaving
Told you no single drop they were
leaving."

The life had passed into her very hair, which was thrown back, loose over each shoulder,

"And the very tresses shared in the
pleasure,
Moving to the mystic measure,
Bounding as the bosom bounded."

He stopped short, perplexed, "as she listened and she listened." But all at once he felt himself struck by the self-same contagion:

"And I kept time to the wondrous chime,
Making out words and prose and rhyme,
Till it seemed that the music furled
Its wings like a task fulfilled, and dropped
From under the words it first had
propped."

He could hear and understand, "word took word as hand takes hand"—and the Gipsy said:

"And so at last we find my tribe,
And so I set thee in the midst . . .

I trace them the vein and the other vein
That meet on thy brow and part again,
Making our rapid mystic mark;
And I bid my people prove and probe
Each eye's profound and glorious globe
Till they detect the kindred spark
In those depths so dear and dark . . .
And on that round young cheek of thine
I make them recognise the tinge . . .
For so I prove thee, to one and all,
Fit, when my people ope their breast,
To see the sign, and hear the call,
And take the vow, and stand the test
Which adds one more child to the rest—
When the breast is bare and the arms are
wide,
And the world is left outside."

There would be probation (said the Gipsy), and many trials for the lady if she joined the tribe; but, like the jewel-finder's "fierce assay" of the stone he finds, like the "vindicating ray" that leaps from it:

"So, trial after trial past,
Wilt thou fall at the very last
Breathless, half in trance
With the thrill of the great deliverance,
Into our arms for evermore;
And thou shalt know, those arms once
curled
About thee, what we knew before,
How love is the only good in the world.
Henceforth be loved as heart can love,
Or brain devise, or hand approve!
Stand up, look below,
It is our life at thy feet we throw
To step with into light and joy;

Not a power of life but we employ
To satisfy thy nature's want."

The Gipsy said much more; she showed what perfect mutual love and understanding can do, for "if any two creatures grow into one, they will do more than the world has done"—and the tribe will at least approach that end with this beloved woman. She says not *how*—whether by one man's loving her to utter devotion of himself, or by *her* giving "her wondrous self away," and taking the stronger nature's sway. . . .

"I foresee and I could foretell
Thy future portion, sure and well;
But those passionate eyes speak true,
speak true,
Let them say what thou shalt do!"

But whatever she does, the eyes of her tribe will be upon her, with their blame, their praise:

"Our shame to feel, our pride to show,
Glad, angry—but indifferent, no!"

And so at last the girl who now sits gazing up at her will come to old age—will retire apart with the hoarded memories of her heart, and reconstruct the past until the whole "grandly fronts for once her soul" . . . and then, the gleam of yet another morning shall break; it will be like the ending of a dream, when

"Death, with the might of his sunbeam,
Touches the flesh, and the soul awakes."

With that great utterance her voice changed like a

bird's. The music began again, the words grew indistinguishable . . . with a snap the charm broke, and the huntsman, "starting as if from a nap," realised afresh that the lady was being bewitched, sprang from the balcony to the ground, and hurried round to the portal. . . . In another minute he would have entered:

> "When the door opened, and more than
> mortal
> Stood, with a face where to my mind
> centred
> All beauties I ever saw or shall see,
> The Duchess: I stopped as if struck by
> palsy.
> She was so different, happy and beautiful,
> I felt at once that all was best" . . .

And he felt, too, that he must do whatever she commanded. But there was, in fact, no commanding. Looking on the beauty that had invested her, "the brow's height and the breast's expanding," he knew that he was hers to live and die, and so he needed not words to find what she wanted—like a wild creature, he knew by instinct what this freed wild creature's bidding was. . . . He went before her to the stable; she followed; the old woman, silent and alone, came last—sunk back into her former self,

> "Like a blade sent home to its scabbard."

He saddled the very palfrey that had brought the little Duchess to the castle—the palfrey he had patted as he had led it, thus winning a smile from her. And he couldn't help thinking that she remembered it too, and knew that he would do anything in the world for her. But when he began to

saddle his own nag ("of Berold's begetting")—not meaning to be obtrusive—she stopped him by a finger's lifting, and a small shake of the head. . . . Well, he lifted her on the palfrey and set the Gipsy behind her—and then, in a broken voice, he murmured that he was ready whenever God should please that she needed him. . . . And she looked down

> "With a look, a look that placed a crown
> on me,"

and felt in her bosom and dropped into his hand . . . not a purse! If it had been a purse of silver ("or gold that's worse") he would have gone home, kissed Jacynth, and soberly drowned himself—but it was not a purse; it was a little plait of hair, such as friends make for each other in a convent:

> "This, see, which at my breast I wear,
> Ever did (rather to Jacynth's grudgment)
> And ever shall, till the Day of Judgment.
> And then—and then—to cut short—this is
> idle,
> These are feelings it is not good to foster.
> I pushed the gate wide, she shook the
> bridle,
> And the palfrey bounded—and so we lost
> her."

There is the story of the Flight of the Duchess; and it seems to me to need no "explanation" at all. The Gipsy can be anyone or anything we like that *saves* us; the Duke and his mother anyone or anything that

crushes love.

"Love is the only good in the world."

And the love (though it *may* be) *need* not be the love of man for woman, and woman for man; but simply love. The quick warm impulse which made this girl look round so eagerly as she approached her future home, and thank the man who led her horse for patting it, and want to hear the name of every bird—the impulse from the heart "too soon made glad, too easily impressed"; the sweet, rich nature of her who "liked whate'er she looked on, and her looks went everywhere" . . . what was all this but love? The tiny lady was one great pulse of it; without love she must die; to give it, take it, was the meaning of her being. And love was neither given nor accepted from her. Worse, it was scorned; it was not "fitting." All she had to do was to be "on show"; nothing, nothing, nothing else—

"And die away the life between."

And then came the time when, like Pompilia, she had "something she must care about"; and the office asked of her was to "assist at the disemboweling" of a noble, harried stag! Not even when she pleaded the hour that awaited her was pity shown, was love shown, for herself or for the coming child. And then the long, spiteful lecture. . . . That night, even to Jacynth, not a word could she utter. Here was a world without love, a world that did not want her—and *she* was here, and she must stay, until, until . . . Which would the coming child be—herself again, or *him* again? Scarce she knew which would be the sadder happening.

And then Love walked in upon her. She was "of their tribe"—they wanted her; they wanted all she was. Just what she was; she would not have to change; they wanted her. They liked her eyes, and the colour on her cheek—they liked *her*. Her eyes might look at them, and "speak true," for they wanted just that truth from just those eyes.

It is any escape, any finding of our "tribe"! It is the self-realisation of a nature that can love. And this is but one way of telling the great tale. Browning told it thus, because for years a song had jingled in his ears of "Following the Queen of the Gipsies, O!"—and to all of us, the Gipsies stand for freedom, for knowledge of the great earth-secrets, for nourishment of heart and soul. But we need not follow only them to compass "the thrill of the great deliverance." We need but know, as the little Duchess knew, what it is that we want, and trust it. *She* placed the old woman at once upon her own "seat of state": from the moment she beheld her, love leaped forth and crowned the messenger of love.

> "And so at last we find my tribe,
> And so I set thee in the midst . . .
> Henceforth be loved as heart can love. . . .
> It is our life at thy feet we throw
> To step with into light and joy."

The Duchess heard, and knew, and was saved. It needed courage—needed swift decision—needed even some small abandonment of "duty." But she saw what she must do, and did it. Duty has two voices often; the Duchess heard the true voice. If she was bewitched, it was by the spell that was ordained to save her, could she hear it. . . . And that she heard

aright, that, leaving the castle, she left the hell where love lives not, we know from the old huntsman:

"For the wound in the Duke's pride
rankled fiery;
So they made no search and small
inquiry";

and Gipsies thenceforth were hustled across the frontier.

Even the Duchess could not make love valid there. Reality was out of them. . . . True, the huntsman, after thirty years, is still her sworn adorer. He had stayed at the castle:

"I must see this fellow his sad life through
—
He is our Duke, after all,
And I, as he says, but a serf and thrall";

—but, as soon as the Duke is dead, our friend intends to "go journeying" to the land of the Gipsies, and there find his lady or hear the last news of her:

"And when that's told me, what's
remaining?"

For Jacynth is dead and all their children, and the world is too hard for his explaining, and so he hopes to find a snug corner under some hedge, and turn himself round and bid the world good-night, and sleep soundly until he is waked to another world, where pearls will no longer be cast before swine that can't value them. "*Amen.*"

But at any rate this talk with his friend has made him see his little lady again, and everything that they did

since "seems such child's play," with her away! So her love did one thing even there—just as one likes to think that the unhappier Duchess, the Italian one, left precisely such a memory in the heart of that officious fool who broke the bough of cherries for her in the orchard.

And is it not good to think that almost immediately after *The Flight of the Duchess* was published, Browning was to meet the passionate-hearted woman whom *he* snatched almost from the actual death-bed that had been prepared for her with as much of pomp and circumstance as was the Duchess's life-in-death! With this in mind, it gives one a queer thrill to read those lines of silenced prophecy:

> "I foresee and I could foretell
> Thy future portion, sure and well:
> But those passionate eyes speak true,
> speak true,
> Let them say what thou shalt do!"

FOOTNOTES:

[166:1] The "Toccata" which awakens these reflections in the poet is by a Venetian composer, Baldassare Galuppi, who was born in 1706, and died in 1785. He lived and worked in London from 1741 to 1744. "He abounded" (says Vernon Lee, in her *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy*) "in melody, tender, pathetic, and brilliant, which in its extreme simplicity and slightness occasionally rose to the highest beauty."

PART III



I

LOVERS MEETING

Browning believed in love as the great adventure of life—the thing which probes, reveals, develops, proclaims or condemns. This faith is common to most poets, or at any rate profession of this faith; but in him, who was so free from sentimentality, it is more inspiring than in any other, except perhaps George Meredith. Meredith too is without sentimentality; but he has more of hardness, shall I say? in his general outlook—more of the inclination to dwell on scientific or naturalistic analogies with human experience. In Browning the "peculiar grace" is his passion for humanity *as* humanity. It gives him but moderate joy to trace those analogies; certainly they exist (he seems to say), but let us take them for

granted—let us examine man as a separate phenomenon, so far as it is feasible thus to do. Moreover, his keenest interest, next to mankind, was art in all its branches—a correlative aspect, that is to say, of the same phenomenon. Thus each absorption explains and aids the other, and we begin to perceive the reason for his triumphs in expression of our subtlest inward life. Man *was*, for him, the proper study of mankind; of all great poets, he was the most "social," and that in the genial, not the satiric, spirit—differing there from Byron, almost the sole other singer of whom it may be said (as Mr. Arthur Symons has said) that for him "society exists as well as human nature." Where Browning excels is in the breadth and kindliness of his outlook; and again, this breadth and this kindliness are entirely unsentimental.

In a "man of the world," then, such as he, belief in love is the more inspiring. But for all his geniality, there is no indulgence for flabbiness—there is little sympathy, indeed, for any of the weaker ways. After *Pauline*—rejected utterance of his green-sickness—the wan, the wistful, moods of love find seldom recognition; there are no withdrawals "from all fear" into the woman's arms, and no looking up, "as I might kill her and be loved the more," into the man's eyes. For love is to make us greater, not smaller, than ourselves. It can indeed *do all* for us, and will do all, but we must for our part be doing something too. Nor shall one lover cast the burden on the other. That other will answer all demands, will lift all loads that may be lifted, but no *claim* shall be formulated on either side. This is the true faith, the true freedom, for both. Meredith has said the same, more axiomatically than Browning ever said it:

"He learnt how much we gain who make
no claims"

—but Browning's whole existence announced that axiom, and triumphantly proved it true. Almost the historic happy marriage of the world! Such was *his* marriage, and such it must have been, for never was man declared beforehand more infallible for the greatest of decisions. He understood: understood love, marriage, and (hardest of all perhaps!) conduct —what it may do, and not do, for happiness. That is to say, he understood how far conduct helps toward comprehension and how far hinders it—when it is that we should judge by words and deeds, and when by "what we know," apart from words and deeds. The whole secret, for Browning, lay in loving greatly.

Thus, for example, it is notable that, except *The Laboratory* and *Fifine at the Fair*, none of his poems of men and women turns upon jealousy. For him, that was no part of love; there could be no place in love for it. And even Elvire's demurs (in *Fifine*), even the departure from her husband, are not the words, the deed, of jealousy, but of insight into Juan's better self. He will never be all that he can be (she sees) until he knows that it is her he loves, and her alone and always; if this is the way he must learn it, she will go, that he may be deep and true as well as brilliant.

For Browning, *how* love comes is not important. It may be by the high-road or the bypath; so long as it is truly recognised, bravely answered, all is well. Living, it will be our highest bliss; dying, our dearest memory.

"What is he buzzing in my ears?

'Now that I come to die,
Do I view the world as a vale of tears?'
Ah, reverend sir, not I!"

And why not? Because in the days gone by, a girl and this now dying man "used to meet." What he viewed in the world then, he now sees again—the "suburb lane" of their rendezvous; and he begins to make a map, as it were, with the bottles on the bedside table.

"At a terrace, somewhere near the stopper,
There watched for me, one June,
A girl: I know, Sir, it's improper,
My poor mind's out of tune."

Nevertheless the clergyman must look, while he traces out the details. . . . She left the attic, "there, by the rim of the bottle labelled 'Ether,'"

"And stole from stair to stair,

And stood by the rose-wreathed gate.
Alas!
We loved, Sir—used to meet:
How sad and mad and bad it was—
But then, how it was sweet!"

They did not marry; and the clergyman shall have no further and no other "confession"—if he calls this one! It is the meaning of the man's life: that is all.

In *Confessions*, the story is done; the man is dying. In *Love among the Ruins*, we have almost the great moment itself. The lover, alone, is musing on the beauties and the hidden wonder of the landscape before him. Here, in this flat pastoral plain, lies buried all that remains of "a city great and gay," the

country's very capital, where a powerful prince once held his court. There had been a "domed and daring palace," a wall with a hundred gates—its circuit made of marble, whereon twelve men might stand abreast. Now all is pasture-land:

"And such glory and perfection, see, of
grass
Never was"

—as here,

"Where a multitude of men breathed joy
and woe
Long ago;
Lust of glory pricked their hearts up,
dread of shame
Struck them tame;
And that glory and that shame alike, the
gold
Bought and sold."

Of the glories nothing is left but a single little turret. It was part of a tower once, a tower that "sprang sublime," whence the king and his minions and his dames used to watch the "burning ring" of the chariot-races. . . . This is twilight: the "quiet-coloured eve" smiles as it leaves the "many-tinkling fleece"; all is tranquillity, the slopes and rills melt into one grey . . . and he knows

"That a girl with eager eyes and yellow
hair
Waits me there
In the turret whence the charioteers
caught soul
For the goal,

When the king looked, where she looks
now, breathless, dumb
Till I come."

That king looked out on every side at the splendid city, with its temples and colonnades,

"All the causeys, bridges, aqueducts—and
then
All the men!
When I do come, she will speak not, she
will stand,
Either hand
On my shoulder, give her eyes the first
embrace
Of my face,
Ere we rush, ere we extinguish sight and
speech
Each on each."

A million fighters were sent forth every year from that city; and they built their gods a brazen pillar high as the sky, yet still had a thousand chariots in reserve—all gold, of course. . . .

"Oh heart! oh blood that freezes, blood
that burns!
Earth's returns
For whole centuries of folly, noise and sin.
Shut them in
With their triumphs and their glories and
the rest!
Love is best!"

But though love be best, it is not all. It is here to transfigure all; we must accept with it the merer things it glorifies. For life calls us, even from our

love. The day is long and we must work in it; but we can meet when the day is done. In the light of this low half-moon can put off in our boat, and row across and push the prow into the slushy sand at the other side of the bay:

> "Then a mile of warm sea-scented beach;
> Three fields to cross till a farm appears;
> A tap at the pane, the quick sharp scratch
> And blue spurt of a lighted match,
> And a voice less loud, through its joys and fears,
> Than the two hearts beating each to each!"

Yes—we can meet at night. . . . But we must part at morning.

> "Round the cape of a sudden came the sea,
> And the sun looked over the mountain's rim;
> And straight was a path of gold for him,
> And the need of a world of men for me."[205:1]

These are plainly not wedded lovers, though some commentators so describe them; and indeed Browning sings but seldom of wedded love. When he does so sing, he reaches heights of beauty beyond any in the other lyrics, but the poems of marriage are not in our survey. In nearly all his other love-poetry, it is the "trouble of love," in one form or another, which occupies him—the lovers who meet to part; those who love "in vain" (as the phrase goes, but never *his* phrase); those who choose separation rather than defiance of the "world, and what it fears"; those who do defy that world, and reckon up their gains.

