CHAPTER IV - BROWNING IN ITALY

The married pair went to Pisa in 1846, and moved soon afterwards to Florence. Of the life of the Brownings in Italy there is much perhaps to be said in the way of description and analysis, little to be said in the way of actual narrative. Each of them had passed through the one incident of existence. Just as Elizabeth Barrett's life had before her marriage been uneventfully sombre, now it was uneventfully happy. A succession of splendid landscapes, a succession of brilliant friends, a succession of high and ardent intellectual interests, they experienced; but their life was of the kind that if it were told at all, would need to be told in a hundred volumes of gorgeous intellectual gossip. How Browning and his wife rode far into the country, eating strawberries and drinking milk out of the basins of the peasants; how they fell in with the strangest and most picturesque figures of Italian society; how they climbed mountains and read books and modelled in clay and played on musical instruments; how Browning was made a kind of arbiter between two improvising Italian bards; how he had to escape from a festivity when the sound of Garibaldi's hymn brought the knocking of the Austrian police; these are the things of which his life is full, trifling and picturesque things, a series of interludes, a beautiful and happy story, beginning and ending nowhere. The only incidents, perhaps, were the birth of their son and the death of Browning's mother in 1849.

It is well known that Browning loved Italy; that it was his adopted country; that he said in one of the finest of his lyrics that the name of it would be found written on his heart. But the particular character of this love of Browning for Italy needs to be understood. There are thousands of educated Europeans who love Italy, who live in it, who visit it annually, who come across a continent to see it, who hunt out its darkest picture and its most mouldering carving; but they are all united in this, that they regard Italy as a dead place. It is a branch of their universal museum, a department of dry bones. There are rich and cultivated persons, particularly Americans, who seem to think that they keep Italy, as they might keep an aviary or a hothouse, into which they might walk whenever they wanted a whiff of beauty. Browning did not feel at all in this manner; he was intrinsically incapable of offering such an insult to the soul of a nation. If he could not have loved Italy as a nation, he would not have consented to love it as an old curiosity shop. In everything on earth, from the Middle Ages to the amoeba, who is discussed at such length in "Mr. Sludge the Medium," he is interested in the life in things. He was interested in the life in Italian art and in the life in Italian politics.

Perhaps the first and simplest example that can be given of this matter is in

Browning's interest in art. He was immeasurably fascinated at all times by painting and sculpture, and his sojourn in Italy gave him, of course, innumerable and perfect opportunities for the study of painting and sculpture. But his interest in these studies was not like that of the ordinary cultured visitor to the Italian cities. Thousands of such visitors, for example, study those endless lines of magnificent Pagan busts which are to be found in nearly all the Italian galleries and museums, and admire them, and talk about them, and note them in their catalogues, and describe them in their diaries. But the way in which they affected Browning is described very suggestively in a passage in the letters of his wife. She describes herself as longing for her husband to write poems, beseeching him to write poems, but finding all her petitions useless because her husband was engaged all day in modelling busts in clay and breaking them as fast as he made them. This is Browning's interest in art, the interest in a living thing, the interest in a growing thing, the insatiable interest in how things are done. Every one who knows his admirable poems on painting--"Fra Lippo Lippi" and "Andrea del Sarto" and "Pictor Ignotus"--will remember how fully they deal with technicalities, how they are concerned with canvas, with oil, with a mess of colours. Sometimes they are so technical as to be mysterious to the casual reader. An extreme case may be found in that of a lady I once knew who had merely read the title of "Pacchiarotto and how he worked in distemper," and thought that Pacchiarotto was the name of a dog, whom no attacks of canine disease could keep from the fulfilment of his duty. These Browning poems do not merely deal with painting; they smell of paint. They are the works of a man to whom art is not what it is to so many of the non-professional lovers of art, a thing accomplished, a valley of bones: to him it is a field of crops continually growing in a busy and exciting silence. Browning was interested, like some scientific man, in the obstetrics of art. There is a large army of educated men who can talk art with artists; but Browning could not merely talk art with artists--he could talk shop with them. Personally he may not have known enough about painting to be more than a fifth-rate painter, or enough about the organ to be more than a sixth-rate organist. But there are, when all is said and done, some things which a fifth-rate painter knows which a first-rate art critic does not know; there are some things which a sixth-rate organist knows which a first-rate judge of music does not know. And these were the things that Browning knew.

