



ROBERT BROWNING

THE RING AND THE BOOK



Robert Browning

The Ring and the Book

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Introduction

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The *Ring and the Book*, the longest and most important of Browning's poems, is the product of several years of creative activity during the period of his fullest maturity. The love romance which had enriched his life for fifteen years had come to an end, and his thought was searching more profoundly than ever before the problems of life and death. For twenty years he had been devoting his art to casual subjects in rich succession; *Men and Women* and *Dramatis Personæ* lay in the immediate past, and the dramatic monologue had become an easy form for voicing his imaginations; yet he must have craved the fuller joy of expressing through some larger subject and at far greater length his conception of human life and of the Divine in and above the world.

The occasion for this expression came in the chance discovery of the *Old Yellow Book* in June 1860 on a market barrow in the Piazza di San Lorenzo, Florence, as told by Browning in the poem. This book is the record of a sensational murder trial at Rome, January-February 1698, and gives many of the facts and motives of an ignoble intrigue for certain properties, culminating in a brutal assassination and in the subsequent execution of the criminals. It was a dark page from the criminal annals of Rome, and time had all but effaced the record when it fell into the hands of the poet. The problem of making these dead fragments live again challenged the imagination of Browning, and by the power of his imagination he saw there in Florence that June night how the crime had stirred Rome a century and a half earlier. So interested did he become in the Franceschini story that he frequently told it to his friends

in conversation, and is said to have offered it to one of them as the plot of an historical novel. Eventually the inspiration came to him to tell the story through his art of poetry, and what was more, he saw the opportunity of expressing through the incidents of this base crime his own fuller vision of man. The interpretation of the *Yellow Book* in his poem involved the whole problem of life as the poet saw it.

How then should he unfold his views? His own age had perfected the novel to present at length the activities and motives of man, and Browning learned much of his art from the novel. Yet he was no novelist, and he left unattempted the possible historical novel in the subject. Long years before he had tried the drama, and had been defeated by a half success, nor could a stage drama trace the minute threads of motive in this case. In the narrative poem as such he had little interest, and seldom practised the fascination of the narrator. Browning's one purpose in the art of poetry was to search the heart deeply for motive. He had by years of practice developed the dramatic monologue to a high point of efficacy in expressing motive. It is accordingly not surprising that he made a "strange art of an art familiar," and by the repetition of the story in many forms in a series of dramatic monologues, he invented a new type of poem which grew directly out of the material before him, and enabled him to tell the Franceschini story more truly than through any of the established forms of art.

This tragic course of events had not developed simply and symmetrically. Life seldom does. It was a confused web of disputed fact, with motive and counter-motive, genuine or sham, conventional or personal, further entangled by the professional casuistry of the lawyers, until the right and wrong of the story seemed hopelessly obscured. Such confusion surrounds every deeper crisis which stirs the heart of man, as is illustrated in the journalistic hubbub around every sensational crime and its trial at the bar of justice. Literary art tends to simplify all this by the

intensification of the prevailing motives, and by the eradication of whatever distracts from these. Yet in the successive development of the epic, the drama, and the novel as methods of picturing life, there has been a distinct evolution away from this artistic singleness toward the variety and intricacy of life. The novel offers large opportunities to present this human complexity. Browning carries literary development a step farther by using in a new way the multi-monologue form of narrative, in which he tells the story from a series of personal standpoints, each of which modifies fact and motive with iridescent shadings of significance and with the perplexing but thrilling uncertainties which we find in real life. He illustrates by his art also the great principle which he found in life — the apparent relativity of truth — “The truth is this to thee and that to me.” He sees that the perception of truth is one of the most vital functions of personality, and that the kind and degree of our perception of it are invariably restricted by all limitations of personality. In monologue after monologue in his previous art Browning had tinged a thought or a passion or a story by the prejudice of the speaker. When at last he found the *Old Yellow Book*, it gave him illustration after illustration of such perversion of truth through personal bias. It became inevitable for him, therefore, in his strong sense of the obligation to represent the full truth of the tragedy, that he should tell and retell the story from the various personal standpoints possible until he had turned every phase of it to the reader. His figures of the landscape and the glass ball, book i. ll. 1348-1378, illustrate this.

The Franceschini tragedy and the enviroing life of Rome thus come to live again before the reader in all that essential intricacy which we find in the world outside of books. In fact, the poem gives the impression not of a book, but of throbbing life, confused almost past finding out. We should read the successive monologues not for a chain of incident, nor for the achievement of a final judgment on the

merits of the case, but to study the hearts of actors and spectators alike, as they pulsate with passions, noble or ignoble, which surge around that act of murder on January 2, 1698.