"Dear, had the world in its caprice
  Deigned to proclaim 'I know you both,
  Have recognised your plighted troth,
Am sponsor for you: live in peace!'—
How many precious months and years
  Of youth had passed, that speed so fast,
  Before we found it out at last,
The world, and what it fears?

How much of priceless life were spent
  With men that every virtue decks,
  And women models of their sex,
Society's true ornament—
Ere we dared wander, nights like this,
  Thro' wind and rain, and watch the
      Seine,
  And feel the Boulevard break again
To warmth and light and bliss?"

That old quarrel between the ideals of Bohemia and of "respectability"! They could have done these things, even as a married pair, but the trouble is that then they would not have "dared" to do them. "People would have talked." . . . Well, people may talk now, but they *have* gained something. They have gained freedom to live their lives as they choose—rightly or wrongly, but at any rate it is not "the world" that sways them. They have learnt how much that good word is worth! What is happening, this very hour, in that environment—here, for instance, in the Institute, which they are just passing? "Guizot receives Montalembert!" The two men are utterly opposed in everything that truly signifies to each; yet now are exchanging empty courtesies. See the courtyard all alight for the reception! Let them escape from it all, and leave respectability to its false standards. *They* are not included—they are outcasts:

"put forward your best foot!"

I accept this delightful poem with some reserve, for I think the lovers had not so wholly emancipated themselves from "the world" as they were pleased to think. The world still counted for them—as it counts for all who remember so vehemently to denounce it. Moreover, married, they could, were their courage complete, have beaten the world by forgetting it. No more docile wild-beast than that much badgered creature when once it recognises the true Contemner! To

> "Feel the Boulevard break again
> To warmth and light and bliss"

—on wild wet nights of wandering . . . this might even, through the example of the Real Unfearing, become a craze! Yes—we must refuse to be dazzled by rhetoric. These lovers also had their falling-short —they could not *forget* the world.

Hitherto we have considered the normal meetings of lovers. Now we turn to the dream-meetings—the great encounters which all of us feel might be, yet are not. There can be few to whom there has not come that imagination of the spiritually compelled presence, which Browning has so marvellously uttered in *Mesmerism*. Here, in these breathless stanzas,[208:1] so almost literally mesmeric that, as we read them (or rather draw them in at our own breathless lips!), we believe in the actual coming of our loved one, and scarce dare look round lest we should find the terrifying glory true . . . here the man sits alone in his room at dead of night, and wills the woman to be with him. He brings his thought to bear on her, "till he feels his hair turn grey":

"Till I seemed to have and hold
In the vacancy
'Twixt the walls and me
From the hair-plait's chestnut-gold
To the foot in its muslin fold—

Have and hold, then and there,
Her, from head to foot,
Breathing and mute,
Passive and yet aware,
In the grasp of my steady stare—

Hold and have, there and then,
All her body and soul
That completes my whole,
All that women add to men,
In the clutch of my steady ken"—

. . . if so he can sit, never loosing his will, and with a gesture of his hands that "breaks into very flame," he feels that he *must* draw her from "the house called hers, not mine," which soon will seem to suffocate her if she cannot escape from it:

"Out of doors into the night!
On to the maze
Of the wild wood-ways,
Not turning to left nor right
From the pathway, blind with sight—

Swifter and still more swift,
As the crowding peace
Doth to joy increase
In the wild blind eyes uplift
Thro' the darkness and the drift!"

And he *will* sit so, feeling his soul dilate, and no

muscle shall be relaxed as he sees his belief come true, and more and more she takes shape for him, so that she shall be, when she does come, altered even from what she was at his first seeming to "have and hold her"—for the lips glow, the cheek burns, the hair, from its plait, breaks loose, and spreads with "a rich outburst, chestnut gold-interspersed," and the arms open wide "like the doors of a casket-shrine," as she comes, comes, comes . . .

"'Now—now'—the door is heard!
Hark, the stairs! and near—
Nearer—and here—
'Now!' and at call the third
She enters without a word!"

* * * * *

Could a woman ever forget the man who should do that with her! Would she not almost be ready, in such an hour, to die as Porphyria died?

But in *Porphyria's Lover*, not so great a spirit speaks. This man, too, sitting in his room alone, thinks of the woman he loves, and she comes to him; but here it is her own will that drives through wind and rain—there is no compelling glory from the man uncertain still of passion's answering passion.

"The rain set early in to-night,
The sullen wind was soon awake,
It tore the elm-tops down for spite,
And did its worst to vex the lake:
I listened with heart fit to break.
When glided in Porphyria." . . .

She glided in and did not speak. She looked round

his cottage, then kneeled and made the dying fire blaze up. When all the place was warm, she rose and put off her dripping cloak and shawl, the hat, the soiled gloves; she let her rain-touched hair fall loose,

> "And, last, she sat down by my side
> And called me. When no voice replied,
>
> She put my arm about her waist,
> And made her smooth white shoulder bare,
> And all her yellow hair displaced,
> And, stooping, made my cheek lie there,
> And spread o'er all her yellow hair—
>
> Murmuring how she loved me—she
> Too weak, for all her heart's endeavour,
> To set its struggling passion free
> From pride, and vainer ties dissever,
> And give herself to me for ever."

But to-night, at some gay feast in a world all sundered from this man's, there had seized her

> "A sudden thought of one so pale
> For love of her, and all in vain:
> So, she was come through wind and rain."

She found him indeed as she had pitifully dreamed of him: "with heart fit to break" sitting desolate in the chill cottage; and even when she was come, he still sat there inert, stupefied as it were by his grief—unresponsive to the joy of her presence, unbelieving in it possibly, since already so often he had dreamed that this might be, and it had not been. But, unfaltering now that she has at last decided, she calls

to him, and as even then he makes no answer, sits down beside him and draws his head to her breast.

"Be sure I looked up at her eyes
  Happy and proud; at last I knew
Porphyria worshipped me; surprise
  Made my heart swell, and still it grew
  While I debated what to do.

That moment she was mine, mine, fair,
  Perfectly pure and good: I found
A thing to do, and all her hair
  In one long yellow string I wound
  Three times her little throat around,

And strangled her." . . .

But he knows that she felt no pain, for in a minute he opened her lids to see, and the blue eyes laughed back at him "without a stain." He loosed the tress about her neck, and the colour flashed into her cheek beneath his burning kiss. Now he propped her head —this time *his* shoulder bore

  "The smiling rosy little head,
So glad it has its utmost will,
  That all it scorned at once is fled,
  And I, its love, am gained instead!

Porphyria's love: she guessed not how
  Her darling one wish would be heard.
And thus we sit together now,
  And all night long we have not stirred,
  And yet God has not said a word!"

* * * * *

This poem was first published as the second of two headed "Madhouse Cells"; and though the classifying title was afterwards rejected, that it should ever have been used is something of a clue to the meaning. But only "something," for even so, we wonder if the dream were all a dream, if Porphyria ever came, and, if she did, was this the issue? What truly happened on that night of wind and rain?—that night which *is* real, whatever else is not . . . I ask, we all ask; but does it greatly matter? Enough that we can grasp the deeper meaning—the sanity in the madness. As Porphyria, with her lover's head on her breast, sat in the little cottage on that stormy night, the world at last rejected, the love at last accepted, she was at her highest pulse of being: she was *herself*. When in all the rest of life would such another moment come? . . . How many lovers have mutually murmured that: "If we could die *now*!"—nothing impaired, nothing gone or to go from them: the sanity in the madness, the courage in the cowardice. . . . So this lover felt, brooding in the "madhouse cell" on what had been, or might have been:

> "And thus we sit together now,
> And yet God has not said a word!"

Six poems of exultant love—and a man speaks in each! With Browning, the woman much more rarely is articulate; and when she does speak, even *he* puts in her mouth the less triumphant utterances. From the nameless girl in *Count Gismond* and from Balaustion—these only—do we get the equivalent of the man's exultation in such lyrics as I have just now shown. . . . Always the tear assigned to woman! It may be "true"; I think it is not at least *so* true, but true in some degree it must be, since all legend will

thus have it. What then shall a woman say? That the time has come to alter this? That woman cries "for nothing," like the children? That she does not understand so well as man the ends of love? Or that she understands them better? . . . Perhaps all of these things; perhaps some others also. Let us study now, at all events, the "tear"; let us see in what, as Browning saw her, the Trouble of Love consists for woman.

FOOTNOTES:

[205:1] Very curious is the uncertainty which this stanza leaves in the minds of some. In Berdoe's *Browning Cyclopædia* the difficulty is frankly stated, with an exquisitely ludicrous result. He interprets the last line of *Parting at Morning* as meaning that the woman "desires more society than the seaside home affords"! But it is the *man* who speaks, not the woman. The confusion plainly arises from a misinterpretation of "him" in "straight was a path of gold for him." Berdoe reads this as "lucrative work for the man"! Of course "him" refers to the sun who has "looked over the mountain's rim" . . . Here is an instance of making obscurity where none really exists.

[208:1] Mr. Symons points out that in this extraordinary poem "fifteen stanzas succeed one another without a single full stop or a real break in sense or sound."

II

TROUBLE OF LOVE: THE WOMAN'S

I.—THE LADY IN "THE GLOVE"

Writing of the unnamed heroine of *Count Gismond*, I said that she had one of the characteristic Browning marks—that of trust in the sincerity of others. Here, in *The Glove*, we find a figure who resembles her in two respects: she is nameless, and she is a "great" lady—a lady of the Court. But now we perceive, full-blown, the flower of Court-training: *dis*-trust. In this heroine (for all we are told, as young as the earlier one) distrust has taken such deep root as to produce the very prize-bloom of legend—that famous incident of the glove thrown into the lion's den that her knight may go to fetch it. . . . Does this interpretation of the episode amaze? It is that which our poet gives of it. Distrust, and only that, impelled this lady to the action which, till Browning treated it, had been regarded as a prize-bloom indeed, but the flower not of distrust, but its antithesis—vanity! All the world knows the story; all the world, till this apologist arrived, condemned alone the lady. Like Francis I, each had cried:

> ". . . 'Twas mere
> vanity,
> Not love, set that task to humanity!"

But Browning, who could detect the Court-grown, found excuse for her in that lamentable gardening. The weed had been sown, as it was sown (so much more tragically) for the earlier heroine; and little though we are told of the latter lady's length of

years, we may guess her, from this alone, to be older. *She had been longer at Court*; its lesson had penetrated her being. Day after day she had watched, day after day had listened; then arrived De Lorge with fervent words of love, and now she watched *him*, hearkened *him* . . . and more and more misdoubted, hesitated, half-inclined and half-afraid; until at last, "one day struck fierce 'mid many a day struck calm," she gathered all her hesitation, yielding, courage, into one quick impulse—and flung her glove to the lions! With the result which we know—of an instant and a fearless answer to the test; but, as well, an instant confirmation of the worst she had dreaded.

It was at the Court of King Francis I of France that it happened—the most brilliant Court, perhaps, in history, where the flower of French knighthood bloomed around the gayest, falsest of kings. Romance was in the air, and so was corruption; poets, artists, worked in every corner, and so did intrigue and baseness and lust. Round the King was gathered the *Petite Bande*, the clique within a clique —"that troop of pretty women who hunted with him, dined with him, talked with him"—led by his powerful mistress, the Duchesse d'Étampes, friend of the Dauphin's neglected wife, the Florentine Catherine de Médicis—foe of that wife's so silently detested rival, "Madame Dame Diane de Poitiers, Grande Sénéschale de Normandie."

The two great mistresses had each her darling poet: the Duchesse d'Étampes had chosen Clement Marot, who could turn so gracefully the Psalms of David into verse; La Grande Sénéschale, always supreme in

taste, patronised Pierre Ronsard—and this was why Pierre sometimes found that when he "talked fine to King Francis," the King would yawn in his face, or whistle and move off to some better amusement.

That was what Francis did one day after the Peace of Cambray had been signed by France and Spain. He had grown weary of leisure:

> "Here we've got peace, and aghast I'm
> Caught thinking war the true pastime.
> Is there a reason in metre?
> Give us your speech, master Peter!"

Peter obediently began, but he had hardly spoken half a dozen words before the King whistled aloud: "Let's go and look at our lions!"

They went to the courtyard, and as they went, the throng of courtiers mustered—lords and ladies came as thick as coloured clouds at sunset. Foremost among them (relates Ronsard in Browning's poem) were De Lorge and the lady he was "adoring."

> "Oh, what a face! One by fits eyed
> Her, and the horrible pitside"

—for they were now all sitting above the arena round which the lions' dens were placed. The black Arab keeper was told to stir up the great beast, Bluebeard. A firework was accordingly dropped into the den, whose door had been opened . . . they all waited breathless, with beating hearts . . .

> "Then earth in a sudden contortion
> Gave out to our gaze her abortion.
> Such a brute! . . .

One's whole blood grew curdling and
creepy
To see the black mane, vast and heapy,
The tail in the air stiff and straining,
The wide eyes nor waxing nor waning."

And the poet, watching him, thought how perhaps in that eruption of noise and light, the lion had dreamed that his shackles were shivered, and he was free again.

"Ay, that was the open sky o'erhead!
And you saw by the flash on his forehead,
By the hope in those eyes wide and
steady,
He was leagues in the desert already."

The King laughed: "Was there a man among them all who would brave Bluebeard?" Not as a challenge did he say this—he knew well that it were almost certain death:

"Once hold you, those jaws want no fresh
hold!"

But Francis had scarcely finished speaking when (as all the world knows) a glove fluttered down into the arena and fell close to the lion. It was the glove of De Lorge's lady. They were sitting together, and he had been, as Ronsard could see, "weighing out fine speeches like gold from a balance." . . . He now delayed not an instant, but leaped over the barrier and walked straight up to the glove. The lion never moved; he was still staring (as all of us, with aching hearts, have seen such an one stare from his cage) at the far, unseen, remembered land. . . . De Lorge

picked up the glove, calmly; calmly he walked back to the place where he had leaped the barrier before, leaped it again, and (once more, as all the world knows) dashed the glove in the lady's face. Every eye was on them. The King cried out in applause that *he* would have done the same:

". . . 'Twas mere
vanity,
Not love, set that task to humanity!"

—and, having the royal word for it, all the lords and ladies turned with loathing from De Lorge's "queen dethroned."

All but Peter Ronsard. *He* noticed that she retained undisturbed her self-possession amid the Court's mockery.

"As if from no pleasing experiment
She rose, yet of pain not much heedful,
So long as the process was needful.

* * * * *

She went out 'mid hooting and laughter;
Clement Marot stayed; I followed after."

Catching her up, he asked what it had all meant. "I'm a poet," he added; "I must know human nature."

"She told me, 'Too long had I heard
Of the deed proved alone by the word:
For my love—what De Lorge would not
dare!
With my scorn—what De Lorge could
compare!

> And the endless descriptions of death
> He would brave when my lip formed a
> breath,
> I must reckon as braved'" . . .

—and for these great gifts, must give in return her love, as love was understood at the Court of King Francis. But to-day, looking at the lion, she had mused on all the dangers affronted to get that beast to that den: his capture by some poor slave whom no lady's love was to reward, no King or Court to applaud, but only the joy of the sport, and the delight of his children's wonder at the glorious creature. . . . And at this very Court, the other day, did not they tell of a page who for mere boyish bravado had dropped his cap over the barrier and leaped across, pretending that he must get it back? Why should she not test De Lorge here and now? For *now* she was still free; now she could find out what "death for her sake" really meant; otherwise, he might yet break down her doubts, she might yield, still unassured, and only then discover that it did not mean anything at all! So—she had thrown the glove.

> '"The blow a glove gives is but weak:
> Does the mark yet discolour my cheek?
> But when the heart suffers a blow,
> Will the pain pass so soon, do you know?'"

* * * * *

De Lorge, indeed, had braved "death for her sake"; but he had then been capable of the public insult. The pain of *that*, had she loved him, must quite have broken her heart. And not only had he been capable of this, but he had not understood her, he too had thought it "mere vanity." Love then was nowhere—

neither in his heart nor in hers. . . . Ronsard, following her with his eyes as she went finally away, saw a youth keeping as close as he dared to the doorway by which she would pass. He was a mere plebeian; naturally his life was not so precious as that of the brilliant De Lorge (thus Ronsard ironically remarks); but there was no doubt what *he* would have done, "had our brute been Nemean." He would exultantly have accepted the test, have thought it right that he should earn what he so ardently desired.

> "And when, shortly after, she carried
> Her shame from the Court, and they
> married,
> To that marriage some happiness, maugre
> The voice of the Court, I dared augur."

De Lorge led for some time the most brilliant of envied careers, and finally married a beauty who had been the King's mistress for a week. Thenceforth he fetched her gloves very diligently, at the hours when the King desired her presence and his absence—and never did he set off on that errand (looking daggers at her) but Francis took occasion to tell the Court the story of the other glove. And she would smile and say that he brought *hers* with no murmur.

