

APPENDIX V

The Brownings in 1847

DURING THE EARLY months of their marriage the Brownings enjoyed a brief period of anonymity—"not receiving six visits in six months" (letter 2705). As interest in their personal life intensified, they were sought out and comments began to appear in private correspondence and print; but there is little available of this nature from which to draw referring to their early days in Italy.

One of the earliest callers on the Brownings was Father Prout who made a passing reference to them in a volume which appeared at the end of 1847 (see letter 2704, note 8). Another early visitor was Mary Boyle whose recollections appeared in 1901 (see letter 2698, note 2). Two Americans, George Stillman Hillard and George William Curtis, who called separately on the Brownings during the period covered by this volume, left brief records of their visits.

Hillard's account appeared in 1853. Subsequently, RB wrote to his sister Sarianna, 19 December 1853: "I see Murray is going to reprint an American book of travels in Italy by Mr Hillard we knew a few years ago—it having had a great success in the U. States—so much the worse for them, for it is really a very poor commonplace affair, far beneath what I should have judged the author capable of producing—see it however, if you can for the sake of the flaming account of 'the Brownings'" (MS at Lilly Library).

Curtis published his recollections of the Brownings on two occasions, the first following the death of EBB in 1861 and the second that of RB in 1889. The versions are markedly different, modified for the events that precipitated them.

To amplify the letters of 1847 we reprint Hillard's and Curtis's accounts in full.

I

by George Stillman Hillard

From *Six Months in Italy*, Boston, 1853, I, 177–178.

It is well for the traveller to be chary of names. It is an ungrateful return for hospitable attentions, to print the conversation of your host, or describe his person, or give an inventory of his furniture, or proclaim how his wife and daughters were dressed. But I trust I may be pardoned if I state, that one of my most delightful associations with Florence arises from the fact, that here I made the acquaintance of Robert and Elizabeth Browning. These are even more familiar names in America than in England, and their poetry is probably more read, and better understood with us, than among

their own countrymen. A happier home and a more perfect union than theirs, it is not easy to imagine; and this completeness arises not only from the rare qualities which each possesses, but from their adaptation to each other. Browning's conversation is like the poetry of Chaucer, or like his own, simplified and made transparent. His countenance is so full of vigor, freshness, and refined power, that it seems impossible to think that he can ever grow old. His poetry is subtle, passionate, and profound; but he himself is simple, natural, and playful. He has the repose of a man who has lived much in the open air; with no nervous uneasiness and no unhealthy self-consciousness. Mrs. Browning is in many respects the correlative of her husband. As he is full of manly power, so she is a type of the most sensitive and delicate womanhood. She has been a great sufferer from ill health, and the marks of pain are stamped upon her person and manner. Her figure is slight, her countenance expressive of genius and sensibility,

shaded by a veil of long brown locks; and her tremulous voice often flutters over her words, like the flame of a dying candle over the wick. I have never seen a human frame which seemed so nearly a transparent veil for a celestial and immortal spirit. She is a soul of fire enclosed in a shell of pearl. Her rare and fine genius need no setting forth at my hands. She is also, what is not so generally known, a woman of uncommon, nay, profound learning, even measured by a masculine standard. Nor is she more remarkable for genius and learning, than for sweetness of temper, tenderness of heart, depth of feeling, and purity of spirit. It is a privilege to know such beings singly and separately, but to see their powers quickened, and their happiness rounded by the sacred tie of marriage, is a cause for peculiar and lasting gratitude. A union so complete as theirs—in which the mind has nothing to crave nor the heart to sigh for—is cordial to behold and soothing to remember.

II

by George William Curtis

From "Editor's Easy Chair," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, September 1861, pp. 555–556.

Fourteen years ago this Easy Chair was sitting one day in his cool room in Florence—cool, although it was Italy and summer. A knock at the door was followed by the brisk entrance of one of the few men in Europe that Mr. Easy Chair then cared to see—Robert Browning. How delightful the hour that followed was, those at once know who know Robert Browning. It ended with a promise of meeting at Browning's tea-table that evening.

In the evening the same alert, robust, thoroughly English-looking man presented to his wife one of the thousand young Americans who had read with eager enthusiasm her then recently-published volumes, which had a more general and hearty welcome in the United States than any English poet since the time of Byron and Company, who were the poets of our fathers.