What persons then should be chosen as narrators? What personal standpoints were significant and vital to the complete understanding of the tragedy? First and most important were the three principals — the husband, the wife, and the priest Caponsacchi. Then the legal presentation of facts in the *Yellow Book* suggested the representation of the professional interpreters of law. Was not law the “patent-truth- extracting process” which man had established to ascertain the rights and wrongs of such cases? Hence Browning includes two of the attorneys found in the recorded case, though he cannot suppress his ironic attitude toward them. Above the lawyers stood their ultimate superior, the Pope, through whose final judgment the sentence was executed against the criminals; in him was exhibited judicial deliberation illuminated by an almost prophetic insight into divine truth. Beyond these six monologues, the poet saw the need of other narratives, which would present the story as it appeared to common, outside Rome. None of the actual personages involved, such as Abate Paolo, Canon, Conti, or Violante, could serve this purpose satisfactorily. Hence the poet invented two purely, typical, anonymous personages, “Half-Rome” and “Other Half-Rome,” who represent the two prejudiced camps of opinion which made up “reasonless, unreasoning Rome.” These speakers were doubtless suggested to the poet by the two anonymous Italian narratives of the murder story, which are included in the *Yellow Book*. Then in a sport of irony and caricature he invented “Tertium Quid”— a third Something — the supercilious, contemptuous opinion of the man who takes pride in his unsympathy, and who plays with judgment trivially, smartly, and sneeringly, even in the face of this violent crime — who found nothing in human life

worthy of serious consideration save the etiquette and intrigue of his own polite circle. These three typical personages represent the opinion of Rome at large, but they also afford the poet an opportunity to tell and retell the story until all the details of fact have become familiar to the reader. Consequently when he passes on to the heart of the poem in the monologues of Guido, Caponsacchi, and Pompilia, he need no longer tell a story, but can devote himself entirely to such incidents and passions as bring out most fully and subtly the character of the speakers. The reading of books ii., iii., and iv., is a fundamental preparation of the reader for the complete understanding of the monologues of Guido, Caponsacchi, and Pompilia. When the poet had written these thrice three monologues he evidently felt his poem to be incomplete of final effect if he left the reader in any possible uncertainty as to the true nature of Guido. In book v. the poet had presented the Guido of skilled subterfuge and of supercilious reliance on the privileges of a sham social condition. He would now give us the genuine Guido, fierce, brutal, ignoble, depraved, blasphemous, till we shudder at the abyss of darkness in his heart. These are the ten monologues of the *Ring and the Book*, not ten repetitions of the same story, but ten glimpses into the human heart as it reacts upon a story which every changes with the personality of the narrator.

To this body of the poem Browning adds his prefatory and concluding books, both of them entirely unconventional in their form, but direct and vitally truthful to the poem as a whole, and to the *Old Yellow Book* before the poet. The first book is an invaluable preparatory miscellany, including the explanation of the title of the poem, an account of the finding of the *Yellow Book*, of its contents, of Browning's immediate interest in it, and of his creative reaction in response to it; then a series of summaries of the monologue situations which follow in the succeeding books of the poem, and finally the invocation and dedication to Mrs. Browning.

The concluding book is equally miscellaneous, and its purpose is to complete the story which had been broken by Guido's shriek in his dungeon, and to lead the reader down from the glaring lights of mid-story into the creeping oblivion which overtook this fact as it overtakes all things human. The device of telling about Guido's execution through the letters of eye-witnesses was suggested to the poet by the three letters of the *Yellow Book*, one of which, the letter of Arcangeli, is included in full, lines 239 — 288. From the additional Italian narrative which had fallen to his hands, Browning then fashions the ghastly spectacle of the throngs of Rome pressing curiously and unfeelingly around Guido's scaffold. Even the final absolution of the memory of Pompilia and the establishment of her innocence takes the form of the court decree included in the *Yellow Book*. At last the inevitable tide of time surges over all, and the Franceschini tragedy and its stir in Rome are swept into final oblivion.

Through the ten voices of the ten monologues, Browning does not merely tell a story; he pictures the life of Rome and Arezzo in the year 1698, with all their play of professional and social motive. The accounts of the motives of Guido and Caponsacchi for entering the church reveal the great worldly ecclesiastical establishment of which they are a part. In domestic life the sacrament of marriage is pictured as mere barter and sale, not unmingled with fraud.

