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## Robert Browning.

The year 1812 marks an eventful era in the world's history; and among the events for which the above year is noted not the least was the birth of one of the greatest English poets, Robert Browning. Browning was descended from a race of bank clerks. His grand-father, Robert Browning first, from his salary, first as errand boy and later as principal of the stock room, had saved a neat sum which, well invested, was inherited by his son, Robert second. Robert Browning second, like his father, at an early age entered the employ of the Bank of England. He was industrious, with but one prominent weakness—a mania for book collecting. His library invaded the whole house. Because he wished to buy as many books as possible, he would not entrust the domestic finances to his wife for fear she would spend more than was necessary. She, having nothing to do, lapsed into idleness, grew pale and anemic, and finally became a shut-in. Robert and a sister a year younger than himself were the only children born to book-buying Robert and his delicate wife.

### School Life.

Browning's schooling, if considered with respect to instruction, by regular teachers, was not the best. He was first sent to a school conducted by an ancient spinster, near his home. He showed remarkable aptitude for learning, but his tendency to such innovations as the introduction into the school room of bats, mice, and turtles, brought forth a request for his withdrawal, which was complied with. His father then mapped out a course of instruction for him to pursue at home, which he did for perhaps a week. He next began a course of reading, in which he was allowed to select his own subjects. He did much of his reading under the supervision of his mother, who was very well versed in the better books, and whose companionship and influence were worth much to him.

At the age of fourteen, Browning, as do most boys of that age, experienced a change of heart, as it is called. He began to grow sentimental, irritable and atheistic; and devoted much of his time to writing high-sounding verse, which he showed, first to his mother, then to his father, and last to Lizzie Flower.

This Lizzie Flower was a rather plain looking lady, about nine years older than Browning. Her affections had been ruthlessly cast aside by a young minister of her parish, and in consequence she very willingly bestowed them upon young Browning. It is said that a woman is never truly good until her fondest hopes have been trampled in the dust; we may therefore surmise that Lizzie Flower was truly good and that her companionship with Browning elevated him. He, as was natural, thought much of her and so informed his mother. He was often entertained at the Flower home by Lizzie and her sister, Sarah, (author of the song, "Nearer My God to Thee".) He, in turn, would entertain them with his poems.

He and Lizzie spent a great deal of time studying Byeon, Keats and Shelley. They would seek the shelter of some great oak and there spend hours reading a book. For two years they eschewed a diet of meat and spent most of their time in the open air.

At the age of eighteen the father, thinking it was time for his son to go to work, secured him a position in the Bank of England. Browning refused to do the work, declared he was tired of the dull, plodding, mercenary world and wanted a change. This change came about a week later, when, after a quarrel with his father, he joined a wandering band of gypsies. A few weeks spent in their company brought him to the conclusion that civilization was not such a disagreeable disease after all, and he returned home. After taking a bath and burning his gypsy garb, he was once more in his right mind.

Soon after this he took up the study of French under a private tutor and continued it for some time with varying success. Following this came a term as a special student in Greek at London University. In order to be near the school he obtained rooms in Gower Street. He had lived there a week when a slight rough-house incident occurred, in which most of the furniture was crippled and not a few of the balusters of the stairway broken. After his father had settled for the damages, Browning, now tired of university life, returned home. He next announced that he was going to write poetry as a profession. This purpose pleased his mother. Lizzie Flower was delighted and predicted for him a career that would lead to the poet laureateship.

### Career as Poet.

This poetic career was uneventful, obscure until he reached the age of thirty. His works so far had not been appreciated except by his immediate circle of acquaintances. His father had, at personal expense, got several volumes of his poems printed. Most of these lay upon the shelves at home. A few had been bought by friends and some given away. People who tried to read them declared they were too hard to read or too obscure. A few editors tried to bring Browning before the public, but their efforts failed. Finally an editor by the name of Fox persuaded Browning to accompany him to several dinners. Here Browning became acquainted with several other authors and actors. Among the latter was Macready who urged Browning to write a play. Browning at his solicitation produced the play, *Stafford*, in which Macready acted the principal part.

### Fails as Playwright.

The result was a feeling of coldness between the author and the actor. The play was little appreciated by the public. The author censured the actor and the actor blamed the author. Browning wrote several plays after this, but failed to win public approval as a playwright. In fact, the reputation of his plays delayed

for several years the fame justly due him as a poet. Browning's relatives considered him a failure, and his father, when he paid the weekly allowance, would often remind him of the fact. Lizzie Flower, however, was still loyal to him. During all these years she and Browning had been firm friends, except for a short time after they had quarreled and returned letters, but they soon made up again.