The visitor saw, seated at the tea-table in the great room of the palace in which they were living, a very small, very slight woman, with very long curls drooping forward, almost across the eyes, hanging to the bosom, and quite concealing the pale, small face, from which the piercing, inquiring eyes looked out sensitively at the stranger. Rising from her chair she put out cordially the thin, white hand of an invalid, and in a few moments they were pleasantly chatting, while the husband strode up and down the room, joining in the conversation with a vigor, humor, eagerness, and affluence of curious

lore which, with his trenchant thought and subtle sympathy, make him one of the most charming and inspiring of companions.

A few days after the same party, with one or two more, went to Vallombrosa, where they passed two days. Mrs. Browning was still too much of an invalid to walk, but we sat under the great trees upon the lawn-like hill-sides near the convent, or in the seats in the dusky convent-chapel, while Robert Browning at the organ chased a fugue of Master Hugues, of Saxe-Gotha, or dreamed out upon twilight keys a faith-throbbing toccata of Galuppi's.

In all her conversation, so mild and tender and womanly, so true and intense and rich with rare learning, there was a girl-like simplicity and sensitiveness and a womanly earnestness that took the heart captive. She was deeply and most intelligently interested in America and Americana, and felt a kind of enthusiastic gratitude to them for their generous fondness of her poetry.

She had been married not a year, and since then she has lived almost exclusively in Italy. Few Italians, and certainly no foreigner, are so saturated with the very spirit of Italy as her husband; and few Italians and no foreigner have been more enthusiastically devoted than she to the political regeneration of that country. Her poems within a few years have been almost exclusively inspired by her Italian political sympathies, and have insensibly

been much moulded in their expression by the style of her husband.

Without question or delay Elizabeth Barrett Browning must be counted among the chief English poets of this century, and unquestionably the first English poet of her sex. And her memorable excellence will be that she was not only a singer but a hearty, active worker in her way, understanding her time, and trying, as she could, to help it. It is a curious juxtaposition, that of "Don Juan" and "Aurora Leigh," and yet they are related in this that they are the two great poems of modern English social life as felt by a man of the world and a religious woman, who were both poets. On the other hand, the literature of love has had few additions since the *Vita Nuova*, the sonnets of Shakespeare, and of Petrarch (if you like him), so true and sweet and subtle as Mrs. Browning's "Sonnets from the Portuguese." And were they not repaid by the "One word more," the last poem in Browning's last volume?

Her public fame will make her widely mentioned. Literature mourns a loss. But the private grief to the many who loved her is a deeper pang. Her death changes Italy and Europe to how many! If you would know what she was, read Browning's "One word more." He made no secret of it; why should another?

"This I say of me, but think of you, Love!
This to you, yourself my moon of poets!
Ah! but that's the world's side—there's the wonder—
Thus they see you, praise you, think they know you,
There, in turn, I stand with them and praise you,
Out of my own self I dare to phrase it.
But the best is when I glide from out them,
Cross a step or two of dubious twilight,
Come out on the other side, the novel
Silent silver lights and darks undreamed of,
Where I hush and bless myself with silence."

III

by George William Curtis

From: "Editor's Easy Chair," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, March 1890, pp. 637–639.

It is more than forty years since Margaret Fuller first gave distinction to the literary notices and reviews of the New York *Tribune*. Miss Fuller was a woman of extraordinary scholarly attainments and intellectual independence, the friend of Emerson and of the "transcendental" leaders, and her critical papers were the best then published, and were fitly succeeded by those of her scholarly friend George Ripley. It was her review in the *Tribune* of Browning's early dramas and the "Bells and Pomegranates" that introduced him to such general knowledge and appreciation among cultivated readers in this country that it is not less true of Browning than of Carlyle that he was first better known in American than at home.

It was but about four years before the publication of Miss Fuller's paper that the Boston issue of Tennyson's two volumes had delighted the youth of the time with the consciousness of the appearance of a new English poet. The eagerness and enthusiasm with which Browning was welcomed soon after were more limited in extent, but they were even more ardent, and the devoted zeal of Mr. Levi Thaxter as a Browning missionary and pioneer forecast the interest from which the Browning societies of later days have sprung. When Matthew Arnold was told in a small and remote farming village in

New England that there had been a lecture upon Browning in the town the week before, he stopped in amazement, and said, "Well, that is the most surprising and significant fact I have heard in America."