Marriage making for the earth,
With gold so much — birth, power, repute, so much,
Or beauty, youth so much, in lack of these.

And the law and the law courts, with their countless delays and perversions of justice are seen in a confusion of law. suits, civil and criminal, which surrounded Pompilia's life. Rome is portrayed in the poem with an art more subtle and penetrating than is usually found in the art of the historical novel.

Yet here, as at all times, Browning is interested in men rather than institutions; in Abate Paolo, Canon Conti, the Confessors Romano and Celestino rather than in the church as such; in Arcangeli and Bottini rather than in the profession of the law. Hence many who were mere names in the *Yellow Book* become personal and alive in the poem. Violante stands forth in all her meddlesome self-will. Donna Beatrice grows portentously to a true novercal type, amplifying the sketch of the old duchess in the *Flight of the Duchess*. The worldly Bishop of Arezzo again yields to the Franceschini in bland deference the victim they desire. A score and more of persons have started into life from the old record, and are significant to Browning as a searcher of the heart of man.

But it is in the interpretation of the three chief actors that the creative Browning best found expression. Guido, Caponsacchi, and Pompilia become at last the measure of Browning's mastery and insight, and are the high-water mark of his creative imagination.

Browning has represented many evil men in his art, but all his other villains pale into insignificance beside the full, passionate, living portrayal of Guido Franceschini. Yet Guido is not a monster, nor an accidentally unfortunate man; he is the hideous outgrowth of a self-seeking, Christless society, in which nobility is no longer a spiritual attribute, but has become a mere merchantable asset and a shield for crouching littlenesses. The *Yellow Book* makes plain accusation concerning the ruthless greed of Guido, but Browning connects this with the effete nobility and the worldly churchmanship of the day as he saw it. And this theme of greed is made to run through the whole Franceschini family with variations. Guido's final desperation of hate and of misanthropy expresses itself in his terrible ravings in his prison cell on the night before his execution.

Caponsacchi, on the other hand, is Browning's highest conception of heroic manhood, not an unreal, and vainly

ideal dream, but a passionate, earnest, and great-hearted man, with a lovable impetuosity and rashness at times. He is a modern St. George, saving a woman in desperate plight by a reckless display of courage. Called suddenly from the narrow, uneventful life of an idle, fashionable canon, not by a great, shining duty, but by a low cry of pain from the roadside, he threw prudence and self-seeking to the wind that he might worship God in saving this woman. Though he is summoned by pity, he is detained by passion — not a debasing, physical passion, but passion controlled by the consecrating power of reverential love, as of the divine. He worships Pompilia with no merely conventional worship of love-sick poetising, but he bows, is blest by the revelation of Pompilia, who seems to him to be an embodiment of the virtues of the Madonna, whom he as a priest had been taught to revere. Into this portrait of his “soldier-saint” Browning put much that was noblest in his own high type of manhood.

In Pompilia, Browning has achieved his master picture of woman. Probably the character of the real Pompilia as it shone from the affidavit of Fra Celestino in the *Old Yellow Book* fixed the poet’s attention on this story. She is represented there as saint and martyr in simple loveliness of character. He further endowed her with the highest spiritual graces which may glorify woman, the passion of maternity, the devoted love for the man who embodies her ideal of manly nobility, and her unquestioning faith in God “held fast despite the plucking fiend.” These are greater and more essential to the highest womanhood than the intellectuality of Balaustion, or the social charm and grace of Colombe. Pompilia of the *Yellow Book* has been glorified at last with all that Browning had found most divine in that woman whom he revered primarily as a woman of these same spiritual graces, and only secondarily as a woman of genius.

The Pope might be added to the noble portraits of this great poem of humanity. As Caponsacchi may be said to

represent the passionate and noble-worldly side of Browning's nature, so the Pope represents his graver, more other worldly character. Browning has given us an unfading portrait of the great, wise, grave Pope, facing a sad duty, and turning from it to confront the darkest problems which may assail the human heart. But he creates the Pope less as a portrait than as a mouthpiece. Through this wise, earnest personality he would speak what he himself felt most deeply in the tragedy. No historic Pope could have spoken as Browning makes Pope Innocent speak. It may be pointed out that Browning uses his other great old men of this period in the same way, as mouthpieces of his own vision of truth: for such undoubtedly is his use of Rabbi Ben Ezra, of the Apostle John, and of the Russian village pope in *Ivan Ivanovitch*. Through the Pope, therefore, Browning gives his own mature verdict in the case, and gives it weight by the impressive personality of the Pope as he presents him.

