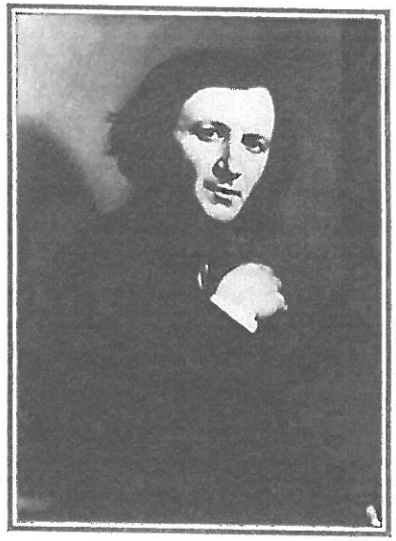
to love, and a child, were granted her almost immediately. She found out she was pregnant in September; she learned she had consumption in December; she was dead in March. The child, seven months inside her, died as well. On the last day of her life, pathetically weakened, she opened her eyes on her deathbed and saw her beloved husband standing over her with a grieving expression. She smiled and whispered, "Do not worry, Arthur, God cannot possibly part us now because we are so happy." They were her last words. None of the Brontë offspring lived past the age of thirty-nine.

Today Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* is regarded as perhaps the greatest novel in the English language; many British and American critics say it is better than *Jane Eyre*. But as far as I am concerned, it is Charlotte, not Emily, whom we should admire the most of these two sisters. It was Charlotte, a homely woman from the bleak moors, who by publishing *Jane Eyre* gave us the first best-selling novel written by a woman. Her personal story is as romantic and inspiring as anything she could ever have conceived of writing in her fiction.









## *Elizabeth Barret Browning* (1806–1861)
## &
## *Robert Browning* (1812–1889)

When we come to the poet Robert Browning, it does seem a shame to speak only of him, given that his wife, Elizabeth Barrett (who of course became Elizabeth Barrett Browning), was in her day even more famous than her husband. So I will indeed speak about both of these fascinating literary figures.

They are quite famous, but unfortunately they are not really famous for what they wrote, in the same way that a Dickens, a Shakespeare, or a Poe is. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, although she wrote numerous poems, is primarily known for one particular love sonnet, which of course begins, "How do I love thee? Let me count the ways." As for Robert Browning, people do not read him much at all today. He is known for a few famous lines, snatches of ideas embedded in poems that remain unread, lines such as "Grow old along with me! The best is yet to be," or "Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp, or what's a heaven for?" In other words, these poets are not known for a large body of work, as John Keats is known, or Wordsworth, Lord Byron, or Coleridge. Keats, Wordsworth, Byron, and Coleridge are better known for their works because they wrote as Romantic poets; they wrote during the age of Romanticism,

when poetry was the genre that the greatest minds of the age used to express their feelings and emotions. They were poets during an age when poetry was king.

But the Brownings wrote after the Romantics; they wrote during the Victorian period, so they are considered Victorian poets. The difficulty with that classification is that during the age when they wrote, the 1800s in England, poetry did not have the central position that it did in the Romantic era. The novel, the Victorian novel, was the most important vehicle for expressing thought during the Brownings' age. And it is the novelists who wrote during the lifetimes of the Brownings—Charles Dickens, Emily and Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, Thomas Hardy—who are considered the most important writers. In fact, there is only one other Victorian poet we know well today—Alfred, Lord Tennyson.

Browning and Tennyson became the two greatest names in poetry during the Victorian age, and they were extremely different. Tennyson was far better known than Browning. Because Tennyson was poet laureate, Queen Victoria expected him to write poems for political occasions. The most famous one he wrote was "The Charge of the Light Brigade," composed during the Crimean War. But he also wrote "Idylls of the King," the beautiful Arthurian legend that he clad in such gorgeous poetry, "Crossing the Bar," his final poem, and "In Memoriam," which became probably the most famous poem of the period.