He was, in other words, what is called an amateur. The word amateur has come by the thousand oddities of language to convey an idea of tepidity; whereas the word itself has the meaning of passion. Nor is this peculiarity confined to the mere form of the word; the actual characteristic of these nameless dilettanti is a genuine fire and reality. A man must love a thing very much if he not only practises it without any hope of fame or money, but even practises it without any hope of doing it well. Such a man must love the toils of the work more than any other man can love the rewards of it. Browning was in this strict sense a

strenuous amateur. He tried and practised in the course of his life half a hundred things at which he can never have even for a moment expected to succeed. The story of his life is full of absurd little ingenuities, such as the discovery of a way of making pictures by roasting brown paper over a candle. In precisely the same spirit of fruitless vivacity, he made himself to a very considerable extent a technical expert in painting, a technical expert in sculpture, a technical expert in music. In his old age, he shows traces of being so bizarre a thing as an abstract police detective, writing at length in letters and diaries his views of certain criminal cases in an Italian town. Indeed, his own Ring and the Book is merely a sublime detective story. He was in a hundred things this type of man; he was precisely in the position, with a touch of greater technical success, of the admirable figure in Stevenson's story who said, "I can play the fiddle nearly well enough to earn a living in the orchestra of a penny gaff, but not quite."

The love of Browning for Italian art, therefore, was anything but an antiquarian fancy; it was the love of a living thing. We see the same phenomenon in an even more important matter--the essence and individuality of the country itself.

Italy to Browning and his wife was not by any means merely that sculptured and ornate sepulchre that it is to so many of those cultivated English men and women who live in Italy and enjoy and admire and despise it. To them it was a living nation, the type and centre of the religion and politics of a continent; the ancient and flaming heart of Western history, the very Europe of Europe. And they lived at the time of the most moving and gigantic of all dramas--the making of a new nation, one of the things that makes men feel that they are still in the morning of the earth. Before their eyes, with every circumstance of energy and mystery, was passing the panorama of the unification of Italy, with the bold and romantic militarism of Garibaldi, the more bold and more romantic diplomacy of Cavour. They lived in a time when affairs of State had almost the air of works of art; and it is not strange that these two poets should have become politicians in one of those great creative epochs when even the politicians have to be poets.

Browning was on this question and on all the questions of continental and English politics a very strong Liberal. This fact is not a mere detail of purely biographical interest, like any view he might take of the authorship of the "Eikon Basilike" or the authenticity of the Tichborne claimant. Liberalism was so inevitably involved in the poet's whole view of existence, that even a thoughtful and imaginative Conservative would feel that Browning was bound to be a Liberal. His mind was possessed, perhaps even to excess, by a belief in growth and energy and in the ultimate utility of error. He held the great central Liberal doctrine, a belief in a certain destiny of the human spirit beyond, and perhaps even independent of, our own sincerest convictions. The world was going right he felt, most probably in his way, but certainly in its own way. The sonnet which he

wrote in later years, entitled "Why I am a Liberal," expresses admirably this philosophical root of his politics. It asks in effect how he, who had found truth in so many strange forms after so many strange wanderings, can be expected to stifle with horror the eccentricities of others. A Liberal may be defined approximately as a man who, if he could by waving his hand in a dark room, stop the mouths of all the deceivers of mankind for ever, would not wave his hand. Browning was a Liberal in this sense.

And just as the great Liberal movement which followed the French Revolution made this claim for the liberty and personality of human beings, so it made it for the liberty and personality of nations. It attached indeed to the independence of a nation something of the same wholly transcendental sanctity which humanity has in all legal systems attached to the life of a man. The grounds were indeed much the same; no one could say absolutely that a live man was useless, and no one could say absolutely that a variety of national life was useless or must remain useless to the world. Men remembered how often barbarous tribes or strange and alien Scriptures had been called in to revive the blood of decaying empires and civilisations. And this sense of the personality of a nation, as distinct from the personalities of all other nations, did not involve in the case of these old Liberals international bitterness; for it is too often forgotten that friendship demands independence and equality fully as much as war. But in them it led to great international partialities, to a great system, as it were, of adopted countries which made so thorough a Scotchman as Carlyle in love with Germany, and so thorough an Englishman as Browning in love with Italy.

