

APPENDIX V

The Brownings at Pratolino

DURING THEIR RESIDENCE in Florence, the Brownings made few excursions into the surrounding countryside. This was owing partly to EBB's health, rarely robust enough for adventures, and partly to the poets' limited income—a day-long outing would have necessitated the hiring of a carriage or a ride in someone else's. One such outing was documented by their American friend Elizabeth Clementine Kinney (*née* Dodge) in the article we reprint below, "A Day with the Brownings at Pratolino." Mrs. Kinney recalls that on a June morning, she and her husband, William Burnet Kinney, collected the Brownings at Casa Guidi and left Florence for a day at Pratolino. Although Mrs. Kinney omits the year, her letter of 6 May 1857 to her son Edmund Clarence Stedman (ms at Columbia), which contains a brief account of the excursion, limits the possibilities. In June 1856 the Brownings were absent from Italy, and they did not meet the Kinneys until July 1853. That leaves 1854 and 1855. We suggest the latter, based on Mrs. Kinney's report of 7 June 1855, published on the 21st of the following month in the *Newark Daily Advertiser*, that included a description of Pratolino.

Situated in the foothills of the Apennines about seven miles north of Florence, Pratolino was the name of a villa built by Francesco I de' Medici, 2nd Grand Duke of Tuscany (1541–87) for, it is said, his paramour Bianca Cappello (1548–87), whom he married in 1578, soon after his first wife's death. The villa consisted of a palace and a celebrated mannerist garden featuring statuary, grottoes, hidden fountains, and, most notably, an immense sculpture by Giambologna (1529–1608) of a crouching figure known as the Appennino. Construction on the villa began in 1569 and continued over the next 16 years. In 1737 the property was acquired by the House of Lorraine, after which the palace and garden fell into neglect, and by then much of the statuary had already been removed. The garden was transformed into an English park in 1819 by Grand Duke Ferdinand III, and three years later the palace was pulled down (see Webster Smith, "Pratolino," *Journal of the Society of Architectural History*, 20, December 1961, 155–168). Thus it was when the Brownings saw it. In the early 1870's the property was

bought by the 2nd Prince Demidoff, who fashioned a residence out of one of the existing structures, known since as Villa Demidoff. Pratolino is now a public park owned by the Province of Florence.

Mrs. Kinney's article is notable for her second-hand account of the Brownings' courtship, as told to her by RB. We present it without comment, even though some of the particulars concerning the courtship are clearly either invented or misremembered.¹

A DAY WITH THE BROWNING'S AT PRATOLINO

by Elizabeth Clementine Kinney

Reprinted from *Scribner's Monthly*, December 1870, pp. 185–188.

The old Dukes of Tuscany were a luxurious race of sovereigns, and had an eye to nature as well as art;—especially did the Medici. They planted their palatial villas, for occasional resort, on sites the most choice and commanding among the hills which surround *La Bella Firenze*. Not limiting themselves in the number of their residences more than in any other extravagance which might minister to pleasure or caprice, they had one to suit every mood of mind; every circumstance of the day; every intrigue that required temporary seclusion; every withdrawal of the court from the capital to the country. Though centuries have passed since most of the ducal villas around Florence were built, and though many of them have been unoccupied during the later reigns; still, every sovereign, from Lorenzo the Magnificent down to the late Grand Duke Leopold, has caused his numerous palaces and villas, with their grounds, to be kept in order, each with its reserved corps of in-door and out-door servants, and ready at notice for the monarch's reception. The enormous expense of keeping up so many royal establishments has, of course, told on the treasury funds; but sovereigns are sovereign, and remonstrance, if it had a voice, on the part of taxed subjects would be heard in vain. Times, however, have changed in United Italy, and sovereigns also. What does Victor Emmanuel want of royal residences, save on state occasions, to please the people? He, who for himself would prefer a cabin to a palace any day; whose taste, so far from being refined, to suit Medicean luxuriance, is emphatically common, or rather, uncommonly coarse! Now that such an unkingly king reigns not only in cultivated Tuscany, but over all Italy, such of us as have seen that fair land already, and visited its palaces and halls, where yet the glory of the past lingers, must certainly congratulate ourselves; for ere long these superfluous luxuries will have sunk their riches in the state treasury.