It was in those early days of Browning's fame, and in the studio of the sculptor Powers in Florence, that the youthful Easy Chair took up a visiting card, and reading the name Mr. Robert Browning, asked, with eager earnestness whether it was Browning the poet. Powers turned his large, calm, lustrous eyes upon the youth, and answered, with some surprise at the warmth of the question:

"It is a young Englishman, recently married, who is here with his wife, an invalid. He often comes to the studio."

"Good Heaven!" exclaimed the youth, "it must be Browning and Elizabeth Barrett."

Powers, with the half-bewildered air of one suddenly made conscious that he had been entertaining angels unawares, said reflectively, "I think we must have them to tea."

The youth begged to take the card which bore the poet's address, and hastening to his room near the Piazza Novella, he wrote a note asking permission for a young American to call and pay respects to Mr. and Mrs. Browning, but wrote it in terms which, however warm, would yet permit it to be put aside if it seemed impertinent, or if for any reason such

a call were not desired. The next morning betimes the note was despatched, and a half-hour had not passed when there was a brisk rap at the Easy Chair's door. He opened it, and saw a young man, who briskly inquired,

"Is Mr. Easy Chair here?"

"That is my name."

"I am Robert Browning." Browning shook hands heartily with his young American admirer, and thanked him for his note. The poet was then about thirty-five. His figure was not large, but compact, erect, and active; the face smooth, the hair dark; the aspect that of active intelligence, and of a man of the world. He was in no way eccentric, either in manner or appearance. He talked freely, with great vivacity, and delightfully, rising and walking about the room as his talk sparkled on. He heard, with evident pleasure, but with entire simplicity and manliness, of the American interest in his works and in those of Mrs. Browning, and the Easy Chair gave him a copy of Miss Fuller's paper in the *Tribune*. It was a bright, and to the Easy Chair, a wonderfully happy hour. As he went, the poet said that Mrs. Browning would certainly expect to give Mr. Easy Chair a cup of tea in the evening, and with a brisk and gay good-by, Browning was gone.

The Easy Chair blithely hied him to the Café Doné, and ordered of the flower girl the most perfect of nosegays, with such fervor that she smiled, and when she brought the flowers in the afternoon, said, with sympathy and meaning: "Eccola, signore! per la donna bellissima!"

It was not in the Casa Guidi that the Brownings were then living, but in an apartment in the Via della Scala, not far from the place or square most familiar to strangers in Florence—the Piazza Trinità. Through several rooms the Easy Chair passed, Browning leading the way, until at the end they entered a smaller room arranged with an air of English comfort, where at a table, bending over a tea-urn, sat a slight lady, her long curls drooping forward. "Here," said Browning, addressing her with a tender diminutive, "here is Mr. Easy Chair." And as the bright eyes but wan face of the lady turned toward him, and she put out her hand, Mr. Easy Chair recalled the first words of her verse he had ever known:

"'Onora, Onora!' her mother is calling.
She sits at the lattice, and hears the dew falling,
Drop after drop from the sycamore laden
With dew as with blossom, and calls home
the maiden.
'Night cometh Onora!'"

The most kindly welcome and pleasant chat followed, Browning's gayety dashing and flashing in, with a sense of profuse and bubbling vitality, glancing at a hundred topics; and when there was some allusion to his "Sordello," he asked, quickly, with an amused smile, "Have you read it?" The Easy Chair pleaded that he had not seen it. "So much the better. Nobody understands it. Don't read it except in the revised form which is coming." The revised form has come long ago, and the Easy Chair has read, and probably supposes that he understands. But Thackeray used to say that he did not read Browning because he could not comprehend him, adding, ruefully, "I have no head above my eyes."

A few days later—

"O day of days! O perfect day!"—

the Easy Chair went with Mr. and Mrs. Browning to Vallombrosa, and the one incident most clearly remembered is that of Browning's seating himself at the organ in the chapel, and playing—some Gregorian chant, perhaps, or hymn of Pergolesi's. It was enough to the enchanted eyes of his young companion that they saw him who was already a great English poet sitting at the organ where the young Milton had sat, and touching the very keys which Milton's hand had pressed.

It was midsummer in Italy, but the high narrow streets of Florence stretch a protecting shade over the lingering pilgrim, and from such companionship as that of the Via della Scala even Venice long wooed in vain. But at last, reluctantly, although the fascinating way lay through Bologna and Ferrara, the journey began toward Venice; and in that city, so early and always dear to Browning, whose romantic life and story most deeply touched and stirred his imagination, and in which he lately died, the Easy Chair received from the poet a glimpse of his earliest impressions.