Was the first lady right or wrong? She was right to hesitate in accepting De Lorge's "devotion"—not because De Lorge was worthless, but because she did not love him. The King spoke truly when he said that not love set that task to humanity. Neither did mere vanity set it, as we now perceive; but *only* love could

excuse the test which love could never have imposed. De Lorge was worthless—no matter; the lady held no right over him, whatever he was, for she did not love him. And not alone her "test" was the proof of this: her hesitation had already proved it.

But, it may be said, the age was different: women still believed that love could come to them through "wooing." Nowadays, to be sure, so subtle a woman as this would know that her own heart lay passive, and that women's hearts do not lie passive when they love. . . . But I think there were few things about love that women did not know in the days of King Francis! We have only to read the discourses of Marguerite de Valois, sister of the King—we have only to consider the story of Diane de Poitiers, seventeen years older than her Dauphin, to realise *that* most fully. Women's hearts were the same; and a woman's heart, when it loves truly, will make no test for very pride-in-love's dear sake. It scorns tests—too much scorns them, it may be, and yet I know not. Again it is the Meredithian axiom which arrests me: "He learnt how much we gain who make no claims." Our lovers then may be, should be, prepared to plunge among the lions for our gloves—but we should not be able to send them! And if so, a De Lorge here and there should win a "hand" he merits not, we may reflect that the new, no more than the old, De Lorge will have won the *heart* which doubts —and, doubting, flings (or keeps) the glove.

> "Utter the true word—out and away
> Escapes her soul." . . .

Gloves flung to lions are not the answer which that enfranchised soul will give! And so the Lady thought

right and did wrong: 'twas *not* love set that task to humanity. Even Browning cannot win her our full pardon; we devote not many kerchiefs to drying this "tear."

II.—DÎS ALITER VISUM; or, LE BYRON DE NOS JOURS

"The gods saw it otherwise." Thus we may translate the first clause of the title; the second, the reference to Byron, I have never understood, and I think shall never understand. Of all the accusations which stand against him, that of letting opportunity in this sort slip by is assuredly not one. Such "poor pretty thoughtful things" as the lady of this poem played their parts most notably in Byron's life—to their own disaster, it is true, but never because he weighed their worth in the spirit of this French poet, so bitterly at last accused, who meets again, ten years after the day of his cogitations, the subject of them in a Paris drawing-room—married, and as dissatisfied as he, who still is free. Reading the poem, indeed, with Byron in mind, the fancy comes to me that if it had been by any other man but Browning, it might almost be regarded as a sidelong vindication of the Frenchman for having rejected the "poor pretty thoughtful thing." For Byron married her[224:1]—and in what did it result? . . . But that Browning should in any fashion, however sidelong, acknowledge Byron as anything but the most despicable of mortals, cannot for a moment be imagined; he who understood so many complex beings failed entirely here. Thus, ever in perplexity, I must abjure the theory of Byronic merit. There lurks in this poem no hidden plea for abstention, for the "man who doesn't"—hinted at through compassionate use of his

name who made one of the great disastrous marriages of the world.

Ten years before this meeting in Paris, the two of the poem had known one another, though not with any high degree of intimacy, for only twice had they "walked and talked" together. He was even then "bent, wigged, and lamed":

> "Famous, however, for verse and worse,
> Sure of the Fortieth spare Arm-chair"

—that is, the next vacancy at the French Academy, for so illustrious was he that his secondary reputation would not injure him.

She who now accuses him was then a "young beauty, round and sound as a mountain-apple," ingenuous, ardent, wealthy—the typical "poor pretty thoughtful thing" with aspirations, for she tried to sing and draw, read verse and thought she understood—at any rate, loved the Great, the Good, and the Beautiful. But to him her "culture" seemed pitifully amateurish—him who took the arts in his stride, as it were, who could float wide and free over the whole province of them, as the sea-gull floats over the waters. Nevertheless he had walked and talked with her "twice" at the little remote, unspoilt seaside resort where they had chanced to meet. It was strange that more people had not discovered it, so fine were the air and scenery—but it remained unvisited, and thus the two were thrown together. One scorching noon they met; he invited her to a stroll on the cliff-road. She took his arm, and (looking back upon it now) remembers that as she

took it she smiled "sillily," and made some banal speech about the blazing, brazen sea below. For she felt that he had guessed her secret, timid hope. . . . Now, recalling the episode (it is he who has given the signal for such reminiscence), she asks him what effect his divination of her trembling heart had had on him that day.

> "Did you determine, as we stepped
> O'er the lone stone fence, 'Let me get
> Her for myself, and what's the earth
> With all its art, verse, music, worth—
> Compared with love, found, gained, and
> kept?'"

For she knows, and she knew that *he* knew, the prompt reply which would come if he "blurted out" a certain question—come in her instant silence, her downward look, the rush of colour to her cheek and brow. They would have returned from that walk as plighted lovers—he, old, famous, weary; she with her youth and beauty, her ardour and her wealth, all rapturously given, and with the happy prospect added to all other joys of being certain of applause for the distinction shown in her choice! . . . A perfect hour for both—while it lasted.

But (so she now reads his gone-by cogitations for him) it would not last. The daily life would reclaim them; Paris would follow, with full time for both to reason and reflect. . . . And thus (still interpreting to him the imagined outcome of his musings) she would regret that choice which had seemed to show her of the elect—for after all a poet *need* not be fifty! Young men can be poets too, and though they blunder, there is something endearing in their blunders; moreover, one day they will be as "firm, quiet, and

gay" as he, as expert in deceiving the world, which is all, in the last analysis, that such a man does.

For, if he *had* spoken to her that day, what would he have said? (She is still expounding to him the situation of this potential married pair, as she has divined in her long musings that he then foresaw it.) He would not have said, like a boy, "Love me or I die." But neither would he have said the truth, which was simply that he wished to use her young ardour and vitality to help his age. Such was the demand which she (as, according to her, he then reasoned it out) would in time have accused him, tacitly or not, of having made upon her. . . . And what would his own reflections have been? She is ready to use her disconcerting clairvoyance for these also; nay, she can do more, she can tell him the very moment at which he acted upon them in advance! For as they foreshadowed themselves, he had ceased to press gently her arm to his side—she remembers well the stopping of that tender pressure, and now can connect the action with its mental source. *His* reflection, then, would have been simply that he had thrown himself away, had bartered all he was and had been and might be—all his culture, knowledge of the world, guerdons of gold and great renown—for what? For "two cheeks freshened by youth and sea": a mere nosegay. *Him*, in exchange for a nosegay!

> "That ended me." . . .

They duly admired the "grey sad church," on the cliff-top, with its scattered graveyard crosses, its garlands where the swallows perched; they "took their look" at the sea and sky, wondering afresh at the general ignorance of so attractive a little hole;

then, finding the sun really too scorching, they descended, got back to the baths, to such civilisation as there was:

> "And then, good-bye! Ten years since
> then:
> Ten years! We meet: you tell me, now,
> By a window-seat for that cliff-brow,
> On carpet-stripes for those sand-paths."

Ten years. He has a notorious liaison with a dancer at the Opera; she has married lovelessly. They have met again, and, in sentimental mood, he has recalled that sojourn, has begun to make a kind of tentative love to her, probably unimpaired in beauty, certainly more intellectually interesting, for the whole monologue proves that she can no longer be patronisingly summed up in "poor pretty thoughtful thing." And she has cried, in the words which open the poem:

> "Stop, let me have the truth of that!
> Is that all true?"

—and at first, between jest and bitterness, has given him the sum of her musings on that moment when he decided to drop the nosegay.

For ten years he has had, tacitly, the last word: his decision has stood unchallenged. Nor shall it now be altered—he has begun to "tell" her, to meander sentimentally around that episode, but she will have nothing less than the truth; they will talk of it, yes, since he has so pleased, but they will talk of it in *her* way. So she cuts him short, and draws this acid, witty little sketch for him. . . . Has she not matured? might it not have "done," after all? The nosegay was

not so insipid! . . . But suddenly, while she mocks, the deeper "truth of that" invades her soul, and she must cease from cynic gibes, and yield the word to something greater in herself.

"Now I may speak: you fool, for all
Your lore! Who made things plain in
vain?
What was the sea for? What, the grey
Sad church, that solitary day,
Crosses and graves and swallows' call?

Was there nought better than to enjoy?
No feat which, done, would make time
break,
And let us pent-up creatures through
Into eternity, our due?
No forcing earth teach heaven's employ?

No grasping at love, gaining a share
O' the sole spark from God's life at strife
With death . . . ?"

He calls his decision wisdom? It is one kind of wisdom only, and that the least—"worldly" wisdom. He was old, and she was raw and sentimental—true; each might have missed something in the other; but completeness is not for our existence here, we await heaven for that. Only earthbound creatures—like the star-fish, for instance—become all they *can* become in this sphere; man's soul must evolve. Have their souls evolved? And she cries that they have not:

"The devil laughed at you in his sleeve!"

Of course he "did not know" (as he now seems feebly to interpolate); she can well believe that, for if he had known, he would have saved two souls—nay, four. What of his Stephanie, who danced vilely last night, they say—will he not soon, like the public, abandon her now that "her vogue has had its

day"? . . . And what of the speaker herself? It takes but half a dozen words to indicate *her* lot:

"Here comes my husband from his whist."

What is "the truth of that"?

Again, I think, something of what I said in writing of *Youth and Art*: again not quite what Browning seems to wish us to accept. Love is the fulfilling of the law —with all my heart; but was love here? Does love weigh worth, as the poet did? does love marry the next comer, as the lady did? Mrs. Orr, devouter votary than I, explains that Browning meant "that everything which disturbs the equal balance of human life gives a vital impulse to the soul." Did one wish merely to be humorous, one might say that this was the most optimistic view of unsuccessful marriage which has yet found expression! But merely to be humorous is not what I wish: we must consider this belief, which Mrs. Orr further declares to be the expression of Browning's "poetic self." Assuredly it is true that stereotyped monotony, even if happy, does leave the soul unstirred to deepest depth. We may hesitate, nevertheless, to embrace the view that "only our mistakes are our experience"; and this is the view which seems to prevail in Mrs. Orr's interpretation of *Dîs Aliter Visum*. Mr. Symons says that the woman points out to the man "his fatal mistake." . . . But was it really a mistake at all? I do not, in urging that question, commit myself to the crass commonplace of Berdoe, who argues that "a more unreasonable match could hardly be imagined than this one would have been"! The "match" standpoint is not here our standpoint. *That* is, simply, that love is the fulfilling of the law, and that these two people did not love. They were in the sentimental state which frequently

results from pleasant chance encounters—and the experienced, subtle man of the world was able to perceive that, and to act upon it. That he has pursued his wonted way of life, and that she has married lovelessly (for a husband who plays whist is, by the unwritten law of romance, a husband who can by no possibility be loved!), proves merely that each has fallen away in the pursuit of any ideal which may then have urged itself—not that both would certainly have "saved their souls" if they had married one another. Speaking elsewhere in this book of Browning's theory of love, I said: "Love can do all, and will do all, but we must for our part be doing something too"—but even love can do nothing if it is not there! Ideals need not be abandoned because they are not full-realised; and, were we in stern mood, it would be possible to declare that this lady had abandoned them more definitely than her poet had, since he at all times was frankly a worldling. Witty as she has become, there still remain in her, I fear, some traces of the poor pretty thoughtful thing. . . . To sum up, for this "tear" also we have but semi-sympathy; and Browning is again not at his best when he makes the Victim speak for herself.

III.—THE LABORATORY

Now let us see how he can make a woman speak when she suffers, but is not, and will not be, a victim.

At once she is a completely realised human creature, uttering herself in such abandonment of all pretence as never fails to compass majesty. Into the soul of this woman in *The Laboratory*, Browning has penetrated till he seems to breathe with her breath. I

question if there is another fictive utterance to surpass this one in authenticity. It bears the Great Seal. Not Shakespeare has outdone it in power and concentration. Every word counts, almost every comma—for, like Browning, we too seem to breathe with this woman's panting breath, our hearts to beat with the very pain and rage of hers, and every pause she comes to in her speech is *our* pause, so intense is the evocation, so unerring the expression of an impulse which, whether or no it be atrophied in our more hesitant and civilised consciousness, is at any rate effectively inhibited.

She is a Court lady of the *ancien régime*, in the great Brinvilliers poisoning-period, and she is buying from an old alchemist in his laboratory the draught which is to kill her triumphant rival. Small, gorgeous, and intense, she sits in the strange den and watches the old wizard set about his work. She is due to dance at the King's, but there is no hurry: he may take as long as he chooses. . . . Now she must put on a glass mask like his, the old man tells her, for these "faint smokes that curl whitely" are themselves poisonous—and she submits, and with all her intensity at work, ties it on "tightly"; then sits again, to peer through the fumes of the devil's-smithy. But she cannot be silent; even to him—and after all, is such an one as he quite truly a man!—she must pour forth the anguish of her soul. Questions relieve her now and then:

> "Which is the poison to poison her,
> prithee?"

—but not long can she be merely curious; every

minute there breaks out a cry:

"He is with her, and they know that I
know
Where they are, what they do . . ."

—the pitiful self-consciousness of such torment, unable to believe in the oblivion (familiar as it has been in past good hours) which sweeps through lovers in their bliss. They could not forget *me*, she thinks, as all her sister-sufferers think. . . . Yet even in this hell, there is some solace. They must be remembering her, and

". . . they believe my
tears flow
While they laugh, laugh at me, at me fled
to the drear
Empty church, to pray God in, for them!—
I am here."

Yes, here—where the old man works for her: grinding, moistening, and mashing his paste, pounding at his powder. It is better to sit here and watch him than go dance at the King's; and she looks round in her restless, nervous anguish—the dagger in her heart, but this way, *this* way, to stanch the wound it makes!

"That in the mortar—you call it a gum?
Ah, the brave tree whence such gold
oozings come!
And yonder soft phial, the exquisite blue,
Sure to taste sweetly—is that poison too?"

But, maddened by the deadlier drug of wretchedness, she loses for a moment the single vision of her rival:

it were good to have *all* the old man's treasures, for the joy of dealing death around her at that hateful Court where each knows of her misery.

> "To carry pure death in an earring, a
> casket,
> A signet, a fan-mount, a filigree basket!"

She need but give a lozenge "at the King's," and Pauline should die in half an hour; or light a pastille, and Elise, "with her head and her breast and her arms and her hands, should drop dead." . . . But he is taking too long.

> "Quick—is it finished? The colour's too
> grim!
> Why not soft like the phial's, enticing and
> dim?"

For if it were, she could watch that other stir it into her drink, and dally with "the exquisite blue," and then, great glowing creature, lift the goblet to her lips, and taste. . . . But one must be content: the old man knows—this grim drug is the deadly drug; only, as she bends to the vessel again, a new doubt assails her.

> "What a drop! She's not little, no minion
> like me—
> That's why she ensnared him: this never
> will free
> The soul from those masculine eyes—say,
> 'No!'
> To that pulse's magnificent come-and-go.
>
> For only last night, as they whispered, I
> brought

My own eyes to bear on her so, that I
thought
Could I keep them one half minute fixed,
she would fall,
Shrivelled; she fell not; yet this does it
all!"

* * * * *

But it is not painless in its working? She does not desire that: she wants the other to *feel* death; more—she wants the proof of death to remain,

"Brand, burn up, bite into its grace[236:1]
—
He is sure to remember her dying face!"

Is it done? Then he must take off her mask; he must —nay, he need not look morose about it:

"It kills her, and this prevents seeing it
close."

She is not afraid to dispense with the protecting vizor:

"*If it hurts her, beside, can it ever hurt me?*"

There it lies—there. . . .

"Now, take all my jewels, gorge gold to
your fill,
You may kiss me, old man, on the mouth
if you will!"

—and, looking her last look round the den, she prepares to go; but what is that mark on her

gorgeous gown? Brush it off! Brush off that dust! It might bring horror down on her in an instant, before she knows or thinks, and she is going straight from here to dance at the King's. . . . She is gone, with her jealousy and her anguish and her passion, and, clutched to her heart, the phial that shall end but one of those torments.

She is gone, and she remains for ever. Her age is past, but not the hearts that ached in it. We curb those hearts to-day; we do not poison now; but have we forgotten the mood for poisoning?

> "If it hurts her, beside, can it ever hurt
> me?"

Such fiercenesses are silenced now; but, silent, they have still their utterance, and it is here.

IV.—IN A YEAR

Nay—here we have the heart unsilenced yet unfierce, the gentle, not the "dreadful," heart of woman: as true to type, so true indeed that we can even figure to ourselves the other hours in which the lady of *The Laboratory* may have known, like the girl here, only dim, aching wonder at her lover's mutability.

> "Was it something said,
> Something done,
> Vexed him? was it touch of hand,
> Turn of head?
> Strange! that very way

Love begun:
I as little understand
Love's decay."[238:1]

Here, again, is full authenticity. Girl-like, she sits and broods upon it all—not angry, not even wholly wretched, for, though now she is abandoned, she has not loved "in vain," since she loved greatly. So greatly that still, still, she can dream:

"Would he loved me yet,
On and on,
While I found some way undreamed
—Paid my debt!
Gave more life and more,
Till, all gone,
He should smile, 'She never seemed
Mine before.'"