Pratolino, one of the favorite royal villas in the environs of Florence, though famous for many historical associations, and more especially for the loves of Francesco Primo and Bianca Cap[p]ello,—out of which grew a romance in real life ending in tragedy,—has, in these latter days, become associated with incidents and names more interesting to me than all the romance which invests it. There I accompanied the great Elizabeth, Queen of Poetry, and Robert the Mighty, crowned also in his own peculiar sphere of poesy, one glorious summer morning a few years back.

There we spent a whole day together in strolling and lounging; admiring and commenting; poetizing and philosophizing; conversing and enjoying; till that mount of vision grew luminous as from some divine presence, and she of the spirit inspired seemed trans-figured before us, as symbolizing, even then and there, this

day, when her raiment is indeed white as snow, where Moses and Elias, ay, Isaiah and David, "The sweet singer of Israel," are with her! We, who were with her then, could say, "It is good to be here!" Whatever be her great gain in that higher state, we cannot but deeply feel that it is through our loss. So familiar had become the united names of these wedded poets, the Brownings, that we can hardly speak of them separately now. Yet never were two made one more dissimilar in every feature of body and mind than Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning. Still, never were an endowed couple more truly united than they, exemplifying the truth that extremes meet.

It was my privilege to live for years near by, and in intimate intercourse with, the divinity of Casa Guidi,—her whose genius has immortalized the walls as well as the windows of that antique palace; for a tablet has been inserted by the grateful Italians, whose cause she so eloquently espoused, in the grand entrance wall, recording her name, deeds, and long residence there, with the tribute of their thanks and love. Yet I had not known the Brownings personally, in the more intimate sense of acquaintanceship, till that blessed day, when, in the balm of a June morning, we started together in an open carriage for Pratolino, taking with us a manservant, who carried the basket containing our picnic dinner, of which only four were to partake. A larger party would have spoiled the whole. A more timid nature was never joined to a bolder spirit than in Elizabeth Browning. She fairly shrunk from observation, and could not endure mixed company, though in her heart kind and sympathetic with all. Her timidity was both instinctive and acquired; having been an invalid and student from her youth up, she had lived almost the life of a recluse; thus it shocked her to be brought face to face with inquisitive strangers, or the world in general. On this very account, and because her health so rarely permitted her to make excursions of any kind, she enjoyed, as the accustomed do not, and the unappreciative cannot, any unwonted liberty in nature's realm, and doubly with a chosen few sympathetic companions, to whom she could freely express her thoughts and emotions. Like most finely strung beings, she spoke through a changeful countenance every change of feeling.

Never shall I forget how her face—the plain mortal beautiful in its immortal expression—lighted up to greet us as our carriage drove into the *porte-cochère* of Casa Guidi on that memorable morning. Simple as a child, the honest enjoyment which she anticipated in our excursion beamed through her countenance. Those large, dark, dreamy eyes—usually like deep wells of thought—sparkled with delight; while her adored Robert's generous capacity for pleasure showed even a happier front than ordinary, reflecting her joy, as we turned into the street and out at the city gate towards Pratolino. The woman of usually many thoughts and few words grew a talker under the stimulus of open country air; while her husband, usually talkative, became the silent enjoyer of her vocal gladness, a pleasure too rarely afforded him to be interrupted. We, of choice, only talked enough to keep our *improvisatrice* in the humor of utterance. Every tree, every wayside flower, every uncommon stone or passing cloud gave fresh impulse to her spirit, which verily seemed like an enfranchised bird's. On reaching the enchanting grounds of Pratolino—which royal love enchanted as long ago as the 16th century—we all began to talk of the past, till the present was animated by its spirit; breathing beauty seemed stirring the leaves of green retreats, made for love; inspiring the songs of numerous birds, whose musical *amours* enjoy now unmolested those right-royal groves; vitalizing the gold and silver fishes which sport in those silver lakes, all