And while on the one side of the struggle was this great ideal of energy and variety, on the other side was something which we now find it difficult to realise or describe. We have seen in our own time a great reaction in favour of monarchy, aristocracy, andecclesiasticism, a reaction almost entirely noble in its instinct, and dwelling almost entirely on the best periods and the best qualities of the old régime. But the modern man, full of admiration for the great virtue of chivalry which is at the heart of aristocracies, and the great virtue of reverence which is at the heart of ceremonial religion, is not in a position to form any idea of how profoundly unchivalrous, how astonishingly irreverent, how utterly mean, and material, and devoid of mystery or sentiment were the despotic systems of Europe which survived, and for a time conquered, the Revolution. The case against the Church in Italy in the time of Pio Nono was not the case which a rationalist would urge against the Church of the time of St. Louis, but diametrically the opposite case. Against the mediæval Church it might be said that she was too fantastic, too visionary, too dogmatic about the destiny of man, too indifferent to all things but the devotional side of the soul. Against the Church of Pio Nono the main thing to be said was that it was simply and supremely cynical; that it was not founded on the unworldly instinct for distorting life, but on the worldly counsel to

leave life as it is; that it was not the inspirer of insane hopes, of reward and miracle, but the enemy, the cool and sceptical enemy, of hope of any kind or description. The same was true of the monarchical systems of Prussia and Austria and Russia at this time. Their philosophy was not the philosophy of the cavaliers who rode after Charles I. or Louis XIII. It was the philosophy of the typical city uncle, advising every one, and especially the young, to avoid enthusiasm, to avoid beauty, to regard life as a machine, dependent only upon the two forces of comfort and fear. That was, there can be little doubt, the real reason of the fascination of the Napoleon legend--that while Napoleon was a despot like the rest, he was a despot who went somewhere and did something, and defied the pessimism of Europe, and erased the word "impossible." One does not need to be a Bonapartist to rejoice at the way in which the armies of the First Empire, shouting their songs and jesting with their colonels, smote and broke into pieces the armies of Prussia and Austria driven into battle with a cane.

Browning, as we have said, was in Italy at the time of the break-up of one part of this frozen continent of the non-possumus, Austria's hold in the north of Italy was part of that elaborate and comfortable and wholly cowardly and unmeaning compromise, which the Holy Alliance had established, and which it believed without doubt in its solid unbelief would last until the Day of Judgment, though it is difficult to imagine what the Holy Alliance thought would happen then. But almost of a sudden affairs had begun to move strangely, and the despotic princes and their chancellors discovered with a great deal of astonishment that they were not living in the old age of the world, but to all appearance in a very unmanageable period of its boyhood. In an age of ugliness and routine, in a time when diplomatists and philosophers alike tended to believe that they had a list of all human types, there began to appear men who belonged to the morning of the world, men whose movements have a national breadth and beauty, who act symbols and become legends while they are alive. Garibaldi in his red shirt rode in an open carriage along the front of a hostile fort calling to the coachman to drive slower, and not a man dared fire a shot at him. Mazzini poured out upon Europe a new mysticism of humanity and liberty, and was willing, like some passionate Jesuit of the sixteenth century, to become in its cause either a philosopher or a criminal. Cavour arose with a diplomacy which was more thrilling and picturesque than war itself. These men had nothing to do with an age of the impossible. They have passed, their theories along with them, as all things pass; but since then we have had no men of their type precisely, at once large and real and romantic and successful. Gordon was a possible exception. They were the last of the heroes.

When Browning was first living in Italy, a telegram which had been sent to him was stopped on the frontier and suppressed on account of his known sympathy with the Italian Liberals. It is almost impossible for people living in a