Writing from Casa Guidi, in Florence, on the 9th of August, 1847—Casa Guidi, upon which a tablet records that there Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning lived, and *Casa Guidi Windows, Sonnets from the Portuguese*, and *Aurora Leigh* were written—Browning says:

"The people of the house there [Via della Scala] told us honestly on the morning of your departure that they could only receive us for a single month, at the expiration of which were to begin certain whitewashings and repaintings. We continued our quest, therefore, and at last found out this cool, airy apartment, which we shall occupy for another month or six weeks, whatever be our subsequent plans, for Rome, or for the Venice you describe. ...

I spent a month of entire delight there some eight years ago, and tho' nothing I have since seen has effaced the impressions of my visit, yet your fresher feelings *bring out* whatever looks faint or dubious in them, as a gentle sponging might revive the gone glory of some old picture. (You must know I have seen an exquisite copy of a Giorgione, the original of which—so I was told—grew only visible and intelligible when thus wetted.) I am glad the railroad and gas-lighting do Venice no more wrong, and that you find all the old strange quietness, and—ought I to be glad of this, too?—depopulation; for of late years we have heard a great deal of the returning life and prosperity of the place; and Mr. Valery, I observe, retracts his earlier bodements of a speedy extinction of what little glimmer of light he still saw.

As for me, I remember that the accounts of the depreciation of the value of houses, coupled with the indifference of the inhabitants of them, were enough to set one dreaming (in one's gondola!) of getting to be as rich as Rothschild, buying all Venice, turning out everybody, and ensconcing one's self in the Doge's palace, among the dropping gold ornaments and flakes of what was lustrous color in Titian's or Tintoret's time, waiting for the proper consummation of all things and the sea's advent.

But do you really find the air so light and pure in this by right mephitic time of August, with those close *calles*, pestilential lagunes, etc., etc., and all that our informants frighten us with? Should a winter in Venice prove no more formidable in its way than it seems a summer does, why, we may have cause to regret our determination to give up our original plans. I am sure your kindness will tell us, should it be enabled, any good news of the winter and spring climate—if weak lungs may brave it with impunity." . . .

To this letter of Browning's, written in his young manhood—he was then thirty-five—about the Venice which always charmed him, may be well added the words of the Lady of Mura, written only a few weeks before the poet's death. Asolo is a sequestered town, which Browning said that he discovered, and in which he fell under the glamour of very Italy. In the prologue to his last volume, written in September before the letter that follows, the poet says:

"How many a year, My Asolo,
Since—one step just from sea to land—

I found you, loved, yet feared you so—
For natural objects seems to stand
Palpably fire-clothed!"

The letter says:

"I have bought in ancient Asolo a narrow, tall tower, into which in the last century (very early) a house was built, and this curious place I have selected for villeggiatura when the scirocco is too strong in Venice for health or comfort. It was here that Browning fifty years ago was inspired to write 'Sordello' and 'Pippa Passes,' so to me it has that charm added to many others. It is such a rough and out-of-the-way little place that you may only know it by name. There is no hotel, no railway, no factory, no sign of modern civilization. It is on a hill, which has an ancient ruined fortress at the top, and was an old Roman settlement, with the usual Roman *mise en scène*, baths, amphitheatre, etc., in the days of Pliny, who somewhere mentions it.

Near my tower, which is built in the ancient wall of the mediæval town, is the tower of Caterina Cornaro, and one sees from most of my windows, so high are they, the whole Marca Trevigiana, with its tragic and dramatic associations of the early Middle Ages; the Eccelini, the Azzi, the incessant wars in which towns were treated by the tyrants like shuttlecocks in the game of battledoor.

Browning and his sister have been here for the last six weeks, and you may fancy how intensely the poet enjoys revisiting after so many years the scenes of his youthful inspirations. He was only twenty-five or six when he first discovered Asolo. . . . Few young people are so gay and cheerful as he and his dear old sister." . . .

It is a pleasant last glimpse of Browning at Asolo, where the master-spell of Italy first touched his genius, and whither at the end he came—"asolare, to disport in the open air, amuse one's self at random"—at heart and in temper of the same unquenched and unquenchable vitality as on that summer day long ago when he sat where Milton had sat, and pressed, as Milton had pressed, the keys of the organ at Vallombrosa.

"Ah, did you once see Shelley plain?
And did he speak to you?
And did you speak to him again?—
How strange it seems and new!"