But this will not be; in a year it is over for him; and for her "over" too, though not yet ended. How will it end for her?

"Well, this cold clay clod
Was man's heart:
Crumble it, and what comes next?
Is it God ?" . . .

The dream, the silly dream, of each forsaken child!

"'Dying for my sake—
White and pink!
Can't we touch these bubbles then
But they break?'"

That is what he will say to himself, in his high male fashion, when he hears that she is dead; she sits and

dreams of it, as women have done since the world began, and will do till it ends.[239:1]

Then, at last, he will know how she loved him; since, for all that has been between them, clearly he has not known that yet. . . . Again, the supreme conviction of our souls that who does know truly *all* the love, can never turn away from it. Most pitiful, most deceived, of dreams—yet after all, perhaps the horn-gate dream, for who knows "truly" but who loves truly?

Yet indeed (she now muses) *has* she enough loved him?

> "I had wealth and ease,
> Beauty, youth:
> Since my lover gave me love,
> I gave these.
>
> That was all I meant
> —To be just,
> And the passion I had raised
> To content.
> Since he chose to change
> Gold for dust,
> If I gave him what he praised,
> Was it strange?"

And after all it was not enough! "Justice" was not enough, the giving of herself was not enough. If she could try again, if she could find that "way undreamed" to pay her debt. . . .

I should like to omit two lines from the second of the stanzas quoted above:

> "*And the passion I had raised*

To content."

From Browning, those words come oddly: moreover, elsewhere the girl cries:

"I, too, at love's brim
Touched the sweet:
I would die if death bequeathed
Sweet to him."

This is more than to "content" the "passion she had raised." Let us regard that phrase as unwritten: it is not authentic, it does not express either the girl or her poet.

The rest comes right and true—and more than all, perhaps, the second verse, where the mystery of passion in its coming no less than in its going is so subtly indicated.

"Strange! that very way
Love begun:
I *as little understand*
Love's decay."

We hear to-day of love that aims at reason. Love forbid that I should say love knows not reason—but love and God forbid that it should *aim* at reason! Leave us that unwisdom at least: we are so wise to-day.

This ardent, gentle girl must suffer, and will suffer long—but will not die. She will live and she will grow. Shall she then look back with scorn upon that earlier self? . . . We talk much now of "re-

incarnation," and always by our talk we seem to mean the coming-back to earth of a spirit which at some time has left it. But are there not re-incarnations of the still embodied spirit—is not re-incarnation, like eternity, with us here and now, as we "in this body" live and suffer and despair, and lift our hearts again to hope and faith? How many of us —grown, not changed—can pityingly look back at ourselves in some such dying moment as this poem shows us; for death it is to that "ourself." Hearts do not break, but hearts do die—*that* heart, *that* self: we pass into a Hades.

> "Well, this cold clay clod
> Was man's heart:
> Crumble it, and what comes next?
> Is it God?"

Or is it new heart, new self, new life? We come forth enfranchised from our Hades. The evil days, the cruel days—we call them back (a little, it may be, ashamed of our escape!) and still the blest remoteness will endure: it was wonderful how it could suffer, the poor heart. . . . Surely this is re-incarnation; surely no returning spirit witnesses more clearly to a transition-state? We *have been* dead; but this "us" who comes back to the world we knew is still the same—the heart will answer as it once could answer, the spirit thrill as once it thrilled. Only—this is the proof —both heart and spirit are *further on*; both have, as it were, gone past the earlier summons and the earlier sense of love; and so, evoking such an hour as this, when we could dream of "dying for his sake, white and pink," we smile in tender, not in scornful, pity—knowing now that "way undreamed" of our girl's dream, and knowing that that way is not to die, but

live and grow, since love that changes "in a year" is not the love to die, or live, for.

FOOTNOTES:

[224:1] The descriptive phrase above might really, at a pinch, be applied to Annabella Milbanke.

[236:1] Note the fierceness achieved by the shortening and the alliteration in this line.

[238:1] Mark how the deferred rhymes paint the groping thoughts. Only after much questioning can the answer come, as it were, in the "chime of the rhyme."

[239:1] And men also, I hasten to add, that there may be no pluming of male feathers—if indeed this be an occasion for pluming on either side.

PART IV



I

A WOMAN'S LAST WORD

They are married, and they have come to a spiritual crisis. She does not, cannot, think as *he* thinks. But does thinking signify? She loves—is not that enough? Can she not have done with thinking, or at all events with talking about thinking? Perhaps, with every striving, she shall achieve no more than that: to *say* nothing, to use no influence, to yield the sanctioned woman's trophy of the "last word." . . . Shall she, then, be yielding aught of value, if she contends no more?

> "What so wild as words are?"

—and that *they* should strive and argue! Why, it is as when birds debate about some tiny marvel of those marvellous tiny lives, while the hawk spies from a bough above.

> "See the creature stalking
> While we speak!
> Hush and hide the talking,
> Cheek on cheek!"

For that hawk is ever watching life: it stands for the mysterious effluence which falls on joy and kills it; and that may just as well be "talking" as aught else! He shall have his own way—or no: that is a paltry yielding. There shall *be* no way but his.

"What so false as truth is,
False to thee?"

She abandons then the cold abstraction; she does not even wish to "know":

"Where the apple reddens
Never pry—
Lest we lose our Edens,
Eve and I.

Be a god and hold me
With a charm!
Be a man and fold me
With thine arm!

Teach me, only teach, Love!
As I ought
I will speak thy speech, Love,
Think thy thought—

Meet, if thou require it,
Both demands,
Laying flesh and spirit
In thy hands."

* * * * *

But even as she measures and exults in the abjection of herself, a voice whispers in her soul that this is not the way. Something is wrong. She hears, but cannot heed. It must be so, since he desires it—since he can desire it. Since he *can* . . .

"That shall be to-morrow,
Not to-night:
I must bury sorrow
Out of sight:

—Must a little weep, Love,
(Foolish me!)
And so fall asleep, Love,
Loved by thee."

He does not wish to know the real Herself. Then the real herself shall "sleep"; all shall be as before.

Will this endure? All depends upon the woman: upon how strong *she* is. For is not this the sheer denial of her husband's moral force? By her silence, her abjection, her suppression, he shall prevail: not otherwise. And so, *if* this endure, what shall the issue prove? Not the highest good of married life for either, and still less for the man than for the woman.

By implication, Browning shows us that in *By the Fireside*, one of his three great songs of wedded love:

"Oh, I must feel your brain prompt mine,
Your heart anticipate my heart,
You must be just before, in fine,
See and make me see, for your part,
New depths of the divine!"

Once more we can trace there his development from *Pauline*. She, looking up "as I might kill her and be loved the more," had, to the lover's thinking, laid her flesh and spirit in his hands, precisely as the wife in the *Last Word* resolves to do. . . . As the poet grew, so grew the man in Browning: we reach *By the Fireside* from these. For the woman in the *Last Word*, strong to lay aside herself, to "think his thought," could with that strength, used otherwise, bring *that* husband to the place where stands the man in *By the Fireside*,

when the "long dark autumn evenings" are come, and together with his wife he treads back the path to their youth, to the "moment, one and infinite" in which they found each other once for all.

"My perfect wife, my Leonor,
Oh heart, my own, oh eyes, mine too,
Whom else could I dare look backward
for,
With whom beside should I dare pursue
The path grey heads abhor?

* * * * *

My own, confirm me! If I tread
This path back, is it not in pride
To think how little I dreamed it led
To an age so blest that, by its side,
Youth seems the waste instead?"

And now read again:

"Meet, *if thou require it*,
Both demands,
Laying flesh and spirit
In thy hands."

A lower note there, is it not? And shall he so require, and she so yield, that backward-treading path is not for them—never shall *they* say to one another:

"Come back with me to the first of all,
Let us lean and love it over again,
Let us now forget and now recall,
Break the rosary in a pearly rain,
And gather what we let fall!"

Too many tears would fall on that wife's rosary—the

wife who had begun so soon to know that Edens shall be lost by thinking Eves!

But let me not enforce a moral. The mood is one that women know, and often wisely use. "Talking" *is* to be hidden, "cheek on cheek," from the hawk on the bough: but talking, as this wife will quickly see, is not the sum of individuality's expression. She can teach him—learning from him all the while—*not* to "require it": she, this same sweet, strong-souled woman, for to be able to speak as she speaks here is her sure indenture of freedom.

> "That shall be to-morrow,
> Not to-night:
> I must bury sorrow
> Out of sight."

The "sorrow" is for him, not for herself: he has fallen below his highest in the tyranny of to-night. Then be sure that she, so loving and so seeing, shall lift him up to-morrow! *This* tear shall be dried.

II

JAMES LEE'S WIFE

In this song-cycle of nine poems we are shown the death of a woman's heart. James Lee's wife sums up in herself, as it were, all those "troubles of love" which we have considered in the earlier monologues. The man has failed her—as De Lorge failed his lady,

as the poet the "poor, pretty thoughtful thing"; love has left her—as it left the woman of *The Laboratory* and the girl of *In a Year*; she and her husband are at variance in the great things of life—like the couple, in *A Woman's last Word*. But even the complete surrender of individuality resolved upon by the wife in that poem would not now avail, if indeed it ever would have availed, the wife of James Lee. All is over, and, as she gradually realises, over with such finality that there is only one thing she can do, and that is to leave him—"set him free."

We learn the mournful story from the wife's lips only; the husband never speaks, and is but once present. All we actually see are the moods of nine separate days—spread over what precise period of time we are not clearly shown, but it was certainly a year. These nine revealings show us every stage from the first faint pang of apprehension to the accepted woe; then the battle with *that*—the hope that love may yet prevail; the clutch at some high stoicism drawn from the laws of nature, or from "old earth's" genial wisdom; next, the less exalted plan to be "of use," since there is nothing else for her to be—and finally the flight, the whole renunciation. Echoes hover from all sad women's stories elsewhere studied: the Tear reigns supreme, the Victim is *in excelsis*—for hardly did Pompilia suffer such excess of misery, since she at least could die, remembering Caponsacchi. James Lee's wife will live, remembering James Lee.

Into the chosen commonplace of the man's name[251:1] we may read a symbolism. "This is every-day's news," the poet seems to say; "you may watch the drama for yourselves whenever you so please." And only indeed in the depth of the woman's passion

is there aught unusual. *That*, as uttered in the final poem, seems more than normal—since she knows her husband for (as she so strangely says of him) "mere ignoble earth"; yet still can claim that he "set down to her"

> "Love that was life, life that was love,
> A tenure of breath at your lips' decree,
> A passion to stand as your thoughts approve,
> A rapture to fall where your foot might be."

More—or less—than dog-like is such love, for dogs are unaware of "mere ignoble earth," dogs do not judge and analyse and patronise, and resolve to "make the low nature better for their throes." Never has the mistaken idea, the inept conduct, of passion been so subtly shown us, with so much at once of pity and of irony.

James Lee's wife is a plain woman.

> "Why, fade you might to a thing like me,
> And your hair grow these coarse hanks of hair,
> Your skin, this bark of a gnarled tree" . . .

So she cries in the painful concluding poem. Faded, coarse-haired, coarse-skinned . . . is all said? But he had married her. In what, do we find the word of that enigma? In the beauties of her heart and mind—the passionate, devoted heart, the subtle, brooding mind. These had done the first work; and alas! they have done the second also. The heart was passionate and devoted, but it analysed too closely, and then clung too closely; the mind was subtle and intense,

but it could not rest, it could not "take for granted"—male synonym for married bliss! And of course we shall not dare deny James Lee his trustiest, sturdiest weapon: *she had no sense of humour!* . . . If he was incomplete, so too was she; and her incompleteness was of the kind that, in this relation, never fails to fail—his, of the kind that more often than not succeeds. Thus she sums him:

> "With much in you waste, with many a
> weed,
> And plenty of passions run to seed,
> But a little good grain too."

This man, who may be reckoned in his thousands, as the corresponding type in woman may, needs—not tyrannically, because unconsciously—a mate who far excels him in all that makes nobility; and, nine times out of ten, obtains her. "Mrs. James Lee" (how quaintly difficult it is to realise that sequence!) is, on the contrary, of the type that one might almost say inevitably fails to find the "true" mate. Perhaps she *has* none. Perhaps, to be long loved, to be even long endured, this type must alter itself by modification or suppression, like the wife in the *Last Word*—who was not of it! For here is the very heart of the problem: can or cannot character be altered? James Lee's wife is of the morbid, the unbalanced, the unlovely: these, if they are to "survive," must learn the lore of self-suppression. Not for them exactingness, caprice, the gay or grave analysis of love and lover: such moods charm alone in lovely women, and even in *them* bring risks along. The Mrs. Lees must curb them wholly. As the whims of unwedded love, they may perchance amuse or interest; marriage, for such, comports them not at all.

Let us trace, compassionately if ironically, the mistakes of this sad woman.

I.—SHE SPEAKS AT THE WINDOW

He is coming back to their seaside home at Sainte-Marie, near Pornic—the Breton "wild little place" which Browning knew and loved so well. "Close to the sea—a hamlet of a dozen houses, perfectly lonely—one may walk on the edge of the low rocks by the sea for miles. I feel out of the earth sometimes as I sit here at the window."[254:1]

And at the window *she* sits, watching for James Lee's return. Yesterday it was summer, but the strange sudden "stop" has come, eerily, as it always seems to come.

> "Ah, Love, but a day
> And the world has changed!
> The sun's away,
> And the bird estranged;
> The wind has dropped,
> And the sky's deranged:
> Summer has stopped."

We can picture him as he arrives and listens to her: is there already a faint annoyance? Need she so drearily depict the passing of summer? It is bad enough that it *should* pass—we need not talk about it! Such annoyance we all have felt with the relentless chroniclers of change. Enough, enough; since summer is gone and we cannot bring it back, let us think of something else. . . . But she goes on, and now we shall not doubt that he is enervated, for this is what she says:

"Look in my eyes!
  Wilt thou change too?
Should I fear surprise?
  Shall I find aught new
In the old and dear,
  In the good and true,
With the changing year?"

The questions have come to her—come on what cold blast from heaven, or him? But in pity for herself, let her not ask them! We seem to see the man turn from her, not "looking in her eyes," and seem to catch the thought, so puerile yet so instinctive, that flashes through his mind. "I never meant to 'change'; why does she put it into my head." . . . And then, doomed blunderer, she goes on:

"Thou art a man,
  But I am thy love.
For the lake, its swan;
  For the dell, its dove;
And for thee (oh, haste!)
  Me, to bend above,
Me, to hold embraced."

She does not *say*, "oh, haste!"—that is the silent comment (we must think) on her not instantly answered plea for his embrace. . . . And when the embrace does come—the claimed embrace—we can figure to ourselves the all it lacks.

II.—BY THE FIRESIDE

Summer now indeed is gone; they are sitting by their fire of wood. The blue and purple flames leap up and die and leap again, and she sits watching them. The wood that makes those coloured flames is shipwreck

wood. . . .

"Oh, for the ills half-understood,
The dim dead woe
Long ago
Befallen this bitter coast of France!"

And then, ever the morbid analogy, the fixed idea:

"Well, poor sailors took their chance;
I take mine."

Out there on the sea even now, some of those "poor sailors" may be eyeing the ruddy casement and gnashing their teeth for envy and hate,

"O' the warm safe house and happy freight
—Thee and me."

The irony of it seizes her. Those sailors need not curse them! Ships safe in port have their own perils of rot and rust and worms in the wood that gnaw the heart to dust. . . . "That is worse."

And how long the house has stood here, to anger the drenched, stark men on the sea! Who lived here before this couple came? Did another woman before herself watch the man "with whom began love's voyage full-sail" . . . watch him and see the planks of love's ship start, and hell open beneath?

This mood she speaks not, only sits and broods upon. And he? Men too can watch, and struggle with themselves, and feel that little help is given them. Some sailors come safe home, and these would have been lighted by the ruddy casement. But she thinks only of the sailors drowning, and gnashing their teeth for hate of the "warm safe house." That

melancholy brooding—and if she but looked lovely while she broods. . . .

III.—IN THE DOORWAY

She stands alone in the doorway, and looks out upon the dreary autumn landscape.[257:1] It is a grey October day; the sea is in "stripes like a snake"—olive-pale near the land, black and "spotted white with the wind" in the distance. How ominous it shows: good fortune is surely on the wing.

> "Hark, the wind with its wants and its
> infinite wail!"

As she gazes, her heart dies within her. Their fig-tree has lost all the golden glint of summer; the vines "writhe in rows, each impaled on its stake"—and like the leaves of the tree, and like the vines, her heart "shrivels up and her spirit shrinks curled."

