

APPENDIX V

A Sibylline Trio

THE FOLLOWING IS a recollection by Mary Burnet Kinney (1843–1924) of a reception that took place on 14 April 1857¹ at the Florence residence (Casa del Bello) of her parents, William Burnet Kinney and Elizabeth Clementine Kinney. Guests included the Brownings; Isa Blagden; Thomas Adolphus Trollope and his wife, Theodosia; Hiram Powers; William Dwight Whitney, professor of Sanskrit at Yale; Mary Somerville; and Harriet Beecher Stowe. The last two and EBB formed the “sibylline trio” of the title.

Mary Somerville (1780–1872), highly esteemed writer on science, and her husband, Dr. William Somerville, had lived in Florence since 1851. Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811–96) became an international celebrity when her anti-slavery novel, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, sold over 300,000 copies in its first year of publication. She visited Florence in April 1857 and called on the Brownings soon after her arrival (see letter 3985).

An awkward moment occurred within the “trio” that evening, as recounted by Mrs. Somerville in her *Personal Recollections* (1873). She writes that while attempting (unsuccessfully) to make conversation with Mrs. Stowe, “she fairly turned her back upon me” (see SD2063).

Mrs. Kinney briefly describes the *soirée* in SD2071, and several years later she recalled that “the three most celebrated women of our time sat side by side on one sofa in my drawing-room. . . . This brilliant coincidence made such an impression on my youngest daughter, then about twelve years old, that she never forgot it; but, when grown into womanhood, she wrote an interesting, piquant article . . . suggested by this reminiscence” (“Reminiscences,” Part 14, ms at Columbia).

1. This is a conjectured date, based on two factors: Harriet Beecher Stowe’s visit to Florence in 1857, which probably began on 6 or 7 April (see letter 3984) and ended less than two weeks later (see *Life of Harriet Beecher Stowe*, comp. Charles Edward Stowe, 1889, p. 304); and letter 3989, which, we speculate, contains EBB’s promise to attend Mrs. Kinney’s reception for Mrs. Stowe.

A SIBYLLINE TRIO

by Mary Burnet Kinney

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The room was pleasantly full. A square room, with angles mellowed in the chaste light and tempered glow of wax-candles and olive oil. A little apart from the groups scattered here and there over the Turkish carpet, sat three ladies, on a red sofa, just athwart the drapery of the window.

Little, littler, littlest, might have been the analogy in the mind of a child beginning her grammar.

“My dear, I wish to show you something, which, one of these days, you will be proud to remember. Do you know who those ladies are?”

Every child of the circle knew well the pleasant face of “Little”—now bending across “Littler” to “Littlest”—with its smile of perennial youth and its setting of silver.

“Mrs. Somerville!”

“Yes; the next?”

Not so familiar or so magnetic, the more rotund, rubicund, and rather set countenance of the silent listener, corresponding to the secret denomination of “Littler.”

“Mrs. Stowe?”

“Right again; you know the third.”

Yes, we knew, and we did not know, her of the fragile form, drooping with its curls of black, like a weeping-willow draped in funereal color. The association was gloomy, and we stood in awe of the name we tremblingly whispered.

“Mrs. Browning.”

“Yes, the three most distinguished women of our era, side by side. Take your fill of the sight and the thought!”

It was a gathering of literati in Florence; in the good old time, before the dreamers along the banks of the placid Arno had awakened to the sense that they were men. When the artist and the student flocked there, to follow, uninterrupted by the encroachment of material progress, each his vocation. Where no shriller sound than the peddler, crying his wares in soft Italian, had as yet jarred the clear and liquid atmosphere. Where there was no steam-engine nigh, to dampen their fancies with its vapor and resolve their dreams to smoke; though the relentless Mercury of the nineteenth century was even now on his sweeping course to the very gates of the favored city. The good-natured Florentine had made room for the more eager children of the North and West, and, while he lived upon the glory of the Past, sipped his lemonade and shrugged his shoulders to the rest of the world, admitted the *forestieri* into his life and contemplation, as he would a new drama. There was nothing real about it, but the slightly quickened flow of silver (gold was scarce) that *did advance* by a throb or two the sluggish Tuscan pulse.

Alas! you were the traitors of your own hiding-place, my countrymen, as you opened the closed doors, and yourselves entered with the breath of the Present into the atmosphere of the Past.

The *palazzi* of the Medici and the Orsini, the humbler homes of the Giotto and the Alighieris, became known by the names of Somerville and Browning,

Trollope and Powers, and others of contemporary renown. Profane feet trod the classic streets that profane eyes might chance to rest upon some one star of the galaxy, while each became the centre of revolving satellites.

The ebb and flow of the tide that soon swept through the open way, had thrown adrift upon these olive-clad hills, across the same path, these three God-gifted women—bowing each to the other's genius;—and the vision of their meeting was indeed a thing to remember.

