

THE STORY OF THE BROWNINGS

The Victorian Idyl of the Lives of
Two Poets

The Brownings. A Victorian Idyll. By David Loth. With Illustrations. \$3.75. New York: Brentano's.

POSSIBLY there is nothing new left to say regarding the story of a married love than which in all history none was more perfect. But Mr. Loth (of the editorial staff of the New York World, by the way), has re-told it in so refreshingly novel a fashion that one reads it with somewhat the same sensation as if it were really a "new story." It has that piquantly personal touch which breathes into history the breath of life, and is winged with wit and a delicate satire which smiles at the follies which even the highest type of humanity knows. From the scientific, philosophical and romantic points of view, the lives of these two poets so singularly brought together (if anything in this paradoxical world is really "singular") has been described and analyzed and microscopically examined and vivisectioned with grave and sometimes farcical particularity. As Lillian Sturchev has made two queens of England live again as human beings subject to like weaknesses as ourselves, and Andre Maurois has transformed Disraeli and Shelley from "personages" to men, so Mr. Loth has made the Brownings the lovable, friendly, get-atable man and woman they were in life. Man and woman first, then poets, and then philosophers and lovers of history and romance. It is the reverse of the too common habits of Browning studies, and they reveal themselves so very human that we happily come nearer to them than usual. The result—for us at least—is an increased appreciation of their genius, an even clearer perception of the beauty of their lives. Many of the anecdotes have been told before. It indeed would seem impossible at this late day to find new ones. But the freshness of Mr. Loth's style make them flash or gleam with a new color. And then so many studies of the Brownings are wearisomely subjective. Mr. Loth's version is finely objective. We see, we hear, we feel.

The author feels that much of the present-day neglect of Robert Browning's poetry was brought about (heretical Mr. Loth) by those Browning Societies whose tireless insistence upon the "inscrutable philosophy" of the great poet's work, often lessened and sometimes obliterated interest in its splendor. "I am quite other than a Brownings," Robert Browning once protested to Edmund Yates when some of the philosophies of the Browning Societies were attributed to 'the Master.' He wanted to be read, not just studied. His denial was as prompt as if he had known that the Societies, after destroying his popularity, would perish themselves from the very lack of that popularity, which was their entire subsistence and real reason for being." However, "it is an ill wind," etc. For years he had been tormented by questions as to precisely what he meant in such or such a poem. He had been sorely—often wrathfully—perplexed how to answer them. "Now the problem was solved. Puzzled admirers no longer had any terrors for him. When pressed to set at rest the doubts that had arisen, he would chuckle cheerfully, wave a hand airily and reply gaily—"Ask the Browning Society. They can tell you, I can't."

Mr. Loth considers the greatest crime of vivisection applauded by the Brownings was the publication of the devastatingly comprehensive "Phrase Book" sponsored by the Boston Browning Society. Mr. Loth is very severe indeed toward these societies for transforming one of the greatest of poets into a mere philosopher.

There is a whole iconoclastic chapter regarding this work of "concealment" of the real Browning carried on, not intentionally but as a witness of superior culture in these decorously conducted societies. And yet it was because his mother was president of the Browning Society in his home town that even when very young Mr. Loth was familiar with the story of the Brownings. After reading Ellen Key's sentimental version of their romance, he announced that he would write a better one, when he was a man. "And here it is."

The glimpses Mr. Loth gives of other famous people besides the Brownings are delectably provocative: of Wordsworth and Landor sitting at Talfourd's table, and listening benevolently, not to say condescendingly, to the toast—"Robert Browning, youngest of the poets of England." Of Wordsworth enraged at the older Browning's "Lost Leader." Of him, walking with a friend in Surrey one day, the laureate "was informed with proper respect that Robert Browning lived over by that hill. 'Hill?' questioned the old man suavely and with the proper emphasis on the more important part of his informant's statement, 'We call such as that, a rise.'" And of how, when the astounding fact was announced in London that Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett were married and in Paris, the still unforgiving Wordsworth exclaimed: "So Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett have gone off together. Well, I hope they understand each other. No one else can."