But courage, courage! Winter comes to all—not to them alone. And have they not love, and a house big enough to hold them, with its four rooms, and the field there, red and rough, not yielding now, but again to yield? Rabbits and magpies, though now they find no food there (the magpies already have well-nigh deserted it; when one *does* alight, it seems an event), yet will again find food. But November—the chill month with its "rebuff"—will see both rabbits and magpies quite departed. . . . No! This shall not be her mood. Winter comes indeed to mere material nature; God means precisely that the spirit shall inherit His power to put life into the darkness and the cold. The spirit defies external change:

"Whom Summer made friends of, let
Winter estrange!"

And she turns to go in, for the hour at rest and solaced. They have the house, and the field . . . and love.

IV.—ALONG THE BEACH

Rest and solace have departed: winter is come—to all. She walks alone on the beach; one may do that, "on the edge of the low rocks by the sea, for miles"; [258:1] and broods once more. She figures him beside her; they are speaking frankly of her pain. She "will be quiet." . . . Piteous phrase of all unquiet women! She will be quiet; she will "reason why he is wrong." Well for her that the talk is but a fancied one; she would not win far with such a preamble, were it real! It is thus that in almost every word we can trace the destined failure of this loving woman. . . . She begins her "reasoning."

"You wanted my love—is that much true?
And so I did love, so I do:
What has come of it all along?

I took you—how could I otherwise?
For a world to me, and more;
For all, love greatens and glorifies
Till God's aglow, to the loving eyes,
In what was mere earth before.

Yes, earth—yes, mere ignoble earth!
Now do I mis-state, mistake?
Do I wrong your weakness and call it
worth?
Expect all harvest, dread no dearth,

Seal my sense up for your sake?

Oh, Love, Love, no, Love! Not so, indeed!
You were just weak earth, I knew":

—and then, pursuing, she sums him up as we saw at the beginning of our study.

Well for her, I say again, that this is but a fancied talk! And since it is, we can accord her a measure of wisdom. For she *has* been wise in one thing: she has not "wronged his weakness and called it worth"—that memorable phrase, so Browningesque!

She has "seen through" him, yet she loves him. Thus far, then, kind and wise in her great passion. . . . But she should *forget* that she has seen through him—she should keep that vision in the background, not hold it ever in her sight. And now herself begins to see that this is where she has not been wise. She took him for hers, just as he was—and did not he, thus accepted, find her his? Has she not watched all that was as yet developed in him, and waited patiently, wonderingly, for the more to come?

"Well, and if none of these good things
came,
What did the failure prove?
The man was my whole world, all the
same."

That is the fault in her:

"That I do love, watch too long,
And wait too well, and weary and wear;
And 'tis all an old story, and my despair
Fit subject for some new song."

She has shown him too much love and indulgence and hope implied in the indulgence: this was the wrong way. The "bond" has been felt—and such "light, light love" as his has wings to fly at the mere suspicion of a bond. He has grown weary of her "wisdom"; pleasure is his aim in life, and *that* is always ready to "turn up next in a laughing eye." . . . So the songs have said and will say for all time—the new songs for the old despair.

But though she knows all this (we seem to see), she will not be able to act upon it. Always she will watch too long, and wait too well. Hers is a nature as simple as it is intense. No sort of subterfuge is within her means—neither the gay deception nor the grave. What she knows that he resents, she still must do immutably—bound upon the wheel of her true self. For only one "self" she has, and that the wrong one.

She turns back, she walks homeward along the beach —"on the edge of the low rocks by the sea, for miles."

V.—ON THE CLIFF

But still love is a power! Love can move mountains, for is not love the same as faith? And not a mountain is here, but a mere man's heart—already "moved," for he *has* loved her.

It is summer again. She sits on the cliff, leaning back on the short dry grass—if one still can call it grass, so "deep was done the work of the summer sun." And there near by is the rock, baked dry as the grass, and flat as an anvil's face. "No iron like that!" Not a weed nor a shell: "death's altar by the lone shore." The drear analogies succeed one another; she sees them everywhere, in everything. The dead grass, the dead

rock. . . . But now, what is this on the turf? A gay blue cricket! A cricket—only that? Nay, a war-horse, a magic little steed, a "real fairy, with wings all right." And there too on the rock, like a drop of fire, that gorgeous-coloured butterfly.

> "No turf, no rock: in their ugly stead,
> See, wonderful blue and red!"

Shall there not then be other analogies? May not the minds of men, though burnt and bare as the turf and the rock, be changed like them, transfigured like them:

> "With such a blue-and-red grace, not theirs
> —
> Love settling unawares!"

It was almost a miracle, was it not? the way they changed. Such miracles happen every day.

VI.—READING A BOOK, UNDER THE CLIFF

These clever young men! She is reading a poem of the wind.[262:1] The singer asks what the wind wants of him—so instant does it seem in its appeal.

> "'Art thou a dumb wronged thing that
> would be righted,
> Entrusting thus thy cause to me?
> Forbear!
> No tongue can mend such pleadings; faith
> requited
> With falsehood—love, at last aware
> Of scorn—hopes, early blighted—
>
> 'We have them; but I know not any tone

So fit as thine to falter forth a sorrow;
Dost think men would go mad without a moan,
If they knew any way to borrow
A pathos like thine own?'"

The splendid lines assail her.[263:1] In her anguish of response she turns from them at last—they are too much. This power of perception is almost a baseness! And bitterly resentful of the young diviner who can thus show forth her inmost woe with his phrase of "love, *at last aware* of scorn," she flings the volume from her—rejecting him, detesting him, and finding ultimately through her stung sense the way to refute him who has dared, with his mere boy's eyes, to discern such anguish. He is wrong: the wind does *not* mean what he fancies by its moaning. He thus interprets it, because he thinks only of himself, and of how the suffering of others—failure, mistake, disgrace, relinquishment—is but the example for his use, the help to his path untried! Such agonies as her own are mere instances for him to recognise and put into a phrase—like that one, which stings the spirit, and sets the heart to woe-fullest aching, and brims the eyes with bitter, bitterest tears. How dare he, with his crude boy's heart, embody grief like hers in words, how dare he know—and now her irony turns cruel:

"Oh, he knows what defeat means, and the rest!
Himself the undefeated that shall be:
Failure, disgrace, he flings them you to test—
His triumph in eternity
Too plainly manifest!"

Of course he does not know! The wind means something else. And as the pain grows fainter, she finds it easier to forgive him. How *could* "the happy, prompt instinctive way of youth" discover the wind's secret? Only "the kind, calm years, exacting their accompt of pain" can mature the mind. This young poet, grown older, will learn the truth one day—on a midsummer morning, at daybreak, looking over some "sparkling foreign country," at its height of gloom and gloss. At its height—next minute must begin, then, the work of destruction; and what shall be the earliest sign? That very wind beginning among the vines:

> "So low, so low, what shall it say but
> this?
> 'Here is the change beginning, here the
> lines
> Circumscribe beauty, set to bliss
> The limit time assigns.'" . . .

Change is the law of life: *that* is what the wind says.

> "Nothing can be as it has been before;
> Better, so call it, only not the same.
> To draw one beauty into our hearts' core,
> And keep it changeless! Such our claim;
> So answered: Never more!
>
> Simple? Why, this is the old woe of the
> world;
> Tune, to whose rise and fall we live and
> die.
> Rise with it then! Rejoice that man is
> hurled
> From change to change unceasingly,

His soul's wings never furled!"

* * * * *

Her rejection of the "young man's pride" has raised her for an instant above her own suffering. Flinging back his interpretation in his face—that interpretation which had pierced her to the quick with its intensity of vision—she has found a better one; and for a while she rests in this. "The laws of nature": shall not that be the formula to still her pain? . . . Not yet, not yet; the heart was numbed but for a moment. Stung to such fresh life as it has been but now, it cries imperiously again. The laws of nature?

"That's a new question; still replies the
fact,
Nothing endures: the wind moans,
saying so;
We moan in acquiescence."

Only to acquiescence can we attain.

"God knows: endure his act!"

But the human loss, the human anguish. . . . Formulas touch not these, nor does acquiescence mitigate. Tell ourselves as wisely as we may that mutability must be—we yet discern where the woe lies. We cannot fix the "one fair good wise thing" just as we grasped it—cannot engrave it, as it were, on our souls. And then we die—and it is gone for ever, and we would have sunk beneath death's wave, as we sink now, to save it—but time washed over it ere death mercifully came. It was abolished even while we lived: the wind had begun "so low, so low" . . .

and carried it away on its moaning voice. Change is the very essence of life; and life may be probation for a better life—who knows? But if she could have engraved, immutable, on her soul, the hours in which her husband loved her. . . .

VII.—AMONG THE ROCKS

Such anguish must, at least, "change" with the rest! And now that autumn is fully come, the loss of summer is more bearable. It is while we hope that summer still may stay that we are tortured.

> "Oh, good gigantic smile o' the brown old
> earth,
> This autumn morning!"

She will forget the "laws of nature": she will unreflectingly watch earth. That is best.

> ". . . How he sets his bones
> To bask i' the sun, and thrusts out knees
> and feet
> For the ripple to run over in its mirth;
> Listening the while, where on the heap
> of stones
> The white breast of the sea-lark twitters
> sweet."

The geniality of earth! She will sink her troubled soul into the vast tranquillity. No science, no "cosmic whole"—just this: the brown old earth.

But soon the analogy-hunting begins: that soul of hers can never rest. What does "this," then, show forth? Her love in its tide can flow over the lower nature, as the waves flow over the basking rocks.

"Old earth smiles and knows":

> "If you loved only what were worth your
> love,
> Love were clear gain, and wholly well for
> you:
> Make the low nature better by your
> throes!
> Give earth yourself, go up for gain above!"

I confess that I cannot follow this analogy. The lesson may be clear—of that later; the analogy escapes me. Who says that rocks are of lower nature than the sea which washes them? But if it does not mean this, what does it mean? Mrs. Orr interprets thus: "As earth blesses her smallest creatures with her smile, so should love devote itself to those less worthy beings who may be ennobled by it." That seems to me to touch this instance not at all. It is the earth who has set "himself" (in the unusual personification) to bask in the sun; the earth, *here*, is getting, not giving. Or rather, all is one: each element wholly joys in the other. And watching this, the woman wrings from it "the doctrine simple, ancient, true," that love is self-sacrifice. Let that be true, I still cannot see how the symbol aids the doctrine.

And the doctrine? Grant that love is self-sacrifice (I had rather say that self-sacrifice is a part, and but a part, of love): is love also self-sufficiency?

> "Make the low nature better by your
> throes."

It is a strange love, surely, which so speaks? Shall a man live, despised, in harmony with her who despises him? James Lee's wife may call this love,

but we absolve James Lee, I think, if he does not! For human beings feel most subtly when scorn dwells near them; they may indeed have caused that scorn —but let there be no talk of love where it subsists.

Even bitterness were less destructive to the woman's hope than this strange counting of the cost, this self-sufficiency. Our sympathy must leave her at this phase; and sympathy for her was surely Browning's aim? But possibly it was not; and *if* not, this indeed is subtle.

VIII.—BESIDE THE DRAWING-BOARD

She had turned wearily from the household cares, the daily direction of a little peasant-servant, to her drawing-board. A cast from Leonardo da Vinci of a woman's hand is her model, and for an hour she has been happily working. She has failed; but that has not clouded joy nor damped ardour.

> "Its beauty mounted into my brain,"

and, effacing the failures, she has yielded to a fancy —has taken the chalk between her lips, instead of her fingers:

> "With soul to help if the mere lips failed,
> I kissed all right where the drawing ailed,
> Kissed fast the grace that somehow slips
> Still from one's soulless finger-tips."

This hand was that of a worshipped woman. Her fancy sets the ring on it, by which one knows

> "That here at length a master found
> His match, a proud lone soul its mate."

Not even Da Vinci's pencil had been able to trace all the beauty—

". . . how free, how fine
To fear almost!—of the limit-line."

He, like her, had suffered some defeat. But think of the minutes in which, with her he worshipped, he "looked and loved, learned and drew, Drew and learned and loved again!" Such moments are not for such as she. She will go back to the household cares —she has her lesson, and it is not the same as Da Vinci's.

"Little girl with the poor coarse hand"

. . . this is *her* model, from whom she had turned to a cold clay cast. Her business is to understand, not the almost fearful beauty of a thing like this, but "the worth of flesh and blood."

But was not that Da Vinci's business too? Would he not, could she speak with him, proudly tell her so? "Nothing but beauty in a hand." Would the Master have turned from this peasant one? No: she hears him condemn her, laugh her woes to scorn.

"The fool forsooth is all forlorn
Because the beauty she thinks best
Lived long ago or was never born,
Because no beauty bears the test
In this rough peasant hand!"

It was not long before Da Vinci threw aside the faulty pencil, and spent years instead of hours in studying, not the mere external loveliness, but the anatomy of the hand, learning the veritable use

"Of flesh and bone and nerve that make
The poorest coarsest human hand
An object worthy to be scanned
A whole life long for their sole sake."

Just the hand—and all the body still to learn. Is not this the lesson of life—this incompleteness?

"Now the parts and then the whole!"

And here is she, declaring that if she is not loved, she must die—she, with her stinted soul and stunted body! Look again at the peasant hand. No beauty is there—but it can spin the wool and bake the bread:

"'What use survives the beauty?'"

Yes: Da Vinci would proclaim her fool.

Then *this* shall be the new formula. She will be of use; will do the daily task, forgetting the unattainable ideals. She cannot keep her husband's love, any more than she can draw the perfect hand; then she will not waste her life in sighing for either gift. She will be useful; she will gain cheer *that* way, since all the others fail her.

"Go, little girl with the poor coarse hand!
I have my lesson, shall understand."

This is the last hope—to be of humble use; this the last formula for survival.

IX.—ON DECK

And this has failed like the rest. She is on board the boat that carries her away from him, she has found the last formula: *set him free*. Well, it in its turn has

been followed: she is gone. Gone—in every sense.

"There is nothing to remember in me,
Nothing I ever said with a grace,
Nothing I did that you care to see,
Nothing I was that deserves a place
In your mind, now I leave you, set you
free."

No "*petite fleur dans la pensée*"—none, none: she grants him all her dis-grace. But will he not grant her something too—now that she is gone? Will he not grant that men have loved such women, when the women have loved them so utterly? It *has* been: she knows that, and the more certainly now that she has yielded finally her claim to a like miracle. His soul is locked fast; but, "love for a key" (if he could but have loved her!), what might not have happened? She might have grown the same in his eyes as he is in hers!

So strange it is to think of *that*. . . . She can think anything when such imagining is once possible to her. She can think of *him* as the "harsh, ill-favoured one!" For what would it have mattered—her ugliness—if he had loved her? They would have been "like as pea and pea." Ever since the world began, love has worked such spells—that is so true that she has warrant to work out this strange, new dream.

Imagine it. . . . If he had all her in his heart, as she has all him in hers! He, whose least word brought gloom or glee, who never lifted his hand in vain—that hand which will hold hers still, from over the sea . . . if, when *he* thinks of her, a face as beautiful as his own should rise to his imagination—with eyes as dear, a mouth like that, as bright a brow. . . .

"Till you saw yourself, while you cried "Tis
she!'"

But it will not be—and if it could be, she would not know or care, for the joy would have killed her.

Or turn it again the converse way. Supposing he could "fade to a thing like her," with the coarse hair and skin . . .

"You might turn myself!—should I know
or care
When I should be dead of joy, James Lee?"

Either way it would kill her, so she may as well be gone, with her

"Love that was life, life that was love";

and there is nothing at all to remember in her. As long as she lives his words and looks will circle round *her* memory. If she could fancy one touch of love for her once coming in those words and looks again. . . . But the boat moves on, farther, ever farther from the little house with its four rooms and its field and fig-tree and vines—from the window, the fireside, the doorway, from the beach and cliff and rocks. All the formulas have failed but this one. This one will not fail. He is set free.

She had to go; and neither him nor her can we condemn. "One near one is too far." She saw and loved too well: one or the other she should have been wise enough to hide from him. But she could

not. Character is fate; and two characters are two fates. Neither, with that other, could be different; each might, with another "other," have been all that each was meant to be.

FOOTNOTES:

[251:1] The poems were first called *James Lee* only.

[254:1] *Life*, Mrs. Orr, p. 266.

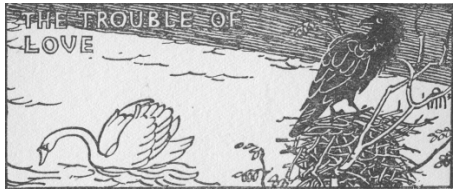
[257:1] "The little church, a field, a few houses, and the sea . . . Such a soft sea, and such a mournful wind!"—*Life*, p. 266.

[258:1] *Life*, p. 266.

[262:1] These lines were published by Browning, separately, in 1836, when he was twenty-six. *James Lee's Wife* was published in 1864.