commonwealth like ours to understand how a small thing like that will affect a man. It was not so much the obvious fact that a great practical injury was really done to him; that the telegram might have altered all his plans in matters of vital moment. It was, over and above that, the sense of a hand laid on something personal and essentially free. Tyranny like this is not the worst tyranny, but it is the most intolerable. It interferes with men not in the most serious matters, but precisely in those matters in which they most resent interference. It may be illogical for men to accept cheerfully unpardonable public scandals, benighted educational systems, bad sanitation, bad lighting, a blundering and inefficient system of life, and yet to resent the tearing up of a telegram or a post-card; but the fact remains that the sensitiveness of men is a strange and localised thing, and there is hardly a man in the world who would not rather be ruled by despots chosen by lot and live in a city like a mediæval Ghetto, than be forbidden by a policeman to smoke another cigarette, or sit up a quarter of an hour later; hardly a man who would not feel inclined in such a case to raise a rebellion for a caprice for which he did not really care a straw. Unmeaning and muddle-headed tyranny in small things, that is the thing which, if extended over many years, is harder to bear and hope through than the massacres of September. And that was the nightmare of vexatious triviality which was lying over all the cities of Italy that were ruled by the bureaucratic despotisms of Europe. The history of the time is full of spiteful and almost childish struggles--struggles about the humming of a tune or the wearing of a colour, the arrest of a journey, or the opening of a letter. And there can be little doubt that Browning's temperament under these conditions was not of the kind to become more indulgent, and there grew in him a hatred of the Imperial and Ducal and Papal systems of Italy, which sometimes passed the necessities of Liberalism, and sometimes even transgressed its spirit. The life which he and his wife lived in Italy was extraordinarily full and varied, when we consider the restrictions under which one at least of them had always lain. They met and took delight, notwithstanding their exile, in some of the most interesting people of their time--Ruskin, Cardinal Manning, and Lord Lytton. Browning, in a most characteristic way, enjoyed the society of all of them, arguing with one, agreeing with another, sitting up all night by the bedside of a third.

It has frequently been stated that the only difference that ever separated Mr. and Mrs. Browning was upon the question of spiritualism. That statement must, of course, be modified and even contradicted if it means that they never differed; that Mr. Browning never thought an Act of Parliament good when Mrs. Browning thought it bad; that Mr. Browning never thought bread stale when Mrs. Browning thought it new. Such unanimity is not only inconceivable, it is immoral; and as a matter of fact, there is abundant evidence that their marriage constituted something like that ideal marriage, an alliance between two strong and independent forces. They differed, in truth, about a great many things, for example, about Napoleon III. whom Mrs. Browning regarded with an admiration

which would have been somewhat beyond the deserts of Sir Galahad, and whom Browning with his emphatic Liberal principles could never pardon for the Coup d'État. If they differed on spiritualism in a somewhat more serious way than this, the reason must be sought in qualities which were deeper and more elemental in both their characters than any mere matter of opinion. Mrs. Orr, in her excellent Life of Browning, states that the difficulty arose from Mrs. Browning's firm belief in psychical phenomena and Browning's absolute refusal to believe even in their possibility. Another writer who met them at this time says, "Browning cannot believe, and Mrs. Browning cannot help believing." This theory, that Browning's aversion to the spiritualist circle arose from an absolute denial of the tenability of such a theory of life and death, has in fact often been repeated. But it is exceedingly difficult to reconcile it with Browning's character. He was the last man in the world to be intellectually deaf to a hypothesis merely because it was odd. He had friends whose opinions covered every description of madness from the French legitimism of De Ripert-Monclar to the Republicanism of Landor. Intellectually he may be said to have had a zest for heresies. It is difficult to impute an attitude of mere impenetrable negation to a man who had expressed with sympathy the religion of "Caliban" and the morality of "Time's Revenges." It is true that at this time of the first popular interest in spiritualism a feeling existed among many people of a practical turn of mind, which can only be called a superstition against believing in ghosts. But, intellectually speaking, Browning would probably have been one of the most tolerant and curious in regard to the new theories, whereas the popular version of the matter makes him unusually intolerant and negligent even for that time. The fact was in all probability that Browning's aversion to the spiritualists had little or nothing to do with spiritualism. It arose from quite a different side of his character--his uncompromising dislike of what is called Bohemianism, of eccentric or slovenly cliques, of those straggling camp followers of the arts who exhibit dubious manners and dubious morals, of all abnormality and of all irresponsibility. Any one, in fact, who wishes to see what it was that Browning disliked need only do two things. First, he should read the Memoirs of David Home, the famous spiritualist medium with whom Browning came in contact. These Memoirs constitute a more thorough and artistic self-revelation than any monologue that Browning ever wrote. The ghosts, the raps, the flying hands, the phantom voices are infinitely the most respectable and infinitely the most credible part of the narrative. But the bragging, the sentimentalism, the moral and intellectual foppery of the composition is everywhere, culminating perhaps in the disgusting passage in which Home describes Mrs. Browning as weeping over him and assuring him that all her husband's actions in the matter have been adopted against her will. It is in this kind of thing that we find the roots of the real anger of Browning. He did not dislike spiritualism, but spiritualists. The second point on which any one wishing to be just in the matter should cast an eye, is the record of the visit which Mrs. Browning insisted on making while on their