About this time Browning formed a friendship with a Miss Hawthorn, a member of London's best society. This friendship detracted somewhat from that with Miss Flower.

### Gets Into Literary Circle.

Edward Moxton, a London publisher, finally suggested to Browning that Browning allow him to get out his verse in pamphlet form. To this Browning assented, and such was the favor with which they were received that he soon had a firm literary footing in London. His royalties now amounted to more than the allowance from his father.

### Visits Italy.

Encouraged by his success, he determined to make another trip to Italy, since some of his best verse had been inspired by a former visit to that country. Accordingly, after completing arrangements, he set sail for Italy.

At a dinner, given in Browning's honor soon after his return, he was asked by a gentleman in the party to inscribe a copy of *Bells and Pomegranates*. Upon Browning's asking the name, the gentleman replied, "John Kenyon."

### John Kenyon and Elizabeth Barrett.

This little incident led to a conversation in the course of which Kenyon informed Browning that he (Kenyon) was a cousin of Elizabeth Barrett, a writer whose works were slowly gaining favor. Browning replied that he had read and admired her works. Encouraged by this, Kenyon requested Browning to write to her, praising her latest book; since she and her friends were somewhat fearful of its success, and a word of commendation from a man like Browning would greatly cheer the author. Browning, having secured her address, wrote to her and received a reply. After the correspondence thus begun had continued for some time, Browning sought permission to call, but received the reply that she was an invalid confined in a dark room and was a "weed fit only for the ground." This only aroused in him a more intense desire to see her; and, by the aid of John Kenyon, he finally succeeded in going in at a time when the father was gone and the doctor and nurse were out. The visit was a brief one, but when Browning came out into the sunlight a new purpose stirred his heart. The vision of a pale face with a halo of curls was indelibly stamped upon his memory.

Here was genius which must soon be lost to the world unless some very effective remedy be employed. Browning believed he could restore her to health

and strength; he would love her back to light and life. He told her this soon after; and so potent was the charm of love that we soon find the former invalid throwing open the windows and letting in the fresh air and sunshine. The doctor became highly indignant and the nurse resigned, neither knowing what had effected the transformation.

She became able to walk. During the absence of her father, she and Browning hastened to a nearby church and were married. She returned home alone and for nearly a week Browning did not see her. Then one day while the remainder of the family were at dinner she slipped out of the house to Browning who was waiting, and together they hastened away. The family knew nothing of the marriage until the runaways were safe in France and had written home, seeking forgiveness and a blessing. These, however were denied as Mrs. Browning's father declared his daughter was dead and refused to open or answer any letters from her. Her father's cruel obstinacy and the fact that she, who had once lived in a home of luxury, must now share the lot of a poor poet, must have been a severe trial to her. Browning realizing this, endeavored to make up for the loss of parental love and luxuries by his tenderness. And right well he must have succeeded, for in a letter to one of her friends, Mrs. Browning said that love had turned the dial backward and the joyousness of girlhood was once more returning to her.

Browning and his wife did but little writing for two years, which were spent in the mountains of Switzerland and in Italy. The royalties from their published books kept them from actual want; and when John Kenyon at his death left them ten thousand pounds they were placed forever beyond the reach of want. For fifteen years they lived a life such as few mortals enjoy, when, without warning, the spirit of her who had both inspired and written some of the most beautiful poems in the English language, took its flight. Her loss touched Browning with a depth of feeling such as only his great heart was capable of. But his was not a spirit to be conquered by sorrow and he determined to live for her boy. After her death in 1861, Browning returned to England, and revisited Italy not until 1878 and thereafter frequently spent his autmns in Venice, where he died Dec. 12, 1889. Browning was forty-nine when his wife died, and before he had reached his fifty-first year England had awakened to the fact that he was one of her great poets. Honors came slowly but surely. A degree from Oxford, tender of the Lord Rectorship, from St. Andrews, which he declined, and advance payments from publishers were heralds of his fame. His best work was done after his wife's death. Through this work runs the spirit of that love which ever remained with him. In his best work, "The Ring and the Book," the character Pompilia is a portrayal of her, whose

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