There is Carlyle, always Browning's friend, anxiously counselling him, "Ye won't mind me, though it's the last advice I may ever give ye, but ye ought to translate the whole of the Greek tragedians—that's your vocation." How-

ever, Browning himself frequently could not remember what was in his mind when he wrote certain lines. Once he said: "When that poem was written two knew what it meant—God and Robert Browning. Now, God alone knows!" There are many other glimpses of the famous men of London. "And such a London! The old city was bursting the bonds of more feudal days as the great middle class, astonished and excited by its own achievements, rose toward the pinnacle of magnificence it was to achieve." The little group of Americans who often gathered in the salon of Casa Guidi live again for a space: the Storks, Hawthorne, Margaret Fuller, and "Hatty" Hosmer, eminent sculptor: the "Modern Woman" of her day, who audaciously walked about Florence without a companion. "Queer—but a good girl." Her friends prided themselves on being broad-minded." To Casa Guidi also came Dickens and Thackeray and Hans Christian Andersen and Florence Nightingale and Mazzini. Even a glimpse of George Sand is given, to whose salon Browning, with almost incredible tolerance for that Victorian day took—yes, actually took Mrs. Browning once, and went alone several times.

Even more lovable than usual, because more "eternally feminine" than most revelations outside the unconscious ones of her verse prove her, is the portrait of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, which Mr. Loth gives. And as we follow the making of the companion portrait from Robert Browning's happy youth to his happy old age, a sense of personal contact grows until it seems almost as real as it did to those who could hear his jovial voice. And still happy, we have him at the last, receiving the news of the laudatory reviews of "Asolando" with an amused little smile—perhaps at the memory of days when reviews of his poems had not been so favorable.

Having indicated, if only inadequately, the pleasure Mr. Loth's version of the Browning idyll will give—now for the fly in the amber: This the repeated use of "Ba," (her family and husband's name for her) when speaking of Mrs. Browning. The infelicity, to put it charitably, is almost unforgivable and wholly inexcusable. Equally so, the use—although not quite so persistent—of "Robert."

F. B.

Mrs Fannie Barrett Browning has written an account of Browning's reception of the volume (Asolando).

"When we knew, two or three days before the end, that the doctors were agreed that they could give us no hope of his recovery, we asked Dr. Cini if we might show him the copy of his Asolando (the first copy of the first edition) which had been sent him in advance; and with the doctor's permission, I undid the parcel at his bedside, - the others standing around. He was very weak and impulsively seized the book, which was upside down, turned it very quickly, - as if afraid his strength would fail him - looked for two different things he wanted to see, found them, and then throwing the book to the bottom of the bed, turned to Dr. Cini and said: - 'That's a little of the work I've done in my lifetime!' A few minutes later he called me from where I was standing over by the fire in front of the chimney piece - for all this had naturally been very overwhelming, so that I had turned away, - and giving me the book said, 'Under any other circumstances I should give it to Mrs Bronson, but now I want to give it to you.' My husband afterwards wrote a touching inscription on the flyleaf of that precious volume; I had a special leather cover made for it and have treasured it for nearly forty years. It is now part of the Browning collection at Wellesley College.

It was a coincidence that the date of his death, the 12th of December, was the date that the Asolando volume came out. The entire edition was sold that day, and they sent us from London a telegram with the news. We told him, he understood perfectly, murmured several times, - 'Very gratifying'.

(Fannie Barrett Browning in her Some Memories of Robert Browning, Boston: 1928, pp 29-31.

Note. The Bronson house at Asolo was named La Mura, at Venice, Cà Alvisi.

"Browning in Asolo" by Katherine de Kay Bronson. With sketches by Clara Montalba. Century Magazine, April, 1900, pp. 920-931.