honeymoon in Paris to the house of George Sand. Browning felt, and to some extent expressed, exactly the same aversion to his wife mixing with the circle of George Sand which he afterwards felt at her mixing with the circle of Home. The society was "of the ragged red, diluted with the low theatrical, men who worship George Sand, à genou bas between an oath and an ejection of saliva." When we find that a man did not object to any number of Jacobites or Atheists, but objected to the French Bohemian poets and to the early occultist mediums as friends for his wife, we shall surely be fairly right in concluding that he objected not to an opinion, but to a social tone. The truth was that Browning had a great many admirably Philistine feelings, and one of them was a great relish for his responsibilities towards his wife. He enjoyed being a husband. This is quite a distinct thing from enjoying being a lover, though it will scarcely be found apart from it. But, like all good feelings, it has its possible exaggerations, and one of them is this almost morbid healthiness in the choice of friends for his wife.

David Home, the medium, came to Florence about 1857. Mrs. Browning undoubtedly threw herself into psychical experiments with great ardour at first, and Browning, equally undoubtedly, opposed, and at length forbade, the enterprise. He did not do so however until he had attended one séance at least, at which a somewhat ridiculous event occurred, which is described in Home's Memoirs with a gravity even more absurd than the incident. Towards the end of the proceedings a wreath was placed in the centre of the table, and the lights being lowered, it was caused to rise slowly into the air, and after hovering for some time, to move towards Mrs. Browning, and at length to alight upon her head. As the wreath was floating in her direction, her husband was observed abruptly to cross the room and stand beside her. One would think it was a sufficiently natural action on the part of a man whose wife was the centre of a weird and disturbing experiment, genuine or otherwise. But Mr. Home gravely asserts that it was generally believed that Browning had crossed the room in the hope that the wreath would alight on his head, and that from the hour of its disobliging refusal to do so dated the whole of his goaded and malignant aversion to spiritualism. The idea of the very conventional and somewhat bored Robert Browning running about the room after a wreath in the hope of putting his head into it, is one of the genuine gleams of humour in this rather foolish affair. Browning could be fairly violent, as we know, both in poetry and conversation; but it would be almost too terrible to conjecture what he would have felt and said if Mr. Home's wreath had alighted on his head.

Next day, according to Home's account, he called on the hostess of the previous night in what the writer calls "a ridiculous state of excitement," and told her apparently that she must excuse him if he and his wife did not attend any more gatherings of the kind. What actually occurred is not, of course, quite easy to ascertain, for the account in Home's Memoirs principally consists of noble

speeches made by the medium which would seem either to have reduced Browning to a pulverised silence, or else to have failed to attract his attention. But there can be no doubt that the general upshot of the affair was that Browning put his foot down, and the experiments ceased. There can be little doubt that he was justified in this; indeed, he was probably even more justified if the experiments were genuine psychical mysteries than if they were the hocus-pocus of a charlatan. He knew his wife better than posterity can be expected to do; but even posterity can see that she was the type of woman so much adapted to the purposes of men like Home as to exhibit almost invariably either a great craving for such experiences or a great terror of them. Like many geniuses, but not all, she lived naturally upon something like a borderland; and it is impossible to say that if Browning had not interposed when she was becoming hysterical she might not have ended in an asylum.

The whole of this incident is very characteristic of Browning; but the real characteristic note in it has, as above suggested, been to some extent missed. When some seven years afterwards he produced "Mr. Sludge the Medium," every one supposed that it was an attack upon spiritualism and the possibility of its phenomena. As we shall see when we come to that poem, this is a wholly mistaken interpretation of it. But what is really curious is that most people have assumed that a dislike of Home's investigations implies a theoretic disbelief in spiritualism. It might, of course, imply a very firm and serious belief in it. As a matter of fact it did not imply this in Browning, but it may perfectly well have implied an agnosticism which admitted the reasonableness of such things. Home was infinitely less dangerous as a dexterous swindler than he was as a bad or foolish man in possession of unknown or ill-comprehended powers. It is surely curious to think that a man must object to exposing his wife to a few conjuring tricks, but could not be afraid of exposing her to the loose and nameless energies of the universe.