[263:1] Nettleship well says: "The difference between the first and second parts of this section is that, while the plaint of the wind was enough to make Browning write in 1836, he must have the plaint of a soul in 1863. . . . And yet, something is lost."

PART V



TROUBLE OF LOVE: THE MAN'S

I

THE WOMAN UNWON

In the section entitled "Lovers Meeting" we saw the exultant mood of love in man, and I there pointed out how seldom even Browning has assigned that mood to woman. But he does not show her as alone in suffering love's pain. The lyrics we are now to consider give us woman as the maker of love's pain for man; we learn her in this character through the utterances of men—and these are noble utterances, every one. Mr. J. T. Nettleship, in his *Essays and Thoughts*, well remarks that man's passion shows, in Browning's work, "a greater width of view and intellectual power" than woman's does; that in the feminine utterances "little beyond the actual love of this life is imagined";[277:1] and that in such utterances "we notice . . . an absolute want of originality and of power to look at the passion of love in an abstract sense outside the woman herself and her lover."

I too have, by implication, found this fault with Browning; but Mr. Nettleship differs from me in that he apparently delights to dwell on the idea of woman's accepted inferiority—her "tender, unaspiring love . . . type of that perfection which looks to one superior." It will be seen from this how little he is involved by feminism. That woman should be the glad inferior quarrels not at all with his vision of things as they should be. Man, indeed, he grants, "must firmly establish his purity and constancy before he dares to assert supremacy over Nature": woman, we may suppose, being—as if she were not quite certainly *a person*—included in Nature. That a devotee of Browning should retain this attitude may well surprise us, since nothing in his "teaching" is clearer than that woman is the great inspiring influence for man. But the curious fact which has struck both Mr. Nettleship and myself—that, in Browning's work, woman does so frequently, *when expressing herself*, fail in breadth and imagination—may very well account for the obsolete gesture in this interpreter. . . . Can it be, then, that Browning was (as has frequently been said of him) very much less dramatic a writer than he wished to believe himself? Or, more aptly for our purpose to frame the question, was he dramatic only for men? Did he merely guess at, and not grasp, the deepest emotions and thoughts of women? This, if it be affirmed, will rob him of some glory—yet I think that affirmed it must be. It leaves him all nobility of mind and heart with regard to us; the glory of which he is robbed is after all but that of thaumaturgic power—it is but to say that he could not turn himself into a woman!

In what ways does Browning show us as the makers of "love's trouble" for man? First, of course, as loved and unwon. But though this be the most obvious of the ways, not obvious is Browning's treatment of it. To love "in vain" is a phrase contemned of him. No love is in vain. Grief, anguish even, may attend it, but never can its issue be futility. Nor is this merely the already familiar view that somehow, though rejected, love benignly works for the beloved. "That may be, that *is*" (he seems to say), "but it is not the truth which most inspires me." The glory of love for Browning resides most radiantly in what it does for the lover's own soul. It is "God's secret": one who loves is initiate.

> "Such am I: the secret's mine now! She has
> lost me, I have gained her;
> Her soul's mine: and thus, grown perfect, I
> shall pass my life's remainder.
> Life will just hold out the proving both
> our powers, alone and blended:
> And then, come next life quickly! This
> world's use will have been ended."

That is the concluding stanza of *Cristina*, which might be called the companion-piece to *Porphyria's Lover*; for in each the woman belongs to a social world remote from her adorer's; in each she has, nevertheless, perceived him and been drawn to him —but in *Cristina* is caught back into the vortex, while in *Porphyria's Lover* the passion prevails, for the man, by killing her, has kept her folded in "God's secret" with himself.

> "She should never have looked at me if
> she meant I should not love her!

There are plenty . . . men, you call such, I
suppose . . . she may discover
All her soul to, if she pleases, and yet
leave much as she found them:
But I'm not so, and she knew it, when she
fixed me, glancing round them."

That is the lover's first impulsive cry on finding himself "thrown over." Why did she not leave him alone? Others tell him that that "fixing" of hers means nothing—that she is, simply, a coquette. But he "can't tell what her look said." Certainly not any "vile cant" about giving her heart to him because she saw him sad and solitary, about lavishing all that she was on him because he was obscure, and she the queen of women. Not *that*, whatever else!

And now, so sure of this that he grows sure of other things as well, he declares that it was a moment of true revelation for her also—she *did* perceive in him the man she wanted.

"Oh, we're sunk enough here, God knows!
but not quite so sunk that moments,
Sure tho' seldom, are denied us, when the
spirit's true endowments
Stand out plainly from its false ones, and
apprise it if pursuing
Or the right way or the wrong way, to its
triumph or undoing."

That was what she had felt—the queen of women! A coquette, if they will, for others, but not for him; and, though cruel to him also in the event, not because she had not recognised him. She *had* recognised him, and more—she had recognised the great truth, had deeply felt that the soul "stops here"

for but one end, the true end, sole and single: "this love-way."

If the soul miss that way, it goes wrong. There may be better ends, there may even be deeper blisses, but that is the essential—that is the significant thing in life.

But they need not smile at his fatuity! He sees that she "knew," but he can see the issue also.

> "Oh, observe! of course, next moment, the
> world's honours, in derision,
> Trampled out the light for ever. Never fear
> but there's provision
> Of the devil's to quench knowledge, lest
> we walk the earth in rapture" . . .

That must be reckoned with; but all it does to those who "catch God's secret" is simply to make them prize their capture so much the more:

> "Such am I: the secret's mine now! She has
> lost me, I have gained her;"

—for though she has cast him off, he has grasped her soul, and will retain it. He has prevailed, and all the rest of his life shall prove him the victorious one—the one who has two souls to work with! He will prove all that such a pair can accomplish; and then death can come quickly: "this world's use will have been ended." She also knew this, but would not follow it to its issue. Thus she lost him—but he gained her, and that shall do as well.

No loving "in vain" there! But this poem is the high-water mark of unsuccessful love exultant. Browning was too true a humanist to keep us always on so shining a peak; he knew that there are lower levels, where the wounded wings must rest—that mood, for instance, of wistful looking-back to things undreamed-of and now gone, yet once experienced:

"This is a spray the bird clung to,
Making it blossom with pleasure,
Ere the high tree-top she sprung to,
Fit for her nest and her treasure.
Oh, what a hope beyond measure
Was the poor spray's, which the flying feet
hung to—
So to be singled out, built in, and sung to!

This is a heart the Queen leant on" . . .

—and in a stanza far less lovely than that of the bird, he shows forth the analogy. The Queen "went on"; but what a moment that heart had had! . . . Gratitude, we see always, for the gift of love in the heart, for God's secret. The lover was left alone, but he had known the thrill. "Better to have loved and lost"—nay, but "lost," for Browning, is not in the scheme. She is there, in the world, whether his or another's.

Sometimes she has never been his at all, has never cared:

"All June I bound the rose in sheaves.
Now, rose by rose, I strip the leaves
And strew them where Pauline may pass.
She will not turn aside? Alas!
Let them lie. Suppose they die?

The chance was, they might take her eye."

And then, for many a month, he tried to learn the lute to please her.

"To-day I venture all I know.
She will not hear my music? So!
Break the string; fold music's wing:
Suppose Pauline had bade me sing!"

Thus we gradually see that all his life he has been learning to love her. Now he has resolved to speak. . . . Heaven or hell?

"She will not give me heaven? 'Tis well!
Lose who may—I still can say
Those who win heaven, blest are they!"

Here again is Browning's typical lover. Never does he whine, never resent: she was free to choose, and she has not chosen *him*. That is pain; but of the "humiliation" commonly assigned to unsuccessful love, he never dreams: where can be humiliation in having caught God's secret? . . . And even if she have half-inclined to him, but found that not all herself can give herself—more pain in that, a nearer approach to "failure," perhaps—even so, he understands.

"I said—Then dearest, since 'tis so,
Since now at length my fate I know,
Since nothing all my love avails,
Since all, my life seemed meant for, fails,
  Since this was written and needs must
    be—
My whole heart rises up to bless
Your name in pride and thankfulness!

Take back the hope you gave—I claim
Only a memory of the same
—And this beside, if you will not blame,
Your leave for one more last ride with
me."

The girl hesitates. Her proud dark eyes, half-pitiful, dwell on him for a moment—"with life or death in the balance," thinks he.

". . . Right!
The blood replenished me again;
My last thought was at least not vain;
I and my mistress, side by side
Shall be together, breathe and ride;
So, one day more am I deified.
Who knows but the world may end to-night?"[285:1]

Now the moment comes in which he lifts her to the saddle. It is as if he had drawn down upon his breast the fairest, most celestial cloud in evening-skies . . . a cloud touched gloriously at once by setting sun and rising moon and evening-star.

"Down on you, near and yet more near,
Till flesh must fade for heaven was here—
Thus leant she and lingered—joy and fear!
Thus lay she a moment on my breast."

And then they begin to ride. His soul smooths itself out—there shall be no repining, no questioning: he will take the whole of his hour.

"Had I said that, had I done this,
So might I gain, so might I miss.
Might she have loved me? just as well

She might have hated, who can tell!

* * * * *

And here we are riding, she and I."

He is not the only man who has failed. All men strive —who succeeds? His enfranchised spirit seems to range the universe—everywhere the *done* is petty, the undone vast; everywhere men dream beyond their powers:

"I hoped she would love me; here we ride!"

No one gains all. Hand and brain are never equal; hearts, when they can greatly conceive, fail in the greatest courage; nothing we do is just what we dreamed it might be. We are hedged in everywhere by the fleshly screen. But *they* two ride, and he sees her bosom lift and fall. . . . To the rest, then, their crowns! To the statesman, ten lines, perhaps, which contain the fruit of all his life; to a soldier, a flag stuck on a heap of bones—and as guerdon for each, a name scratched on the Abbey stones.

"My riding is better, by their leave!"

Even our artists! The poet says the thing, but we feel it. Not one of us can express it like him; but has he *had* it? When he dies, will he have been a whit nearer his own sublimities than the lesser spirits who have never turned a line?

"Sing, riding's a joy! For me, I ride."

(Note the fine irony here. The poet shall sing the joy

of riding; this man *rides*.)

The great sculptor, too, with his twenty years' slavery to Art:

> "And that's your Venus, whence we turn
> To yonder girl that fords the burn!"

But the sculptor, with his insight, acquiesces, so this man need not pity him. The musician fares even worse. After *his* life's labours, they say (even his friends say) that the opera is great in intention, but fashions change so quickly in music—he is out-of-date. He gave his youth? Well—

> "I gave my youth; but we ride, in fine."

Supposing we could know perfect bliss in this world, what should we have for which to strive? We must lead some life beyond, we must have a bliss to die for! If *he* had this glory-garland round his soul, what other joy could he ever so dimly descry?

> "Earth being so good, would heaven seem
> best?
> Now, heaven and she are beyond this
> ride."

* * * * *

Thus he has mused, riding beside her, to the horses' rhythmic stretching pace. It shall be best as she decrees. She rejects him: he will not whine; what she does shall somehow have its good for him—*she* shall not be wrong! He has the thought of her in his soul, and the memory of her—and there will be, as well, the memory of this ride. That moment he has, whole and perfect:

"Who knows but the world may end to-
night!"

Yes; they ride on—the sights, the sounds, the thoughts, encompass them; they are together. His soul, all hers, has yet been half-withdrawn from her, so deeply has he mused on what she is to him: it is the great paradox—almost one forgets that she is there, so intimate the union, and so silent. . . . But is she *not* there? and, being there, does she not now seem to give him something strange and wonderful to take from her? She *is* there—

"And yet—she has not spoke so long!"

She is as silent as he. They might both be in a trance. He knows what his trance is—can it be that hers is the same? Then what would it mean? . . . And the hope so manfully resigned floods back on him. What if this *be* heaven—what if she has found, caught up like him, that she does love?

Can it mean that, gazing both, now in this glorious moment, at life's flower of love, they both are fixed so, ever shall so abide—she with him, as he with her? Can it mean that the instant is made eternity—

"And heaven just prove that I and she
Ride, ride together, for ever ride?"

* * * * *

Despite the transcendental interpretations of this glorious love-song—surpassed, I think and many others think, by none in the world—I believe that the concluding stanza means just that. Hope has rushed on him again from her twin-silence—can she be at one with him in all, as she is in this? Will the proud

dark eyes have forgotten the pity—and the pride? . . . The wrong that has been done to Browning by his too-subtle "interpreters" is, in my view, incalculable. Always he must be, for them, the teacher. But he is the *poet*! He "sings, riding's a joy"—and such joy brings hope along with it, hope for the "obvious human bliss." People seem to forget that it was Browning who made that phrase[289:1]—which might almost be his protest against the transcendentalists.

Much of his finest work has been thus falsified, thus strained to meanings so "profound" as to be none at all. Mr. Nettleship's gloss upon this stanza of *The Last Ride* is a case in point. "[The lover] buoys himself with the hope that the highest bliss *may* be the change from the minute's joy to an eternal fulfilment of joy." Does this mean anything? And if it did, does that stanza mean *it*? I declare that it means nothing, and that the stanza means what instinctively (I feel and know) each reader, reading it—not "studying" it—accepts as its best meaning: the human one, the true following of the so subtly-induced mood. And that is, simply, the invigoration, the joy, of riding; and the hope which comes along with that invigoration and that joy.

In the strange *Numpholeptos* we find, by implication, the heart of Browning's "message" for women. "The nympholepts of old," explains Mr. Augustine Birrell in one of the volumes of *Obiter Dicta*, "were those unfortunates who, whilst carelessly strolling among sylvan shades, caught a hasty glimpse of some spiritual inmate of the woods, in whose pursuit their

whole lives were ever afterwards fruitlessly spent."

The man here has fallen in love with "an angelically pure and inhumanly cold woman, who requires in him an unattainable union of immaculate purity and complete experience of life."[290:1]

She does not reject his love, but will wholly accept it only on these impossible terms. Herself dwells in some "magic hall" whence ray forth shafts of coloured light—crimson, purple, yellow; and along these shafts, which symbolise experience, her lover is to travel—coming back to her at close of each wayfaring, for the rays end before her feet, beneath her eyes and smile, as they began. He goes forth in obedience; he comes back. Ever the issue is the same: he comes back smirched. And she—forgives him, but not loves him.

> "What means the sad slow silver smile
> above
> My clay but pity, pardon?—at the best
> But acquiescence that I take my rest,
> Contented to be clay?"

She "smiles him slow forgiveness"—nothing more; he is dismissed, must travel forth again. *This* time he may return, untinged by the ray which he is to traverse. She sends him, deliberately; he must break through the quintessential whiteness that surrounds her—but he is to come back unsmirched. So she pitilessly, for all her "pity," has decreed.

And patient, mute, obedient, always he has gone—until this day. This day his patience fails him, and he speaks. Once more he had come back—once more been "pardoned." But the pity was so gentle—like a moon-beam. He had almost hoped the smile would

pass the "pallid moonbeam limit," be "transformed at last to sunlight and salvation." If she could pass that goal and "gain love's birth," he scarce would know his clay from gold's own self; "for gold means love." . . . But no; the "sad slow silver smile" had meant, as ever, naught but pity, pardon, acquiescence in his lesserness for *him*. *She* acquiesced not; she keeps her love for the "spirit-seven" before God's throne.[291:1]

He then made one supreme appeal for

> "Love, the love sole and whole without
> alloy."

Vainly! Such an appeal "must be felt, not heard." Her calm regard was unchanged—nay, rather it had grown harsh and hard, had seemed to imply disdain, repulsion, and he could not face those things; he rose from his kissing of her feet—he *did* go forth again. This time he might return, immaculate, from the path of that "lambent flamelet." . . . He knew he could not, but—he *might*! She promises that he can: should he not trust her?

And now, to-day, once more he is returned. Still she stands, still she listens, still she smiles! But he protests at last:

> "Surely I had your sanction when I faced,
> Fared forth upon that untried yellow ray
> Whence I retrack my steps?"

The crimson, the purple had been explored; from

them he had come back deep-stained. How has the yellow used him? He has placed himself again for judgment before her "blank pure soul, alike the source and tomb of that prismatic glow." To this yellow he has subjected himself utterly: she *had* ordained it! He was to "bathe, to burnish himself, soul and body, to swim and swathe in yellow licence." And here he is: "absurd and frightful," "suffused with crocus, saffron, orange"—just as he had been with crimson, purple!

She willed it so: he was to track the yellow ray. He pleads once more her own permission—nay, command! And, as before, she shows

> "Scarce recognition, no approval, some
> Mistrust, more wonder at a man become
> Monstrous in garb, nay—flesh-disguised as
> well,
> Through his adventure."

But she had said that, if he were worthily to retain her love, he must share the knowledge shrined in her supernal eyes. And this was the one way for *man* to gain that knowledge. Well, it is as before:

> "I pass into your presence, I receive
> Your smile of pity, pardon, and I leave."