Browning was far more intellectual than Tennyson, and much more difficult to understand. He was an acquired taste. Because he wrote poems about incidents and people that require knowledge of history, particularly art history, his poetry today is rather like a crossword puzzle—it is full of ref-





erences that have disappeared in the twentieth century. Even at the time Browning was writing he was constantly accused of being terribly obscure. His wife, reading a poem that he had written years before, came to him one day and said, "My dear Robert, I do not understand what you are referring to in this line. Would you explain it to me?" Robert Browning read his own poem, looked at the line, looked at his wife, and said, "My dear, when I wrote that line, only God and Robert Browning knew what it meant. And now God only knows!"

What I want to do first is tell you about these two people's fascinating lives, looking at the time before they met, and then continuing with the incredible story of their engagement and marriage. Let us begin with Elizabeth Barrett.

She was born in 1806 and was six years older than her future husband, Robert Browning, which was unusual in the 1800s. The most important person in her life before she met Browning was her father, Edward Barrett Moulton. His middle name, Barrett, was his mother's maiden name. He inherited money from his mother's family, and to get that money he had to change his last name to his mother's maiden name. Unfortunately, he had already been named Edward Barrett Moulton, so he ended up with the unwieldy name of Edward Barrett Moulton-Barrett.

Edward Barrett Moulton-Barrett, whom we will now just call Edward Barrett, was a ruthlessly dominating personality, and this nature would lead to the conflict between himself and his daughter Elizabeth when she fell in love with Robert Browning. Edward found a submissive, weak woman to marry, Mary; coincidentally he was six years younger than she was. They married and had twelve children, four girls and eight boys. Elizabeth was the oldest, and the favorite of

Edward Barrett. His marriage lasted twenty-seven years, and then Mary died in 1832.

The other important child in the family was the eldest son, Edward, and he and Elizabeth were close. He always called her Ba, which was short for "baby"; she always called him Bro, for "brother." It was clear that Elizabeth was a prodigy. From the age of four she developed a fascination with ancient Greece; by six she was writing poems about the subject. Her father paid to have them published when she was only twelve years old.

The Barretts were a strange family, unconventional. Edward Barrett was an agnostic, rare in the Victorian age. This was something that one certainly did not teach to children, but he did. We have a prayer that he taught to his children: "O God, if there is a God, save my soul, if I have a soul." Hardly your typical pious Victorian family. Elizabeth's personality from a young age was impetuous. She wanted to do everything quickly—learning, reading, talking, writing. At fifteen, although she had been told never to saddle her own pony because the saddle was so heavy, she decided to do it by herself. She stumbled as she was putting the saddle on her pony, and the heavy saddle fell on her spine. This caused a spinal injury that would torment her the rest of her life and caused her to become a semi-invalid. She had to lie flat on her back for so long after the accident that it caused a lung affliction that would eventually kill her.

Now let us turn to her future husband, Robert Browning. Born in 1812, he also came from a rather eccentric family. His paternal grandfather was notoriously tightfisted. When Robert Browning's father finally got his first job as a clerk in the Bank of England, his father, Robert Browning's grandfa-





ther, presented to his son a bill of all the expenses the family had incurred from the time of his birth, and he expected Robert's father to pay him back. On the bill was even the fee the midwife had charged for delivering Robert's father. Because Robert's father suffered from such stinginess, he made sure that when his son was born—the only child in the family—he would be given everything and never be expected to pay back anything. Robert Browning's father was a delightful man, as was his Scottish mother, and Browning enjoyed a warm, secure childhood. As an only child he was doted on from the time he was born.

He certainly was an unusual child. He kept a diary from the time he was seven, and we have one of his first entries: "I married two wives this morning." Here was a young man with a vivid imagination! Browning loved to read books from his father's vast library, and he decided from an early age he wanted to be a poet.

When he was in his early twenties, his first poem, "Pauline," was published. The poem was greatly influenced by the poet Shelley, and if you know anything about Shelley, you know he was the most emotional of the Romantic poets. "Pauline" was reviewed by John Stuart Mill, who began his career in writing as a reviewer of poetry. Robert Browning was dismayed when he read Mill's review; it would change the direction of his poetry for the rest of his life. John Stuart Mill wrote: "This writer seems to me possessed with a more intense and morbid self-consciousness than I have ever known in any sane human being." Browning was humiliated, and he vowed he would never again so reveal his true feelings and emotions.