unconscious of the rapturous faces once mirrored there. Even the climbing roses encircled those ancient walls with beauty, and conjured fragrant memories of a dead, yet living past. As we neared the villa, no wonder that poetic fancy seized that enthusiastic group, and we saw the beautiful Bianca strolling among the flowers with her infatuated lover, herself not more fond than ambitious to share his ducal crown. The very insects seemed whispering of that tragic romance, and our queen of song relapsed into dreams which we dared not disturb, till, threading our path silently along the winding ways, we at length entered a grove in the rear of the villa, where, with one accord, we paused for rest and refreshment. By this time the reaction of languor, after unwonted excitement, came over Mrs. Browning; she almost fell prostrate on the grass, where she lay with closed eyes, a stone for her pillow, like Jacob in his dream,—and doubtless she also had a vision of the ladder on which the angels were descending and ascending, as her ministers.

Withdrawing a short distance, so that our mellowed voices might not reach her, while lunch was being prepared under the trees, Robert Browning put on his talking-cap again and discoursed, to two delighted listeners, of her who slept. After expressing his joy at her enjoyment of the morning, the poet's soul took fire by its own friction, and glowed with the brilliance of its theme. Knowing well that he was before fervent admirers of his wife, he did not fear to speak of her genius, which he did almost with awe, losing himself so entirely in her glory that one could see that he did not feel worthy to unloose her shoe-latchet, much less to call her his own. This led back to the birth of his first love for her, and then, without reserve, he told us the real story of that romance, "the course of" which "true love never did run smooth." There have been several printed stories of the loves of Elizabeth and Robert Browning, and we had read some of these; but as the poet's own tale differed essentially from the others, and as the divine genius of the heroine has returned to its native heaven, whilst her life on earth now belongs to posterity, it cannot be a breach of confidence to let the truth be known.

Mr. Barrett, the father of Elizabeth, though himself a superior man, and capable of appreciating his gifted child, was, in some sense, an eccentric. He had an unaccountable aversion to the idea of "marrying off" any of his children. Having wealth, a sumptuous house, and being a widower, he had somehow made up his mind to keep them all about him. Elizabeth, the eldest, had been an invalid from her early youth, owing partly to the great shock which her exquisite nervous organization received when she saw an idolized brother drown before her eyes, without having the power to save him. Grief at this event naturally threw her much within herself, while shattered health kept her confined for years to her room. There she thought, studied, wrote; and from her sick-chamber went forth the winged inspirations of her genius. These came into the heart of Robert Browning, and nesting there, awakened love for "The Great Unknown," and he sought her out. Finding that the invalid did not receive strangers, he wrote her a letter, intense with his desire to see her. She reluctantly consented to an interview. He flew to her apartment, was admitted by the nurse, in whose presence only could he see the deity at whose shrine he had long worshipped. But the golden opportunity was not to be lost; love became oblivious to any save the presence of the real of its ideal. Then and there Robert Browning poured his impassioned soul into hers; though his tale of love seemed only an enthusiast's dream. Infirmary had hitherto so hedged her about, that she deemed herself forever protected from all assaults of love.

Indeed she felt only injured that a fellow-poet should take advantage, as it were, of her indulgence in granting him an interview, and requested him to withdraw from her presence, not attempting any response to his proposal, which she could not believe in earnest. Of course he withdrew from her sight, but not to withdraw the offer of his heart and hand; *au contraire*, to repeat it by letter, and in such wise as to convince her how "dead in earnest" he was. Her own heart, touched already when she knew it not, was this time fain to listen, be convinced, and overcome. But here began the tug of war! As a filial daughter, Elizabeth told her father of the poet's love, of the poet's love in return, and asked a parent's blessing to crown their happiness. At first, incredulous of the strange story, he mocked her; but when the truth flashed on him, from the new fire in her eyes, he kindled with rage, and forbade her ever seeing or communicating with her lover again, on the penalty of disinheritance and banishment forever from a father's love. This decision was founded on no dislike for Mr. Browning personally, or anything in him, or his family; it was simply arbitrary. But the new love was stronger than the old in her—it conquered. On wings it flew to her beloved, who had perched on her window, and thence bore her away from the fogs of England to a nest under Italian skies. The nightingale who had long sung in the dark, with "her breast against a thorn," now changed into a lark—morning had come—singing for very joy, and at heaven's gate, which has since opened to let her in. The unnatural father kept his vow, and would never be reconciled to his daughter, of whom he was not worthy; though she ceased not her endearing efforts to find her way to his heart again; ever fearing that he, or she, might die without the bond of forgiveness having reunited them. Always cherishing an undiminished love for her only parent, this banishment from him wore on her, notwithstanding the rich compensation of such a husband's devotion, and the new maternal love which their golden-haired boy awakened. What she feared, came upon her! Her father died without leaving her even his pardon, and her feeble *physique* never quite recovered from the shock. Few witnessed the strong grief of that morally strong woman. I saw her after her first wrestling with the angel of sorrow, and perceived that with the calm token of his blessing, still she dragged a maimed life.