But no! This time he will not leave, he will not dumbly bend to his penance. Hitherto he has trusted her word that the feat can be achieved, the ray trod to its edge, yet he return unsmirched. He has tried the experiment—and returned, "absurd as frightful." This is his last word.

> ". . . No, I say:

No fresh adventure! No more seeking love
At end of toil, and finding, calm above
My passion, the old statuesque regard,
The sad petrific smile!"

And he turns upon her with a violent invective. She is not so much hard and hateful as mistaken and obtuse.

"You very woman with the pert pretence
To match the male achievement!"

Who could not be victorious when all is made easy, when the rough effaces itself to smooth, the gruff "grinds down and grows a whisper"; when man's truth subdues its rapier-edge to suit the bulrush spear that womanly falsehood fights with? Oh woman's ears that will not hear the truth! oh woman's "thrice-superfine feminity of sense," that ignores, as by right divine, the process, and takes the spotless result from out the very muck that made it!

But he breaks off. "Ah me!" he cries,

"The true slave's querulous outbreak!"

And forth again, all slavishly, at her behest he fares. Who knows but *this* time the "crimson quest" may deepen to a sunrise, not decay to that cold sad sweet smile—which he obeys?

Such a being as this, said Browning himself, "is imaginary, not real; a nymph and no woman"; but the poem is "an allegory of an impossible ideal of

love, accepted conventionally." *How* impossible he has shown not only here but everywhere—*how* conventionally accepted. This is not woman's mission! And in the lover's querulous outbreak—the "true slave's" outbreak—we may read the innermost meaning of the allegory. If women will set up "the pert pretence to match the male achievement," they must consent to take the world as men are forced to take it. There must be no unfairness, no claim on the chivalry which has sought to shield them: in the homely phrase, they must "take the rough with the smooth"—not the stainless result alone, with a revolted shudder for the marrings which have made it possible.

But having flung these truths at her, observe that the man rues them. He accepts himself as a slave: the slave (as I read this passage) to what is *true* in the idea of woman's purity. The insufferable creature of the smile is (as he says) the "mistaken and obtuse unreason of a she-intelligence"; but somewhere there was right in her demand. If man could but return, unstained! He must go forth, must explore the rays—of all the claims of woman on him this is most insistent; but if he could explore, and not return "absurd as frightful." . . . He cannot. Experience is not whole without "some wonder linked with fear"—the colours! The shafts ray from her "midmost home"; she "dwells there, hearted." True, but this is not *experience*, and she shall not conceit herself into believing it to be. She shall not set up the "pert pretence to match the male achievement": she shall learn that men make women "easy victors," when their rough effaces itself to smooth for woman's sake. One or the other she must choose: knowledge and the right to judge, or ignorance and the duty to refrain from judgment. . . . And yet—he goes again;

he obeys the silver smile! For the "crimson-quest may deepen to a sunrise"; he *may* come back and find her waiting, "sunlight and salvation," because she understands at last; and both shall look for stains from those long shafts, and see none there. . . . Maybe, maybe: he goes—will come again one day; and *that* at last may prove itself the day when "men are pure, and women brave."

We pass from the unearthly atmosphere of *Numpholeptos*—well-nigh the most abstract of all Browning's poems—to the vivid, astonishing realism of *Too Late*.

Edith is dead, and the man who loved her and failed to win her, is musing upon the transmutation of all values in his picture of life which has been made by the tidings. Not till now had he fully realised his absorption in the thought of her: "the woman I loved so well, who married the other." He had been wont to "sit and look at his life." That life, until he met her, had rippled and run like a river. But he met her and loved her and lost her—and it was as if a great stone had been cast by a devil into his life's mid-current. The waves strove about it—the waves that had "come for their joy, and found this horrible stone full-tide."

The stone thwarted God. But the lover has had two ways of thinking about it. Though the waves, in all their strength and fullness, could not win past, a thread of water might escape and run through the "evening-country," safe, untormented, silent, until it reached the sea. This would be his tender, acquiescent brooding on all she is to him, and the hope that still they may be united at the last, though

time shall then have stilled his passion.

The second way was better!

> "Or else I would think, 'Perhaps some
> night
> When new things happen, a meteor-ball
> May slip through the sky in a line of light,
> And earth breathe hard, and landmarks
> fall,
> And my waves no longer champ nor chafe,
> Since a stone will have rolled from its
> place: let be!'"

For the husband might die, and he, still young and vigorous, might try again to win her. . . . That was how he had been wont to "sit and look at his life."

> "But, Edith dead! No doubting more!"

All the dreams are over; all the brooding days have been lived in vain.

> "But, dead! All's done with: wait who may,
> Watch and wear and wonder who will.
> Oh, my whole life that ends to-day!
> Oh, my soul's sentence, sounding still,
> 'The woman is dead that was none of his;
> And the man that was none of hers may
> go!'
> There's only the past left: worry that!" . . .

All that he was or could have been, she should have had for a word, a "want put into a look." She had not given that look; now she can never give it—and perhaps she *does* want him. He feels that she does—a "pulse in his cheek that stabs and stops" assures him

that she "needs help in her grave, and finds none near"—that from his heart, precisely *his*, she now at last wants warmth. And he can only send it—so! . . . His acquiescence then had been his error.

"I ought to have done more: once my
speech,
And once your answer, and there, the
end,
And Edith was henceforth out of reach!
Why, men do more to deserve a friend,
Be rid of a foe, get rich, grow wise,
Nor, folding their arms, stare fate in the
face.
Why, better even have burst like a thief
And borne you away to a rock for us two,
In a moment's horror, bright, bloody and
brief" . . .

Well, *he* had not done this. But—

"What did the other do? You be judge!
Look at us, Edith! Here are we both!
Give him his six whole years: I grudge
None of the life with you, nay, loathe
Myself that I grudged his start in advance
Of me who could overtake and pass.
But, as if he loved you! No, not he,
Nor anyone else in the world, 'tis
plain" . . .

—for he who speaks, though he so loved and loves her, knows that he is and was alone in his worship. He knows even that such worship of her was among unaccountable things. That *he*, young, prosperous, sane, and free, as he was and is, should have poured his life out, as it were, and held it forth to *her*, and

said, "Half a glance, and I drop the glass!" . . . For—and now we come to those amazing stanzas which place this passionate love-song by itself in the world —

"Handsome, were you? 'Tis more than they
held,
More than they said; I was 'ware and
watched:

* * * * *

The others? No head that was turned, no
heart
Broken, my lady, assure yourself!"

Her admirers had quickly recovered: one married a dancer, others stole a friend's wife, or stagnated or maundered, or else, unmarried, strove to believe that the peace of singleness *was* peace, and not—what they were finding it! But whatever these rejected suitors did, the truth about her was simply that

"On the whole, you were let alone, I
think."

And laid so, on the shelf, she had "looked to the other, who acquiesced." He was a poet, was he not?

"He rhymed you his rubbish nobody read,
Loved you and doved you—did not I
laugh?"

Oh, what a prize! Had she appreciated adequately her pink of poets? . . . But, after all, she had chosen him, before *this* lover: they had both been tried.

"Oh, heart of mine, marked broad with her

mark,
Tekel, found wanting, set aside,
Scorned! See, I bleed these tears in the
dark
Till comfort come, and the last be bled:
He? He is tagging your epitaph."

And now sounds that cry of the girl of *In a Year*.

"If it could only come over again!"

She *must* have loved him best. If there had been time. . . . She would have probed his heart and found what blood is; then would have twitched the robe from her lay-figure of a poet, and pricked that leathern heart, to find that only verses could spurt from it. . . .

"And late it was easy; late, you walked
Where a friend might meet you; Edith's
name
Arose to one's lip if one laughed or talked;
If I heard good news, you heard the
same;
When I woke, I knew that your breath
escaped;
I could bide my time, keep alive, alert."

Now she is dead: "no doubting more." . . . But somehow he will get his good of it! He will keep alive—and long, she shall see; but not like the others; there shall be no turning aside, and he will begin at once as he means to end. Those others may go on with the world—get gold, get women, betray their wives and their husbands and their friends.

"There are two who decline, a woman and

I,
And enjoy our death in the darkness
here."[301:1]

And he recurs to her cherished, her dwelt-on, adored defects. Only *he* could have loved her so, in despite of them. The most complex mood of lovers, this! Humility and pride are mingled; one knows not which is which—the pride of love, humility of self. Only so could the loved one have declined to our level; only so could our love acquire value in those eyes—and yet "the others" did not love so, the defects *were* valid: there should be some recognition: "*I* loved, *quand même*!" Why, it was almost the defects that brought the thrill:

"I liked that way you had with your curls,
Wound to a ball in a net behind:
Your cheek was chaste as a quaker-girl's,
And your mouth—there was never, to
my mind,
Such a funny mouth, for it would not shut;
And the dented chin, too—what a chin!
There were certain ways when you spoke,
some words
That you know you never could
pronounce:
You were thin, however; like a bird's
Your hand seemed—some would say,
the pounce
Of a scaly-footed hawk—all but!
The world was right when it called you
thin.

But I turn my back on the world: I take
Your hand, and kneel, and lay to my
lips.

Bid me live, Edith!"

—and she shall be queen indeed, shall have high observance, courtship made perfect. He seems to see her stand there—

"Warm too, and white too: would this
wine
Had washed all over that body of yours,
Ere I drank it, and you down with it,
thus!"

. . . The wine of his life, that she would not take—but she shall take it now! He will "slake thirst at her presence" by pouring it away, by drinking it down with her, as long ago he yearned to do. Edith needs help in her grave and finds none near—wants warmth from his heart? He sends it—so.

Assuredly this is the meaning; yet none of the commentators says so. She was the man's whole life, and she has died. Then he dies too, that he may live.

"There are two who decline, a woman and
I,
And enjoy our death in the darkness
here."

Yet even in this we have no sense of failure, of "giving-in": it is for intenser life that he dies, and she shall be his queen "while his soul endures."

This is the last of my "women unwon." In none of all these poems does courage fail; love is ever God's secret. It comes and goes: the heart has had its

moment. It does not come at all: the heart has known the loved one's loveliness. It has but hoped to come: the heart hoped with it. It has set a price upon itself, a cruel crushing price: the heart will pay it, if it can be paid. It has waked too late—it calls from the grave: the heart will follow it there. No love is in vain:

> "For God above creates the love to reward
> the love."

FOOTNOTES:

[277:1] He excepts, of course, all through this passage, *Any Wife to any Husband*—a poem which has not fallen into my scheme.

[285:1] No line which Browning has written is more characteristic than this—nor more famous.

[289:1] In *By the Fireside*.

[290:1] Arthur Symons, *Introduction to the Study of Browning*, p. 198.

[291:1] Browning himself, asked by Dr. Furnivall, on behalf of the Browning Society, to explain this allusion, answered in the fashion which he often loved to use towards such inquirers: "The 'seven spirits' are in the Apocalypse, also in Coleridge and Byron, a common image." . . . "I certainly never intended" (he also said) "to personify wisdom, or philosophy, or any other abstraction." And he summed up the, after all, sufficiently obvious meaning by saying that *Numpholeptos* is "an allegory of an impossible ideal object of

love, accepted conventionally as such by a man who all the while" (as I have once or twice had occasion to say of himself!) "cannot quite blind himself to the fact that" (to put it more concisely than he) knowledge and purity are best obtained by achievement. Still more concisely: "Innocence—sin—virtue"—in the Hegelian chord of experience.

[301:1] Here is a clear echo of Heine, in one of his most renowned lyrics:—

"The dead stand up, 'tis the midnight
bell,
In crazy dances they're leaping:
We two in the grave lie well, lie well,
And I in thine arms am sleeping.

The dead stand up, 'tis the Judgment
Day,
To Heaven or Hell they're hieing:
We two care nothing, we two will
stay
Together quietly lying."

II

THE WOMAN WON

Love is not static. We may not sit down and say, "It cannot be more than now; it will not be less. Henceforth I take it for granted." Though she be won, there still is more to do. I say "she" (and Browning says it), because the taking-for-granted ideal is essentially man's—woman has never been persuaded to hold it. Possibly it is *because* men feel so keenly

the elusiveness of women that they grow weary in the quest of the real Herself. But, says Browning, they must not grow weary in it. Elusive though she be, her lover must not leave her uncaptured. For if love is the greatest adventure, it is also the longest. We cannot come to an end of it—and, if we were wise, should not desire so to do.

But is she in truth so elusive? Are not women far simpler than they are accounted? "The First Reader in another language," I have elsewhere said of them; but doubtless a woman cannot be the judge. Let us see what Browning, subtle as few other men, thought of our lucidity.

> "Room after room,
> I hunt the house through
> We inhabit together.
> Heart, fear nothing, for, heart, thou shalt
> find her—
> Next time, herself!—not the trouble
> behind her
> Left in the curtain, the couch's perfume!
> As she brushed it, the cornice-wreath
> blossomed anew;
> Yon looking-glass gleamed at the wave of
> her feather."

So elusive, says this man, is the real Herself! But (I maintain) she does not know it. She goes her way, unconscious—or, if conscious, blind to its deepest implication. Caprice, mood, whim: these indeed she uses, *for fun*, as it were, but of "the trouble behind her" she knows nothing. Just to rise from a couch, pull a curtain, pass through a room! How should she dream that the cornice-wreath blossomed anew? And when she tossed her hat off, or carefully put it on

before the mirror . . . if the glass did gleam, it was a trick of light; *she* did not produce it! For, conscious of this magic, she would lose it; her very inapprehensiveness it is which "brings it off." Yet she loves to hear her lover tell of such imaginings, and the more he tells, the more there seem to be for him.

> "Yet the day wears,
> And door succeeds door;
> I try the fresh fortune—
> Range the wide house from the wing to
> the centre.
> Still the same chance! she goes out as I
> enter.
> Spend my whole day in the quest, who
> cares?
> But 'tis twilight, you see—with such suites
> to explore,
> Such closets to search, such alcoves to
> importune!"

Listening, she begins to understand how deeply he means "herself." It is not only the spell that she leaves behind her in the mere, actual rooms: it is the mystery residing in her "house of flesh." What does *that* house contain—where is *she*? He seems to hold her, yet she "goes out as he enters"; he seems to have found her, yet it is like hide-and-seek at twilight, and half-a-hundred hiders in a hundred rooms!

She listens, puzzled; perhaps a little frightened to be so much of a secret. For she never meant to be—she cannot feel that she *is*; and thus, how shall she help him to "find" her? Perhaps she must always elude? She does not desire that: he must not let her escape him! And he quickly answers:

"Escape me?
Never—
Beloved!
While I am I, and you are you,
So long as the world contains us both,
Me the loving and you the loth,
While the one eludes, must the other
pursue."

But she is not "the loth"; that is all his fancy. She wants him to find her. And this, in its turn, scares *him*.

"My life is a fault at last, I fear:
It seems too much like a fate, indeed!
Though I do my best, I shall scarce
succeed."

It is the trouble of love. He may never reach her. . . . They look at one another, and he takes heart again.

"But what if I fail of my purpose here?
It is but to keep the nerves at strain,
To dry one's eyes and laugh at a fall,
And, baffled, get up and begin again—
So the chase takes up one's life, that's all."

But she is now almost repelled. She is not this enigma: she *wants* him to grasp her. Well, then, she can help him, he says:

"Look but once from your farthest bound
At me so deep in the dust and dark,
No sooner the old hope goes to ground
Than a new one, straight to the self-same
mark,
I shape me—

Ever
Removed!"

Is not this the meaning? The two poems seem to me supplementary of each other. First, the sense of her elusiveness; then the dim resentment and fear which this knowledge of mystery awakes in her. She does not (as I have seemed to make her) *speak* in either of these poems; but the thoughts are those which she must have, and so far, surely, her lover can divine her? The explanation given both by Mrs. Orr and Berdoe of *Love in a Life* (the first lyric), that the lover is "inhabiting the same house with his love," seems to me simply inept. Is it not clear that no material house[308:1] is meant? They are both inhabiting the *body*; and she, passing through this sphere, touching it at various points, leaves the spell of her mere being everywhere—on the curtain, the couch, the cornice-wreath, the mirror. But through *her* house he cannot range, as she through actualities. And though ever she eludes him, this is not what she sets out to do; she needs his comprehension; she does not desire to "escape" him.

The old enigma that is no enigma—the sphinx with the answer to the riddle ever trembling on her lips! But if she were understood, she might be taken for granted. . . . So the lips may tremble, but the answer is kept back:

"While the one eludes must the other
pursue."

"The desire of the man is for the woman; the desire of the woman is for the desire of the man."

In those two poems the lovers are almost gay; they

can turn and smile at one another 'mid the perplexity. The man is eager, resolute, humorous; the woman, if not acquiescent, is at least apprehending. The heart shall find her some day: "next time herself, not the trouble behind her!" She feels that she can aid him to that finding; it depends, in the last resort, on *her*.