Robert Browning, reeling from the harsh review from John

Stuart Mill, decided he should not be a poet, he should be a playwright; a playwright could hide behind his characters and no one would ever know what his true emotions were. He did not have the talent to be a playwright, but he had to write one bad play after another before he discovered this failing. A humiliation worse than Mill's review awaited him when a brutal drama critic said of his first play: "I saw Mr. Browning's drama under the worst possible circumstances; the curtain was up." He was frustrated—he knew he should be a poet, but he did not know how to express himself in the best way through poetry.

This brings us to 1836. Elizabeth Barrett was thirty years old and unmarried. She had been publishing her poetry, which had garnered favorable reviews and a reading public interested in her. She moved to 50 Wimpole Street, which became one of English literature's most famous addresses because of her elopement with Browning.

In 1840, Elizabeth and her beloved brother Edward were at Torquay. Mr. Barrett was in London, and he wrote asking Edward to come back home to help him. Elizabeth was so enjoying the seaside stay that she begged her father to let her brother stay through the weekend and then come home, and Barrett relented. The very next day Edward went boating and was drowned. For the rest of her life Elizabeth blamed herself, for keeping Edward with her. Some critics say that this tragedy made her poetry better and informed her writing with a philosophical base it did not possess before.

Recovering from the tragedy of her brother's death as best she could, Elizabeth had become beloved by the public. They knew that she was a semi-invalid and could usually be found on her couch composing, so they called her the Caged Nightingale. Myths began to spring up around her, making her





poetry even more delightful to the public. She was interviewed by numerous magazines anxious for details of her existence. Her great love was a cocker spaniel, Flush. A reporter came to Elizabeth Barrett's home one day, seeking information for an article about the beautiful semi-invalid poet, and he was of course invited to meet the dog. The reporter, in his article, observed that Elizabeth Barrett and her beloved Flush looked similar. But unfortunately, in the article the reporter not only said that the owner looked like the dog, but also specified in which way: "Both have prominent round eyes, a high rounded forehead, and long hanging silken ears." That certainly gives you an odd picture of Elizabeth Barrett's appearance.

Elizabeth Barrett read a poem written by Robert Browning called "Pippa Passes" that has the famous line in it "God's in his heaven—all's right with the world." She liked the poetry very much. The general public was still not interested in Browning, and he was finding it difficult to be published. But two years later, in a poem that Elizabeth Barrett published, she mentioned Robert Browning and compared him to William Wordsworth and Alfred, Lord Tennyson, praising him and saying what a fine poet he was. Browning read this and realized it gave him the opportunity he had been thinking about, which was to write Elizabeth Barrett and tell her how much her poetry meant to him. And so in 1844, when he was thirty-two, unmarried, and she was thirty-eight, unmarried and an invalid, he wrote to her.

On January 10, 1845, he sent Elizabeth Barrett a short letter that ended, "I love your verses with all my heart, dear Miss Barrett," and he was so bold as to ask if they could meet sometime. She only wrote back, "In spring we shall see," putting him off, but not telling him no. One of the reasons

she put him off was that her father, Edward Barrett, had become an absolute tyrant. He never wanted to be separated from his beloved daughter and even went so far as to use her guilt in the death of her brother to keep her in her place. What their relationship was psychologically is hard to guess, but we do know that he vowed he would never let his daughter marry. Now there appeared a possibility that she might fall in love, because on Tuesday afternoon, May 20, 1845, from three to four-thirty, she invited Robert Browning to visit, which he did.

The visit went awry from the moment he walked in the door, because Flush the cocker spaniel ran up to Robert Browning and bit him. Browning patiently decided to ignore this welcome; his main reason for being there was to introduce himself to this woman whom he knew, at first sight, he wanted to marry. He certainly found out soon enough that Elizabeth Barrett's father welcomed him even less than Flush did.