To return to Pratolino: The poet's story of his love had sharpened appetite, and we gathered at the rustic table in the grove, where our queen, Elizabeth, crowned the feast. Recovered by rest from the morning's fatigue, she was able to join, though not again to lead, our conversation. Under the stimulus of appetizing viands, and good wine in moderation, Robert Browning's spirits overflowed, even to the confession of telling us their romance, receiving only from its heroine the slight punishment of her, "Robert, dear! how could you?" After lunch we all went to the brow of the hill, and together looked out on that marvellous view, backed by the Apennines in their afternoon glory; while before us lay dreamily, under a softening mist-veil, Florence the Beautiful!—its massive palaces, with their ponderous eaves; its majestic Duomo; its heaven-pointing Campanile,—that perfection of symmetry; its arching bridges, spanning the classic Arno, which curved like a silver thread amidst all that scene of loveliness. There the past and the present met together; terror and beauty embraced each other. All that Elizabeth Browning said, after gazing a while in silence, was, "How it speaks to us!" Since then it has spoken to us again through the echo from her spirit; we caught it even then, and though that spirit has since passed away, the echo of its own song has not died, shall not die; Elizabeth Browning "was for all time!"

We returned to Florence just as the sun was setting behind the Tuscan hills, and the moon rising on our forward path as a welcome. When we rolled under the arched gateway of Casa Guidi, a tired voice said, faintly, “How I thank you!” While in heartiest tone Robert Browning repeated, “Ay, thanks for a real pleasure-day.” As for us, we could only claim our right to all the thanksgiving, and respond, “Yes, a day to be remembered, and——” recorded here!

1. In the aforementioned letter to her son, Mrs. Kinney’s details of the courtship differ slightly from those she recalled years later. Note, for example, that in the earlier version RB asked Edward Moulton-Barrett for his consent. The relevant passage from the letter is as follows:

Mr Browning once told us the story of their courtship & marriage, while we were lounging in the enchanted gardens of Pratolino, the summer villa of Francesco Primo of Tuscany, where he idled the rosy hours of love with his beautiful mistress (afterwards wife) Bianca Cappello. We four—Mr & Mrs B. Mr K. & I—had gone out there together to pass the day; had dined under the venerable trees, & were looking forth on as lovely a view as was ever bounded by these glorious Apennines, when the story was whispered “under the rose.” But tho’ it was *entré nous*—for the Brownings dread getting their private affairs into newspapers—I will tell it again to you *in confidence*. It was in brief on this wise: Mr B. had fallen in love with Miss Barrett’s poems and wrote requesting an introduction to herself. This, she at first refused, as she had scarce ever seen the face of man, &, like Miranda, knew by sight only her father, having been always confined to the sofa, a desperate invalid. However, a second letter brought consent to the interview. He came, & declared his love at first sight: she resented the offer, which seemed to her to mock her helpless state. So he left under her frown; but sent back his poems & a letter. While she read & mused, the fire burned! She believed him true, and again received him. He asked the father’s consent, & was peremptorily refused. So, with hers, he took her in his arms, put her in a carriage, carried her to a parson, & <the> poets’ love-knot was tied. Till then he <did not> even know that she could stand on her feet! He bore her—as tenderly as one would an infant—to Italy, where *love* & milder airs revived at once her drooping frame. In a year or so, she gave birth to their spiritual-eyed boy, whose poetic beauty failed even to touch the hard heart of the grandsire, & who is now seven years old.