Browning's theoretic attitude in the matter was, therefore, in all probability quite open and unbiassed. His was a peculiarly hospitable intellect. If any one had told him of the spiritualist theory, or theories a hundred times more insane, as things held by some sect of Gnostics in Alexandria, or of heretical Talmudists at Antwerp, he would have delighted in those theories, and would very likely have adopted them. But Greek Gnostics and Antwerp Jews do not dance round a man's wife and wave their hands in her face and send her into swoons and trances about which nobody knows anything rational or scientific. It was simply the stirring in Browning of certain primal masculine feelings far beyond the reach of argument--things that lie so deep that if they are hurt, though there may be no blame and no anger, there is always pain. Browning did not like spiritualism to be mentioned for many years.

Robert Browning was unquestionably a thoroughly conventional man. There are many who think this element of conventionality altogether regrettable and disgraceful; they have established, as it were, a convention of the unconventional. But this hatred of the conventional element in the personality of a poet is only possible to those who do not remember the meaning of words. Convention means only a coming together, an agreement; and as every poet must base his work upon an emotional agreement among men, so every poet must base his work upon a convention. Every art is, of course, based upon a convention, an agreement between the speaker and the listener that certain objections shall not be raised. The most realistic art in the world is open to realistic objection. Against the most exact and everyday drama that ever came out of Norway it is still possible for the realist to raise the objection that the hero who starts a subject and drops it, who runs out of a room and runs back again for his hat, is all the time behaving in a most eccentric manner, considering that he is doing these things in a room in which one of the four walls has been taken clean away and been replaced by a line of footlights and a mob of strangers. Against the most accurate black-and-white artist that human imagination can conceive it is still to be admitted that he draws a black line round a man's nose, and that that line is a lie. And in precisely the same fashion a poet must, by the nature of things, be conventional. Unless he is describing an emotion which others share with him, his labours will be utterly in vain. If a poet really had an original emotion; if, for example, a poet suddenly fell in love with the buffers of a railway train, it would take him considerably more time than his allotted three-score years and ten to communicate his feelings.

Poetry deals with primal and conventional things--the hunger for bread, the love of woman, the love of children, the desire for immortal life. If men really had new sentiments, poetry could not deal with them. If, let us say, a man did not feel a bitter craving to eat bread; but did, by way of substitute, feel a fresh, original craving to eat brass fenders or mahogany tables, poetry could not express him. If a man, instead of falling in love with a woman, fell in love with a fossil or a sea anemone, poetry could not express him. Poetry can only express what is original in one sense--the sense in which we speak of original sin. It is original, not in the paltry sense of being new, but in the deeper sense of being old; it is original in the sense that it deals with origins.

All artists, who have any experience of the arts, will agree so far, that a poet is bound to be conventional with regard to matters of art. Unfortunately, however, they are the very people who cannot, as a general rule, see that a poet is also bound to be conventional in matters of conduct. It is only the smaller poet who sees the poetry of revolt, of isolation, of disagreement; the larger poet sees the poetry of those great agreements which constitute the romantic achievement of civilisation. Just as an agreement between the dramatist and the audience is

necessary to every play; just as an agreement between the painter and the spectators is necessary to every picture, so an agreement is necessary to produce the worship of any of the great figures of morality--the hero, the saint, the average man, the gentleman. Browning had, it must thoroughly be realised, a real pleasure in these great agreements, these great conventions. He delighted, with a true poetic delight, in being conventional. Being by birth an Englishman, he took pleasure in being an Englishman; being by rank a member of the middle class, he took a pride in its ancient scruples and its everlasting boundaries. He was everything that he was with a definite and conscious pleasure--a man, a Liberal, an Englishman, an author, a gentleman, a lover, a married man.

This must always be remembered as a general characteristic of Browning, this ardent and headlong conventionality. He exhibited it pre-eminently in the affair of his elopement and marriage, during and after the escape of himself and his wife to Italy. He seems to have forgotten everything, except the splendid worry of being married. He showed a thoroughly healthy consciousness that he was taking up a responsibility which had its practical side. He came finally and entirely out of his dreams. Since he had himself enough money to live on, he had never thought of himself as doing anything but writing poetry; poetry indeed was probably simmering and bubbling in his head day and night. But when the problem of the elopement arose he threw himself with an energy, of which it is pleasant to read, into every kind of scheme for solidifying his position. He wrote to Monckton Milnes, and would appear to have badgered him with applications for a post in the British Museum. "I will work like a horse," he said, with that boyish note, which, whenever in his unconsciousness he strikes it, is more poetical than all his poems. All his language in this matter is emphatic; he would be "glad and proud," he says, "to have any minor post" his friend could obtain for him. He offered to read for the Bar, and probably began doing so. But all this vigorous and very creditable materialism was ruthlessly extinguished by Elizabeth Barrett. She declined altogether even to entertain the idea of her husband devoting himself to anything else at the expense of poetry. Probably she was right and Browning wrong, but it was an error which every man would desire to have made.