Elizabeth returned Browning's interest, but she was not strong enough physically or psychologically to break away from her father. Robert Browning realized this, but he believed firmly that this was the woman he wanted to marry. Over the next year, he worked carefully to strengthen Elizabeth and get her strong enough to leave that household and elope with him. A regular marriage was out of the question because her father would not allow it, so the only hope was subterfuge. Browning also saw that Elizabeth had become an opium addict because the drug had been given to her in large quantities to ease the pain of her spinal injury. The first task he set for himself was to wean her from the opium. She slowly became strong enough to be carried up and down the stairs of her house when her father was





absent. Finally she became strong enough to climb the stairs herself and venture outside.

Robert Browning sought the help of Elizabeth Barrett's maid, Lilly Wilson, in fostering the invalid's strength. In the meantime Elizabeth was certainly falling head over heels in love with the handsome poet, writing sonnets to him, though she did not let him read them. Finally, in September 1846 they realized they must act, because Mr. Barrett had decided the house needed to be painted, and all his children would accompany him down to the country while the house was being prepared. He left, and Robert and Elizabeth took this opportunity to escape.

Taking the maid with them, they eloped; after the marriage they sailed to Italy. They knew that once they had been married, so against Mr. Barrett's wishes, there was no hope that they could live together with him. Indeed, when Mr. Barrett discovered what his daughter had done, he wanted all traces of her obliterated from the house. Any poems he had of hers were destroyed, any pictures put away forever. When people said to him, "It seems you would rather have her dead than alive," he responded, "No, I would not want my daughter to be dead rather than alive, but I would want her dead if the choice were between being dead or alive and happy as she is now."

Robert and Elizabeth arrived safely in Italy. They decided to make Florence their home because of its beauty and because it was cheap. They had little money, for although Robert Browning was still writing poetry, the public still did not eagerly read it. It was his wife who was famous—behind his back many called Robert Browning "Mr. Elizabeth Barrett Browning."

Now that they were married, Elizabeth at last showed her husband the love sonnets she had been writing steadily

to him from the time they had first met. And when he read these sonnets, he recognized that they were her finest poems. He insisted, over her objections, that they should be published, but neither wanted the public to know they were Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poetry. Robert's pet name for her was "his little Portuguese," so they decided to publish these love sonnets and call them *Sonnets from the Portuguese* so it would sound as if they had been translated from some obscure poet in Portugal. When they were published, however, most readers recognized that the poet must be Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Today the one sonnet that begins, "How do I love thee? Let me count the ways," is by far the most famous thing she ever wrote.

The couple was happily ensconced in their home, Casa Guidi, in Florence. They were thrilled to be with one another, and of course what they wanted more than anything else was a child, but because of Elizabeth's frail health they thought it was impossible for her to conceive. Finally, in 1849, two and a half years after they were married, a son was born. Because both of them were poets, what better name to give the child of two writers than Pen. They called him Penini, which in Italian means "little pen."

Once Pen was born, the Brownings decided that because there was now a grandchild for Edward Barrett, they would return to England, try to visit her father, and make amends. It was a big mistake. Not only did Edward Barrett refuse to meet them, but also when he heard they were in England, he, through a messenger, sent her every letter that she had written him. Even though there had been no communication from him, she had faithfully corresponded with her father from the time of the elopement. Not only were all her letters returned to her,





but not one of them had been opened. She and Browning realized the rift would never be healed; she had forever lost her father because she had married the man she loved.

They devoted their energy and effort to their son. He was a beautiful and precocious boy, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning could not help herself, dressing him in velvet and lace and plumed hats. This would become a problem for Pen, because as he grew up he somehow felt that the world owed him a living, that the world owed him adoration. He eventually became a painter and sculptor, but he would always be second-rate. He could imitate things pretty well, but he had no original thoughts. Because he was so spoiled as a little boy, he never was able to grow up and realize he must face the world on its own terms.

