

THE BROWNINGS

Assembly Feb. 11, 1948

A little more than a hundred years ago, in September 1846, two English poets were married in the city of London, Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett. Their interesting lives, their learned letters to each other, their great romance, as well as their poetry are well known to all the English speaking world. Probably all of you here, even the Freshmen, have heard of the poems of one or the other of these great poets. *I want*

to devote this half-hour to remembering them.
Robert Browning was born in the early part of the century of parents who were well to do. He had a very thorough, though not conventional education for he never attended one of the greater universities. He began writing poetry at an early age and as he did not need to earn his living, he was able to devote himself to the pursuit of literature and music, which was another of his great interests. His father agreed that his son could make a career of poetry if he liked...so that he began publishing at the age of 20.

Elizabeth Barrett belonged to a very large and prosperous London family. She had 8 brothers and 2 sisters, all of whom she loved. But the peace of the family was disturbed by a very tyrannical father...he was more than tyrannical...he was so peculiar in his views for his children that he might be called slightly unbalanced. He wanted them always to live with him, and never to marry. Some of them finally defied him and did marry...Elizabeth among them...and the father never forgave them to his dying day.

Elizabeth, the eldest, was an invalid, never leaving home, and spending most of her time on a couch in her sitting room. She was supposed to have strained her back as a girl and to have as well, weak lungs. (Doctors knew much less about these things a hundred years ago than they do now). In her confinement and solitude, she studied and wrote till she was not only a scholar of the first order in several languages, but she also developed her genius for poetry, of which her father was very proud. She published fairly early, too. She wrote a great many letters to friends and relatives as well...and very charming letters they were. Occasionally some one came to visit her...After several years, the doctors said that she ought to go to Italy to a warmer climate for her health, but her father would not hear of it. He said she was not to leave home, for he wanted all his children near him.

Among some of the poems that she read was one difficult long one by a new poet, Robert Browning. She admired it greatly and referred to it in a poem of her own. She said that Browning's poem was like a pomegranate, with a very hard skin on the outside,

but once you penetrated the hard crust, you found great sweetness and beauty inside. He was flattered by her words and wrote to her...and so a famous correspondence began. They did not meet for a long time. When Browning suggested coming to see her, she said no at first. She said she was not in her first youth, that she was not strong, that she was afraid both of them would be disillusioned if they met...and she genuinely thought that she would not live very long...that Death had marked her for himself. But Browning persisted and finally came to see her. Thus began this famous romance. She was frightened of the idea of marriage for she knew her father's views on the subject. But Browning said he would carry her off to Italy and bring her back to health. Her happiness had improved her health already. She insisted, however, that their marriage should be kept secret. So one day, Sept. 12, 1846, she met Robert Browning at a church near her home and was married to him. She told no one...not even her beloved sisters, for fear that the father might accuse them afterwards of knowing the secret and not telling him. A few days later, she and Browning went to Italy..and they lived happily there for 15 years...her health so much improved that she was almost unrecognisable. She made one or two visits to London and saw many of her family but her father would never see her again nor answer one of the many letters that she wrote him. He returned them unopened.

The Brownings lived in many places in Italy but Florence finally became their home. They adored the country and one of them said once: " Open my heart and you will see, written upon it, Italy."

There are so many fascinating things to tell you of the Brownings.. but the time is too short to give you more than a word or two.

Robert Brownings' poetry was pre-eminently a poetry of passion. He sang of passionate life and passionate love of man and woman or the love of ideals. He believed in striving for the good life, in the mercy of the Creator. He has been called a great optimist. His poems deal with the problems of life, with the struggle against evil. He had deep sympathy with the sufferings and difficulties of individual men and women,. His poetry was original in being much rougher in melody than any other during the 19th Century, but at the same time, he could show true lyrical power as well as the ability to tell a thrilling and dramatic story with force and interest and gusto.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poetry was much more appreciated in her lifetime , than his. It is much less profound, but easier to understand, more musical and has a softness and sweetness of touch that her husband's lacked. Her greatest contribution was the famous sonnet sequence Sonnets from the Portuguese, of which I shall speak in a moment and which are among the great love poems of the English language.