As a child, I conscientiously gathered up the mother's lesson, put a peg in, read a little lecture to memory, and turned with a mind at ease, to my play. As with maturer years came greater knowledge, and each of these famous minds opened their stores of thought for me, I have thanked my mother for the picture then stereotyped upon my recollection, I have looked at it, and turned it over and over, and gilded it with my after-perceptions. But, if asked at the time what were my impressions, I fear my reply would have been much colored with the remembrance of various play-hours in the rooms of the great mathematician. If called to speak to the three, I should have dropped a curtsy to the two and nestled to the elder's side.

Mrs. Somerville seldom carried her problems with her out of the study. A certain portion of the day was sacredly set aside for them. The other hours belonged to her family, her friends—who were numerous,—to the world, in which she ever moved as a benefactress. The children never escaped her notice, and old and young welcomed her to their circles and their sympathies. She seemed to carry the sublime simplicity, caught from intercourse with the laws of God, into every path of life. The keen intuition of childhood felt her greatness, and yet loved it. Her rooms were the pleasantest to gather at. She, and her amiable husband—who seldom left his fireside—and her daughters, made bright their home. I remember they had a famous Poll Parrot that was a great attraction to my young inquisitiveness. And when the dear old lady would stop on her way by me to inquire when I would come and see her again, she always held the parrot out as first inducement. We lived in the same house at that time, according to the European custom of each family's occupying one floor.

Mrs. Stowe as on a visit to Florence, where her fame had, of course, preceded her. All hearts were beating high with the delight of receiving the trans-atlantic genius, whose pen had enchanted both worlds. "Uncle Tom's Cabin" was a capital story for the child as well as the adult, and children were eager in their desire to see her who had told the tale of Eva. Did her modesty shrink from this notoriety? We felt as if she crept within herself, and as she spoke to us, her calm, pensive eyes looked absent.

Let me lightly step above the dead. The veil, that always seemed half-drawn, has closed over the spirit-face, and we forgive Mrs. Browning, that we knew so little of her whose still, small voice hushed the tempest of our play, and whose thin hand, clasped over ours, seemed to reach already from another shore.

Soft-tempered she was, ever soft-spoken to all, and despite her towering genius and sufficiency of mind, through a certain adhesion of spirit, she appealed to the sympathy, and thereby strengthened, in personal intercourse, her hold upon everyone who came in contact with her; at least, any one at all able to appreciate her. Others, she seemed to make no effort to gain over, and, I suppose, many must

have met and parted from her with keen disappointment. It may have been owing to her very, very feeble health. She had no strength to waste on unprofitable effort, with such high aims in view. The cords of life with her seemed swept by a mighty impulse, whose vibrations kept the spirit ever tremulous. She eagerly stretched out her hand for help in the secret workings of her busy brain and heart, in the unfolding of Life's grand mystery, and her dark eyes would expand with a supernatural brilliancy as they fastened their gaze on any other thinker, who could travel in the same paths. Her friends, though among the most ardent, were not as numerous or varied, as those of her more many-sided sister—Mrs. Somerville—whose health was equable as her temper, and permitted her to take up others' burdens. Unlike her, again, Mrs. Browning lived enshrouded in the mystic atmosphere of the inner world, carried the breath of the study with her everywhere, and when the fire smouldered for want of outward kindling, she lay dreaming, company or no company. And yet her life was the joy, the life of her more robust husband. He interposed his sturdy frame, not only as a shield for his delicate companion, to break for her the force of every rough wind that blew, but as a body, through which, for many years, she drew her breath of mortal life.

Their child, as with most boys, was a reflex of the mother. She could not make him other than herself, gentle and *spirituel*, unfit to battle with the Real. He early evinced a power of self-absorption that made him like to wander off alone, returning, most often, trembling with an emotion, of which he was the victim, and not the master,—to cast weird, unmeaning lines at his idolized mother's feet; happy that for the time he had pacified—with what he could not tell—the exactions of a spirit ever restlessly called in play by the undefined influence of the atmosphere in which he lived. It was well for his future—and that of the world, perhaps—that he was soon released and transplanted to other associations, which have completely transformed the elfin child, if late reports are correct, to a rough, substantial young Briton.

We can imagine that Robert Browning, *père*, goes seeking ever and wooing yet his Spirit-Bride, whose lamp of life he had kept alive for years and fed with the choicest oil from his own redundant store. His utmost supply could keep it burning no longer, but it went out so gradually, so gently, that, at times, it must seem to him hardly gone as yet. While to us, who bask in the full refulgence of her strong, mental light, that grew brighter and brighter to the end, and is to know no setting, she still lives. Death has only drawn a veil between us and her greater splendor.