Robert Browning continued to write, and although the public was still fairly unreceptive, he knew he was finding his strength. He published a volume of poetry, *Men and Women*, which is superb. In this volume he settled upon the kind of poetry he could write effectively. The form he specialized in and brought to genius was called the dramatic monologue. No one wrote dramatic monologues better than Robert Browning, so let me just say a word about this kind of poetry. You remember that once John Stuart Mill had told him that his feelings were too strong, that they needed to be suppressed, and Browning decided to hide himself. The best way to hide himself, he concluded, was behind other characters.

The form is called a dramatic monologue because, as the word *monologue* implies, one person alone is speaking. It is called *dramatic* because the poet chooses a crucial, character-revealing moment in this person's life. Usually the name of Browning's poem is the name of the character who is speak-

ing, and the character is generally a figure from history, usually Renaissance art. "Andrea del Sarto" is one of the famous dramatic monologues; "Fra Lippo Lippi" is another. They are somewhat obscure in that you need to know about the historical personage, but what Browning does so well is that, as you hear the character speak, his poems seem as though you are eavesdropping on one side of a conversation. And as the character speaks, that character reveals in the poetry far more about his personality than he or she ever wanted to. Just by listening to a Browning character speak you are able to judge him as an immortal soul and as a human being, and pass judgments—usually against the character. It is a very intellectual form, and no one was able to pack more psychological realism and power into a poem than Robert Browning. My particular favorite is "My Last Duchess." The narrator is a subtly vicious man who is looking for a second wife. As he speaks, the horror of what he has done to his first wife is gradually revealed, though he does not really think he is giving that away.

In 1857, Elizabeth Barrett Browning published a long verse novel called "Aurora Leigh." It is a poem, but it almost reads like a novel. It was a tremendous success. An interesting thing about Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poetry is this: if you read that poem now—and most of her poems—they do not have the same effect they did during her lifetime. Today they seem dated; they really do not seem all that powerful. And what is even more interesting about Elizabeth Barrett Browning is that during her lifetime she hated the indifference the public showed to her husband's poetry, and she began to resent how much the public loved her own poetry. An astute critic, she realized that although she was a good poet, her husband was far better. She predicted that his





poetry would live into the future in a way hers would not, and that turns out to have been absolutely correct. Today we consider Robert Browning one of the greatest English poets, while Elizabeth Barrett Browning is simply a very good poet.

Shortly after she wrote "Aurora Leigh," which was considered her masterpiece, all the years of lung problems and spinal problems came together, and by the late 1850s she was sinking fast. On June 29, 1861, at the age of fifty-five, she died. On that last evening Robert was at her side. She opened her eyes and he said to her, "Do you know me?" She responded, "My Robert, my heaven, my beloved, God bless you." She shut her eyes, then opened them one more time. Robert said, "How do you feel?" She gave a radiant smile and said, "Beautiful," and she died. The moment she breathed her last, Browning removed an Etruscan ring that he had given her, which she had always worn, from her finger. He put it on his watch chain, where it remained for the rest of his life. They had had fifteen happy years together as husband and wife in Italy. She was buried in the English cemetery in Florence, where you can find her grave today.

Pen, now eleven, was motherless. Robert Browning, now having to rear him alone, worried about his son's dependent nature and realized he needed to earn a greater income because this artistic son of his would likely never be able to function on his own. Fortunately for Browning, the public was finally beginning to appreciate his poetry, particularly in America. Suddenly numerous Browning societies, which you can still find today in America, sprang up all over the United States. Because Browning's poetry was so difficult and obscure, the purpose of the Browning societies was for people to sit, read some lines aloud, and then say, "What do you

think he meant by this?" And people would look for references in their art histories and say, "Well, I think he is trying to say this about this historical figure."