3.

I want you now to hear some of the Browning poems.

MY LAST DUCHESS

We shall begin with a poem of Robert Browning's called My Last Duchess. It is a dramatic monologue, of which Browning wrote many. The duke is speaking, not the poet.

You must imagine two men, standing in a great house, looking at the painting of a beautiful woman, the duke's first wife, who has died. The man, who is with the duke, is the representative of another man, with whom the duke is negotiating for he wants to marry that man's daughter, who will thus become his second duchess.

In this poem, by the way he shows his friend the picture of his first wife, we understand in an oblique manner, what a disagreeable man the duke is and how he made his first wife suffer. The duke is an art collector...he enjoys the picture of his last duchess as a work of art. At the end of the poem, as the two men are walking down the stairs of the great mansion, the duke points out a little bronze statue ^{of the duke} he has recently bought. You understand that the death of his last duchess has meant nothing to him and you pity the second duchess for whom the negotiations are going on.

Ida Alkeroki will recite My Last Duchess

HOME THOUGHTS FROM ABROAD

We all know what it is to be homesick. Even though the Brownings loved Italy...its sunshine and gay flowers...they were English. Robert Browning remembers what spring in England is like in April...there is no lovelier season in that northern island. In the last line, he mentions the "gaudy melon flower", which he sees in the hot, voluptuous south. But what he wants to think of are the country birds of England..the chaffinch, the whitethroat, the swallows and the thrush (listen for the ~~names~~ names of these birds in the poem)..and the fruit blossoms that come in May. How many English people, who have been far away from home, have said these words and have been transported in mind to a glimpse of their own beautiful countryside in the spring....

Filiz Karasey will write Home Thoughts
from Abroad.

SONNET

During the time when Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett were in love, Elizabeth Barrett wrote a series of sonnets. She was too shy to show them to Robert Browning when they were written. After the two poets were married, however, one morning after breakfast as he was standing looking out of the window, she put them into his pocket and asked him to read them when he was alone. He thought them so good that he wanted to have them published. But Elizabeth hated the idea of the public knowing her ^{intimate} thoughts and feelings, Robert Browning said, we can disguise them so that no one will know they are about your own experience. So the two poets pretended that they were translations from a foreign language. They hit upon Portuguese. It was merely a blind...camouflage, we would call it now. So this sonnet sequence of 44 sonnets was called Sonnets from the Portuguese, though they were Elizabeth Barrett Browning's own love sonnets to her husband.

The only one we shall hear is the first one, in which the author thinks of the sad years of her life and the tears she has shed. She says that she thought Death was coming to take her away, but she found it wasn't Death but Love.

Emily Barrett will write a Sonnet from the
Portuguese

6.

THE MUSICAL INSTRUMENT

This poem of Mrs. Browning's shows some her best singing qualities and her belief that to be a good poet is a painful process.

The theme of the poem is that only by suffering can the poet understand how to sing...and the whole poem is the carrying out of a long simile.

The simile is this: A mythological god, Pan...who was rather a frightening god of sheep and flocks, who was half a man and half an animal, wants to make a pipe to play a tune on. So he takes a reed that he finds in the river. He pulls the reed out roughly and then begins to take out the inside pulp. After he has done that, he makes holes in the reed through which he can blow. (Now the poor reed doesn't look very nice and the author imagines that it suffers.) But when Pan puts the pipe he has made to his lips and blows on it, we hear the sweetest sounds....it is a musical instrument.

So, a man has to have his heart taken out with pity and pain, to have his life notched like the reed, before he can be a true poet and make sweet music.

Listen for the line: "Making a poet out of a Man."

Jüniel BASARANOGLU will write A Musical
Instrument.

CONCLUSION.

These four Browning poems you have heard, two by Robert Browning and two by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, are only a faint sample of their poetry. I hope they may be an inspiration to you to read more of these authors, and to study their lives. These two great Victorians represent the best principles and philosophy of the 19th Century. Their love of liberty and beauty, their sympathy with suffering men and women, their belief in aspiring to lead the good life...these are things that endure. Their poetry is a great heritage which we all can enjoy.

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