But in *Two in the Campagna* a different lover is to deal with. What he wants is more than this. He wants to pass the limits of personality, to forget the search in the oneness. There is more than "finding" to be done: finding is not the secret. He tries to tell her—and he cannot tell her, for he does not himself fully know.

> "I wonder do you feel to-day
> As I have felt since, hand in hand,
> We sat down on the grass, to stray
> In spirit better through the land,
> This morn of Rome and May?"

His thought escapes him ever. Like a spider's silvery thread it mocks and eludes; he seeks to catch it, to hang his rhymes upon it. . . . No; it escapes, escapes.

> "Help me to hold it! First it left
> The yellowing fennel. . . ."

What does the fennel mean? Something, but he cannot grasp it—and the thread now seems to float upon that weed with the orange cup, where five green beetles are groping—but not there either does it rest . . . it is all about him: entangling, eluding:

> "Everywhere on the grassy slope,
> I traced it. Hold it fast!"

The grassy slope may be the secret! That infinity of passion and peace—the Roman Campagna:

"The champaign with its endless fleece
Of feathery grasses everywhere!
Silence and passion, joy and peace,
An everlasting wash of air—
Rome's ghost since her decease."

And think of all that that plain even now stands for:

"Such life here, through such lengths of
hours,
Such miracles performed in play,
Such primal naked forms of flowers,
Such letting nature have her way
While heaven looks from its towers!"

They love one another: why cannot they be like that plain, why cannot *they* "let nature have her way"? Does she understand?

"How say you? Let us, O my dove,
Let us be unashamed of soul,
As earth lies bare to heaven above!
How is it under our control
To love or not to love?"

But always they stop short of one another. That is the dread mystery:

"I would that you were all to me,
You that are just so much, no more.
Nor yours nor mine, nor slave nor free!
Where does the fault lie? What the core
O' the wound, since wound must be?"

He longs to yield his will, his whole being—to see with her eyes, set his heart beating by hers, drink his fill from her soul; make her part his—*be* her. . . .

"No. I yearn upward, touch you close,
Then stand away. I kiss your cheek,
Catch your soul's warmth—I pluck the rose
And love it more than tongue can speak—
Then the good minute goes."

Goes—with such swiftness! Already he is "far out of it." And shall this never be different?

". . . Must I go
Still like the thistle-ball, no bar,
Onward, whenever light winds blow?"

He must indeed, for already he is "off again":

"Just when I seemed about to learn!"

Even the letting nature have her way is not the secret. The thread is lost again:

"The old trick! Only I discern—
Infinite passion, and the pain
Of finite hearts that yearn."

No contact is close enough. The passion is infinite, the hearts are finite. The deepest love must suffer this doom of isolation: plunged as they may be in one another, body and soul, in the very rapture is the sentence. The good minute goes. It shall be theirs again—again they shall trust it, again the thread be lost: "the old trick!"

For it is the very trick of life, as here we know it. The Campagna itself says that—

"Rome's ghost since her decease."

Mutability, mutability! Though the flowers are the primal, naked forms, they are not the same flowers; though love is ever new, it is ever old. *New as to-day is new: old as to-day is old*; and all the lovers have discerned, like him,

"Infinite passion, and the pain
Of finite hearts that yearn."

For has she helped him to hold the thread? No; she too has been the sport of "the old trick." And even of that he cannot be wholly sure:

"I *wonder* do you feel to-day
As I have felt . . . ?"

In the enchanting *Lovers' Quarrel* we find a less metaphysical pair than those whom we have followed in their quest. This man has not taken her for granted, but neither has he frightened her with the mystery of her own and his elusiveness. No; these two have just had, very humanly and gladly, the "time of their lives"! All through the winter they have frolicked: there never was a more enchanting love than she, and plainly he has charmed her just as much. The same sort of fun appealed to them both at the same moment—games out of straws of their own devising; drawing one another's faces in the ashes of the hearth:

"Free on each other's flaws,
How we chattered like two church daws!"

And then the *Times* would come in—and the Emperor has married his Mlle. de Montijo!

"There they sit ermine-stoled,
And she powders her hair with gold."

Or a travel-book arrives from the library—and the two heads are close together over the pictures.

"Fancy the Pampas' sheen!
Miles and miles of gold and green
  Where the sunflowers blow
  In a solid glow,
And to break now and then the screen—
  Black neck and eyeballs keen,
Up a wild horse leaps between!"

. . . No picture in the book like that—what a genius he is! The book is pushed away; and there lies the table bare:

"Try, will our table turn?
Lay your hands there light, and yearn
  Till the yearning slips
  Thro' the finger-tips
In a fire which a few discern,
  And a very few feel burn,
And the rest, they may live and learn!

Then we would up and pace,
For a change, about the place,
  Each with arm o'er neck:
  'Tis our quarter-deck,
We are seamen in woeful case.
  Help in the ocean-space!
Or, if no help, we'll embrace."

The next play must be "dressing-up"; for the sailor-game had ended in that nonsense of a kiss because they had not thought of dressing properly the parts:

"See how she looks now, dressed
In a sledging-cap and vest!
'Tis a huge fur cloak—
Like a reindeer's zoke
Falls the lappet along the breast:
Sleeves for her arms to rest,
Or to hang, as my Love likes best."

Now it is *his* turn; he must learn to "flirt a fan as the Spanish ladies can"—but she must pretend too, so he makes her a burnt-cork moustache, and she "turns into such a man!" . . .

All this was three months ago, when the snow first mesmerised the earth and put it to sleep. Snow-time is love-time—for hearts can then show all:

"How is earth to know
Neath the mute hand's to-and-fro?"

* * * * *

Three months ago—and now it is spring, and such a dawn of day! The March sun feels like May. He looks out upon it:

"All is blue again
After last night's rain,
And the South dries the hawthorn-spray.
Only, my Love's away!
I'd as lief that the blue were grey."

Yes—she is gone; they have quarrelled. Or rather,

since it does not take two to do that wretched deed, *she* has quarrelled. It was some little thing that he said—neither sneer nor vaunt, nor reproach nor taunt:

"And the friends were friend and foe!"

She went away, and she has not come back, and it is three months ago.

One cannot help suspecting that the little thing he said, which was *not* so many things, must then have been something peculiarly tactless! This girl was not, like some of us, devoid of humour—that much is clear: laughter lived in her as in its home. What *had* he said? Whatever it was, he "did not mean it." But that is frequently the sting of stings. Spontaneity which hurts us hurts far more than malice can—for it is more evidently sincere in what it has of the too-much, or the too-little. . . . Well, angry exceedingly, or wounded exceedingly, she had gone, and still is gone—and he sits marvelling. Three months! Is she going to stay away for ever? Is she going to cast him off for a word, a "bubble born of breath"? Why, they had been *one* person!

"Me, do you leave aghast
With the memories We amassed?"

Just for "a moment's spite." . . . She ought to have understood.

"Love, if you knew the light
That your soul casts in my sight,
How I look to you
For the pure and true,
And the beauteous and the right—"

But so had she looked to *him*, and he had shown her "a moment's spite." . . . Yet he cannot believe that a hasty word can do all this against the other memories. Things like that are indeed for ever happening; trivialities thus can mar immensities. The eye can be blurred by a fly's foot; a straw can stop all the wondrous mechanism of the ear. But that is only the external world; endurance is easy there. It is different with love.

> "Wrong in the one thing rare—
> Oh, it is hard to bear!"

And especially hard now, in this "dawn of day." Little brooks must be dancing down the dell,

> "Each with a tale to tell,
> Could my Love but attend as well."

But as she cannot, he will not. . . . Only, things will get lovelier every day, for the spring is back, or at any rate close at hand—the spring, when the almond-blossom blows.

> "We shall have the word
> In a minor third
> There is none but the cuckoo knows:
> Heaps of the guelder rose!
> I must bear with it, I suppose."

For he would choose, if he could choose, that November should come back. Then there would be nothing for her to love but love! In such a world as spring and summer make, heart can dispense with heart; the sun is there, and the "flowers unnipped"; but in winter, freezing in the crypt, the heart cries: "Why should I freeze? Another heart, as chill as mine

is now, would quiver back to life at the touch of this one":

> "Heart, shall we live or die?
> The rest . . . settle by-and-bye!"

Three months ago they were so happy! They lived blocked up with snow, the wind edged in and in, as far as it could get:

> "Not to our ingle, though,
> Where we loved each the other so!"

If it were but winter now again, instead of the terrible, lovely spring, when she will have the blue sky and the hawthorn-spray and the brooks to love—and the almond-blossom and the cuckoo, and that guelder-rose which he will have to bear with . . .

But, after all, it *is* November for their hearts! Hers is chill as his; she cannot live without him, as he cannot without her. If it were winter, "she'd efface the score and forgive him *as before*" (thus we perceive that this is not the first quarrel, that he has offended her before with that word which was *not* so many things!)—and what else is it but winter for their shivering hearts? So he begins to hope. In March, too, there are storms—here is one beginning now, at noon, which shows that it will last. . . . Not yet, then, the too lovely spring!

> "It is twelve o'clock:
> I shall hear her knock
> In the worst of a storm's uproar:
> I shall pull her through the door,
> I shall have her for evermore!"

. . . I think she came back. She would want to see

how well he understood the spring—he who could make that picture of the Pampas' sheen and the wild horse. Why should spring's news unfold itself, and he not "say things" about it to her, like those he could say about the mere *Times* news? And it *is* impossible to bear with the guelder-rose—the guelder-rose must be adored. They will adore it together; she will efface the score, and forgive him as before. What fun it will be, in the worst of the storm, to feel him pull her through the door!

In *The Lost Mistress* it is really finished: she has dismissed him. We are not told why. It cannot be because he has not loved her—he who so tenderly, if so whimsically, accepts her decree. He will not let her see how much he suffers—he still can say the "little things" she liked.

"All's over, then: does truth sound bitter
  As one at first believes?
Hark, 'tis the sparrows' good-night twitter
  About your cottage eaves!

And the leaf-buds on the vine are woolly,
  I noticed that, to-day;
One day more breaks them open fully
  —You know the red turns grey."

That is what his life has turned, but he will not maunder about it.

"To-morrow we meet the same then,
      dearest?
  May I take your hand in mine?
Mere friends are we—well, friends the
      merest
  Keep much that I resign."

He is no more "he" for her: he is a friend like the rest. *He* resigns. But the friends do not know what "he" knew.

> "For each glance of the eye so bright and
> black
> Though I keep with heart's endeavour—
> Your voice, when you wish the snowdrops
> back,
> Though it stay in my soul for ever—"

. . . Is this like a friend? But he accepts her bidding—very nearly. There are some things, perhaps, that he may fail in, but she need not fear—he will try.

> "Yet I will but say what mere friends say,
> Or only a thought stronger;
> I will hold your hand but as long as all
> may,
> Or so very little longer!"

Again we have the typical Browning lover, who will not reproach nor scorn nor whine. But I think that this one had perhaps a little excess of whimsical humour. She would herself have needed a good deal of such humour to take this farewell just as it was offered. "*Does truth sound bitter, as one at first believes?*" Somewhat puzzling to her, it may be, that very philosophical reflection! . . . This has been called a noble, tender, an heroic, song of loss. For me there lurks a smile in it. I do not say that the smile makes the dismissal explicable; rather I a little wonder how she could have sent him away. But is it certain that she will not call him back, as she called the snowdrops? He means to hold her hand a little longer than the others do!

The Worst of It is the cry of a man whose young, beautiful wife has left him for a lover. He cares for nothing else in the world; his whole heart and soul, even now, are set on discovering how he may help her. But there is no way, for him. And the "worst of it" is that all has happened *through* him. She had given him herself, she had bound her soul by the "vows that damn"—and then had found that she must break them. And he proclaims her right to break them: no angel set them down!

But *she*—the pride of the day, the swan with no fleck on her wonder of white; she, with "the brow that looked like marble and smelt like myrrh," with the eyes and the grace and the glory! Is there to be no heaven for her—no crown for that brow? Shall other women be sainted, and not she, graced here beyond all saints?

> "Hardly! That must be understood!
> The earth is your place of penance,
> then."

But even the earthly punishment will be heavy for her to bear. . . . If it had only been he that was false, not she! *He* could have borne all easily; speckled as he is, a spot or two would have made little difference. And he is nothing, while she is all.

Too monstrously the magnanimity of this man weights the scale against the woman. Instinctively we seek a different "excuse" for her from that which he makes—though indeed there scarce is one at which he does not catch.

> "And I to have tempted you"—

. . . that is, tempted her to snap her gold ring and break her promise:

"I to have tempted you! I, who tired
Your soul, no doubt, till it sank! Unwise,
I loved and was lowly, loved and aspired,
Loved, grieving or glad, till I made you
mad,
And you meant to have hated and
despised—
Whereas, you deceived me nor
inquired!"

This is the too-much of magnanimity. Browning tends to exaggerate the beauty of that virtue, as already we have seen in Pompilia; and assuredly this husband has, like her, the defect of his quality. Tender, generous, high-hearted he is, but without the "sinew of the soul," as some old writer called *anger*. All these wonderful and subtle reasons for the tragic issue, all this apprehensive forecasting of the blow that awaits the woman "at the end of life," and the magnanimity which even then she shall find dreadfully awaiting her . . . all this is noble enough to read of, but imagine its atmosphere in daily life! The truth is that such natures are but wasted if they do not suffer—almost they might be called responsible for others' misdoings. We read the ringing stanzas of *The Worst of It*, and feel that no one should be doomed to suffer such forgiveness. What chance had *her* soul? At every turn it found itself forestalled, and shall so find itself, he tells her, to all eternity.

"I knew you once; but in Paradise,
If we meet, I will pass nor turn my
face."

No: this with me is not a favourite poem. The wife, beautiful and passionate, was never given a chance, in this world, to be "placed" at all in virtue; and she felt, no doubt, with a woman's intuition, that even in the last of all encounters she should still be baffled. Already that faultless husband is planning to be crushingly right on the Day of Judgment. And he *is* so crushingly right! He is not a prig, he is not a Pharisee; he is only perfectly magnanimous—perfectly right. . . . And sometimes, she must have thought vaguely, with a pucker on the glorious brow, —sometimes, to love lovably, we must yield a little of our virtue, we must be willing to be perfectly wrong.

But his suffering is genuine. She has twisted all his world out of shape. He believes no more in truth or beauty or life.

> "We take our own method, the devil and I,
> With pleasant and fair and wise and
> rare:
> And the best we wish to what lives, is—
> death."

She is better off; she has committed a fault and has done . . . now she can begin again. But most likely she does not repent at all, he goes on to reflect—most likely she is glad she deceived him. She had endured too long:—

> "[You] have done no evil and want no aid,
> Will live the old life out and chance the
> new.

And your sentence is written all the same,
And I can do nothing—pray, perhaps:
But somehow the word pursues its game—
If I pray, if I curse—for better or worse:
And my faith is torn to a thousand scraps,
And my heart feels ice while my words breathe flame.

Dear, I look from my hiding-place.
Are you still so fair? Have you still the eyes?
Be happy! Add but the other grace,
Be good! Why want what the angels vaunt?
I knew you once: but in Paradise,
If we meet, I will pass nor turn my face."

I think the saddest thing in this poem is its last stanza; for we feel, do we not? that *now* she is having her first opportunity to be both happy and good—free from the intolerable magnanimity of this husband. And so, by making a male utterance too "noble," Browning has almost redressed the balance. The tear had been too frequently assigned to woman; exultation too often had sounded from man. We have seen that many of the feminine "tears" were supererogatory; and now, in this chapter of the Woman Won, we see that she can tap the source of those salt drops in man. But not in *James Lee's Wife* is the top-note of magnanimity more strained than in *The Worst of It*. Moral gymnastics should not be practised at the expense of others. No one knew that better than Browning, but too often he allowed his subtle intellect to confute his warm, wise heart—too often he fell to the lure of "situation," and forgot the truth. "A man and woman *might* feel so," he

sometimes seems to have said; "it does not matter that no man and woman ever have so felt."

And thus, now and then, he gave both men and women—the worst of it. But oftener he gave them such a best of it that I hardly can imagine a reader of Browning who has not love and courage in the heart, and trust and looking-forward in the soul; who does not, in the words of the great Epilogue:—

"Greet the unseen with a cheer."

FOOTNOTES:

[308:1] Compare this passage with one in a letter to E. B. B.: "In this House of Life, where I go, you go—when I ascend, you run before—when I descend, it is after you."

THE END

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Transcriber's Notes:

This text uses a unique type of ellipsis to represent where material

has been left out of poetry quotations and out of the story line of a poem. They are indicated here by five asterisks:

* * * * *

The number of periods in ellipses match the original.

Thought breaks in the text are indicated by the following:

The following words appear in the original with and without hyphens:

commonplace/common-place
disgrace/dis-grace
moonbeam/moon-beam
wellnigh/well-nigh

Pages 2, 162, 164, 196, 198, 244, 274, and 276 are blank. Those page numbers are not included.

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