Before Elizabeth died, the two of them had loved to walk about Florence; they would frequent outdoor bookstalls, because they could purchase marvelous books, just as you can today, cheaply. One day when Robert and Elizabeth were strolling through one of these outdoor book markets, his eye was attracted by an old book. It was bound in yellow vellum, cost today's equivalent of 40¢. He bought this book and discovered it was about a triple murder that had taken place in Rome in 1698. The book told of an evil count who murdered his estranged wife and foster parents, after accusing this poor woman of falling in love with a priest. Browning became fascinated by this tale of murder, and he turned it into his own masterpiece poem. He decided he would write nine different dramatic monologues, each told from the point of view of a different person involved in the tragedy: the woman who was murdered, the count who murdered her, the priest who was unjustly accused . . . these nine characters would tell their sides of the story. He called it *The Ring and the Book*. It took him four years to write it, from 1865 until 1869, and when *The Ring and the Book* came out in 1869, it was immediately recognized as the work of a genius.

Even Queen Victoria, who was passionate about Alfred, Lord Tennyson, and who had pretty much ignored Robert Browning, now recognized that she had a second genius poet writing in her reign. Her acceptance of Robert Browning finally established him in England. She claimed she kept *The Ring and the Book* at her nightstand, a shrine of sorts since her beloved husband Albert had made that piece of furniture.





There is the wonderful story (though, alas, probably apocryphal) that when Victoria died in 1901 and they removed the nightstand from Buckingham Palace, they discovered that Albert had been somewhat lacking as a furniture maker. One leg of the nightstand was obviously too short, for resting beneath it to balance the piece was *The Ring and the Book*!

Browning's son, Pen, was still unsettled and dependent, and his father began to think perhaps he should marry again, even though he was still completely devoted to Elizabeth. Perhaps he should marry someone wealthy, to make sure his son would be well protected. He did propose to one woman, Lady Ashburton. She was rich, a widow, and pretty. But when he proposed, he was rejected, and it is little wonder why. Robert Browning was painfully honest; he said to her in his proposal, "Though my heart is buried in Florence, I must think of my son and make sure he is well provided for." Hardly a romantic effort.

He was really quite grateful when she turned him down, because had they married, he would probably have felt terrible guilt. His one everlasting love, Elizabeth, was always in the forefront of his thoughts. In his journal he once quoted the great Italian poet Dante, who also had a love of his life, Beatrice, though she was someone he would never marry: "Thus I believe, thus I affirm, thus I am certain it is, that from this life I shall pass to another, better there where that lady lives of whom my soul is forever enamored." Clearly Browning's soul would be forever enamored by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and he remained faithful to her memory for the rest of his life.

By now his best years as a poet were behind him. He had become so popular, so accustomed to being invited to wealthy homes and sharing meals and giving entertainment by talking

about his poetry, that one critic said about his final years, "Browning dinnered himself away." Rather than working on his poetry, he was enjoying too much the life of just being a celebrity. His son, Pen, married a rich woman from New York when he was thirty-eight, and Browning realized that no matter how mediocre an artist Pen was, he would always be provided for. This relief from a father's burden freed Browning in one sense; he died not long after. You would of course expect that he would be buried next to his beloved Elizabeth in Florence. But he was not, because by the time of his death he was so renowned as a poet that the English wanted his body brought back on a barge from Italy to England to be buried where the greatest artists are buried, in Westminster Abby.

And so today Elizabeth Barrett Browning is pretty much known as the wife of Robert Browning, and the one who penned those immortal *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, where anybody can find a spiritual soul mate in those beautiful rhymes. Robert Browning's reputation, on the other hand, has continued to grow. Many people who like him as a poet see him as a philosopher and religious teacher, because in his poetry the doubts that troubled other Victorian authors, such as Tennyson and Dickens, are resolved due to his basic optimism. People who want to be uplifted by literature turn to Robert Browning in a way they cannot turn to someone like Charles Dickens, who presented so many gloomy predictions about what was going to happen to society. Browning is viewed as a relief, an escape from gloom to where you can still be inspired. I think Elizabeth Barrett Browning would be proud today to realize that what she predicted, that her husband's neglected reputation would rise, has come true.





## *Charles Dickens*

*(1812–1870)*