

Robert Browning.

BY THE REV. PROFESSOR SALMOND, D.D.

IN many things the England of the second half of the nineteenth century has been enriched beyond the common fortune of nations. But in nothing has the favour shown her been more conspicuously seen than in the joint ministry of her two great poets, Alfred Tennyson and Robert Browning. Born within two years of each other, and endowed each with a rare and fertile faculty of song, they have been good stewards of the divine gift, and have used it through a long lifetime in the service of all that is noblest and purest. They have both been interpreters of the mind of their time—both prophets as well as singers to their fellow-countrymen. By the high example they have set of lives consecrated to great and benign pursuits, the imperishable contributions they have made to the literature which is our national glory, and the help they have brought to minds burdened with the problems which are the peculiar birth of a transitional age, they have laid the England of this generation under a debt which is beyond discharge. We cannot be too grateful that the elder poet is yet spared to us, still capable of instructing and charming us by new products of his unrivalled art, able in the late evening of his day to look, with a serene hopefulness, to the crossing of the bar and to repeat with the note of a clearer conviction than ever those lessons of faith in God, reverence for Christ, and confidence in immortality which were of such moment for the England of his youth. Now that his junior brother in song has been taken from us, we are sensibly the poorer as a people. The Italy to which he was so deeply attached, the Italy which was made so much the more to him by the memory of the years he spent upon her soil in happy union with one who was not less as a poetess than he was as a poet, held his mortal remains in trust for a time. But English he continued to be to his heart's core, and it was only England that could be the fit guardian of his dust. His message has been a message to England above all other nations—a message of strength and moral courage, a message of faith and hope for his own people. The place that is worthy of him is the place which he has found in the solemn hall of

England's heroes, where he is now laid, meet comrade in death for Chaucer and the sovereigns of English song.

It would be hazardous to anticipate what his ultimate rank may be. We are yet too near him to judge him with impartial eye, or say how much of his work is of that vital and catholic order of art which ensures immortality. But his place, surely, will be a high one, and it will certainly be a distinct one. Following the impulse of a strong and original genius, he chose a path apart from others, and he had to make it for himself. It cost the great poet of the Lakes a quarter of a century's patient loyalty to himself and his art, after the critics had magisterially denied him the name of poet, to conquer for himself the recognition which was his due. Then came the reaction which had its climax in the ovation in Oxford, when Keble presented him for the degree of D.C.L., and three thousand voices of England's truest sons made the Sheldonian theatre ring with a welcome more enthusiastic than had been accorded to any man of his own time but the victor of Waterloo. Like Wordsworth and others of England's strongest souls, Robert Browning had to endure long and weary years of disfavour or neglect. He fought his battle with a brave fidelity to himself and to his idea of the poet's vocation, and the time had long gone by when he could say of the English people that they loved him not.

He has passed from us full of years, rich in the honour of his country, recognised as one whose work cannot be forgotten, whose fame is enduring. Yet it may be that the causes which delayed the appreciation of his muse may operate towards a certain reduction of his poetic rank after a lapse of years. In truth there is not a little to wonder at and regret in his work—the perverted originality with which he tortures rhyme, the involutions and inversions of his style, his distressing obscurities, his lack of simplicity and directness, the painful minuteness of his analysis, his relentless pursuit of motives and the very shadows of motives, his abrupt transitions and broken connections of thought, of which it has been said that they come

upon us like so many electric shocks. There is also his vexing inattention to cadence and artistic form—an inattention all the more vexing when so many of his smaller poems show how perfect a master of poetic form and how musical a singer he could be when he chose that way. He has himself given us to understand that he chose the other way on purpose, judging that the language should be the literal reflection of the mood. His method, nevertheless, interferes with the proper enjoyment of much of his work on the part of most outside the circle of the Browning Societies, where hard nuts to crack may be choicest pleasure.

Besides this, his peculiar delight, and much of his special power, lay in the dissection of the remoter types of character, in laying bare the more uncommon and limited idiosyncrasies of men, in depicting the subtler moods of mind, in following into their furthest recesses the intricate and hidden feelings and desires which form the spring of action. To a large extent he expended his vast poetic power on subjects which appeal to a select class of readers rather than to men as such, and on phases of life, developments of belief, peculiarities of thought, which may be less distinctive of future generations than they have been of his own. It is possible, therefore, that it may be with him as it threatens to be with Dickens, and that, though we of this particular quarter of a century have come to understand and appreciate him, it may be much more difficult for our successors to do so. It is seldom safe to cast the horoscope of a poet. Time, the final arbiter of opinion, has so often falsified the most confident predictions. But we may venture to say that, at least, as regards a considerable portion of the poetry we have received from the two chief singers of our day, the probabilities of superior permanence are on the side of the Laureate. They lie in the pre-eminently Tennysonian qualities of sleepless regard to form, sustained perfection in the artist's craft, the habit of clear, chastened, musical expression, and not less in the fact that he consecrates his muse to themes which lie closer to the intelligence and the feeling of the mass of men—pictures of English life, old-world tales of England's heroic age, the more general aspects of character, the more catholic experiences of the religious mind. But, on the other hand, in Robert Browning we have one who

has often struck a larger note, a man of great, forceful, varied gifts, who has taken us down to depths which the Laureate cares not to sound, who, at the same time, has given us lyrics which are not likely to perish, snatches of poetry as artistically perfect as anything in our language, and occasional bursts of melody which haunt the ear and hold the memory as few do.

How wide, too, is the range of Robert Browning's muse, running as it does from the simplest tales of fancy and affection, and stories for children, to the profound soundings of faith and the unravelling of the most tangled skeins of motive. He has enriched us with a new form of ballad, less direct and objective than the Tennysonian, but of a strong and rare quality. He has devised a new way of adapting legend, as in the case of the "Pied Piper," for which youth will thank him. He has given us studies of character and analyses of action which remind us at times of Shakespeare. He has familiarised us with a new application of the dramatic art—one in which the movement is bold and energetic, even to abruptness, but in which Browning himself is the speaker in all the speakers and the actor in all the actors. But, above all, it is as a prophet of religion that he has laid us under a lasting debt of gratitude. It has been said of his religious poems that they are dramatic studies. It is this that makes them so singularly attractive in the purely poetic interest. But, apart from this, they have a peculiar power, and charm, and helpfulness in the note of decision which rings in them. They penetrate farther into the secret of that conflict between faith and knowledge which is most characteristic of our age than is attempted by any other poet, except the author of *In Memoriam*, and Arthur Hugh Clough in occasional inspirations. But they do so in the spirit of hope, and in the conviction of victory. They give the natural history and the defence of doubt as has been seldom done. But they do this so as to make it clear that doubt cannot be the resting-place either of man's heart or of man's intelligence. They speak with the voice of certainty on the great question of immortality. Their teaching, so far as it carries us within the sacred province of faith, is Christian teaching, and it is a positive teaching, not entirely in the sense of the Creeds, it may be, but in the essential truth of things.