One of the qualities again which make Browning most charming, is the fact that he felt and expressed so simple and genuine a satisfaction about his own achievements as a lover and husband, particularly in relation to his triumph in the hygienic care of his wife. "If he is vain of anything," writes Mrs. Browning, "it is of my restored health." Later, she adds with admirable humour and suggestiveness, "and I have to tell him that he really must not go telling everybody how his wife walked here with him, or walked there with him, as if a wife with two feet were a miracle in Nature." When a lady in Italy said, on an occasion when Browning stayed behind with his wife on the day of a picnic, that he was "the only man who behaved like a Christian to his wife," Browning was

elated to an almost infantile degree. But there could scarcely be a better test of the essential manliness and decency of a man than this test of his vanities. Browning boasted of being domesticated; there are half a hundred men everywhere who would be inclined to boast of not being domesticated. Bad men are almost without exception conceited, but they are commonly conceited of their defects.

One picturesque figure who plays a part in this portion of the Brownings' life in Italy is Walter Savage Landor. Browning found him living with some of his wife's relations, and engaged in a continuous and furious quarrel with them, which was, indeed, not uncommonly the condition of that remarkable man when living with other human beings. He had the double arrogance which is only possible to that old and stately but almost extinct blend--the aristocratic republican. Like an old Roman senator, or like a gentleman of the Southern States of America, he had the condescension of a gentleman to those below him, combined with the jealous self-assertiveness of a Jacobin to those above. The only person who appears to have been able to manage him and bring out his more agreeable side was Browning. It is, by the way, one of the many hints of a certain element in Browning which can only be described by the elementary and old-fashioned word goodness, that he always contrived to make himself acceptable and even lovable to men of savage and capricious temperament, of detached and erratic genius, who could get on with no one else. Carlyle, who could not get a bitter taste off his tongue in talking of most of his contemporaries, was fond of Browning. Landor, who could hardly conduct an ordinary business interview without beginning to break the furniture, was fond of Browning. These are things which speak more for a man than many people will understand. It is easy enough to be agreeable to a circle of admirers, especially feminine admirers, who have a peculiar talent for discipleship and the absorption of ideas. But when a man is loved by other men of his own intellectual stature and of a wholly different type and order of eminence, we may be certain that there was something genuine about him, and something far more important than anything intellectual. Men do not like another man because he is a genius, least of all when they happen to be geniuses themselves. This general truth about Browning is like hearing of a woman who is the most famous beauty in a city, and who is at the same time adored and confided in by all the women who live there.

Browning came to the rescue of the fiery old gentleman, and helped by Seymour Kirkup put him under very definite obligations by a course of very generous conduct. He was fully repaid in his own mind for his trouble by the mere presence and friendship of Landor, for whose quaint and volcanic personality he had a vast admiration, compounded of the pleasure of the artist in an oddity and of the man in a hero. It is somewhat amusing and characteristic that Mrs. Browning did not share this unlimited enjoyment of the company of Mr. Landor,

and expressed her feelings in her own humorous manner. She writes, "Dear, darling Robert amuses me by talking of his gentleness and sweetness. A most courteous and refined gentleman he is, of course, and very affectionate to Robert (as he ought to be), but of self-restraint he has not a grain, and of suspicion many grains. What do you really say to dashing down a plate on the floor when you don't like what's on it? Robert succeeded in soothing him, and the poor old lion is very quiet on the whole, roaring softly to beguile the time in Latin alcaics against his wife and Louis Napoleon."

One event alone could really end this endless life of the Italian Arcadia. That event happened on June 29, 1861. Robert Browning's wife died, stricken by the death of her sister, and almost as hard (it is a characteristic touch) by the death of Cavour. She died alone in the room with Browning, and of what passed then, though much has been said, little should be. He, closing the door of that room behind him, closed a door in himself, and none ever saw Browning upon earth again but only a splendid surface.