The slow toil of years had at last carried out the plan which came suddenly to the poet as he was thinking of the materials in the *Yellow Book*, yet it was not the "gold" of fact but the "alloy" of personality, the richly endowed nature of Robert Browning that raised the poem to greatness. It is at last the one poem which seems to employ every power of his mastership, and to utter his deepest convictions concerning the life of man.

Charles W. Hodell.

Baltimore, Maryland, U.S.A.

January 27, 1911.

The Ring and The Book

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Do you see this Ring?

'Tis Rome-work, made to match (By
Castellani's imitative craft)

Etrurian circlets found, some happy morn, After a
dropping April; found alive Spark-like 'mid unearthed slope-
side figtree-roots That roof old tombs at Chiusi: soft, you
see, Yet crisp as jewel-cutting. There's one trick, (Craftsmen
instruct me) one approved device

10

And but one, fits such slivers of pure gold As this was —
such mere oozings from the mine, Virgin as oval tawny
pendent tear

At beehive-edge when ripened combs o'erflow — To bear
the file's tooth and the hammer's tap: Since hammer needs
must widen out the round, And file emboss it fine with lily-
flowers, Ere the stuff grow a ring-thing right to wear.

That trick is, the artificer melts up wax With honey, so to
speak; he mingles gold

20

With gold's alloy, and, duly tempering both, Effects a
manageable mass, then works.

But his work ended, once the thing a ring, Oh, there's
repristination! Just a spirt O' the proper fiery acid o'er its
face, And forth the alloy unfastened flies in fume; While,
self-sufficient now, the shape remains, The rondure brave,

the lilled loveliness, Gold as it was, is, shall be evermore:
Prime nature with an added artistry —

30

No carat lost, and you have gained a ring.

What of it? 'Tis a figure, a symbol, say; A thing's sign:
now for the thing signified.

Do you see this square old yellow Book, I toss I' the air,
and catch again, and twirl about By the crumpled vellum
covers — pure crude fact Secreted from man's life when
hearts beat hard, And brains, high-blooded, ticked two
centuries since?

Examine it yourselves! I found this book, Gave a *lira* for
it, eightpence English just,

40

(Mark the predestination!) when a Hand, Always above
my shoulder, pushed me once, One day still fierce 'mid
many a day struck calm, Across a Square in Florence,
crammed with booths, Buzzing and blaze, noontide and
market-time; Toward Baccio's marble — ay, the basement-
ledge O' the pedestal where sits and menaces John of the
Black Bands with the upright spear, 'Twixt palace and
church — Riccardi where they lived, His race, and San
Lorenzo where they lie.

50

This book — precisely on that palace-step Which, meant
for lounging knaves o' the Medici, Now serves re-venders to
display their ware — 'Mongst odds and ends of ravage,
picture-frames White through the worn gilt, mirror-sconces

chipped, Bronze angel-heads once knobs attached to chests,
(Handled when ancient dames chose forth brocade) Modern
chalk drawings, studies from the nude, Samples of stone,
jet, breccia, porphyry Polished and rough, sundry amazing
busts

60

In baked earth (broken, Providence be praised!) A wreck
of tapestry, proudly-purposed web When reds and blues
were indeed red and blue, Now offered as a mat to save
bare feet (Since carpets constitute a cruel cost) Treading the
chill scagliola bedward: then A pile of brown-etched prints,
two *crazie* each, Stopped by a conch a-top from fluttering
forth — Sowing the Square with works of one and the same
Master, the imaginative Sienese

70

Great in the scenic backgrounds —(name and fame None
of you know, nor does he fare the worse:) From these Oh,
with a Lionard going cheap If it should prove, as promised,
that Joconde Whereof a copy contents the Louvre! — these I
picked this book from. Five compeers in flank Stood left and
right of it as tempting more — A dog's-eared Spicilegium,
the fond tale O' the Frail One of the Flower, by young
Dumas, Vulgarised Horace for the use of schools,

80

The Life, Death, Miracles of Saint Somebody, Saint
Somebody Else, his Miracles, Death and Life — With this,
one glance at the lettered back of which, And “Stall!” cried
I: *a lira* made it mine.

Here it is, this I toss and take again; Small-quarto size,
part print part manuscript: A book in shape but, really, pure
crude fact Secreted from man's life when hearts beat hard,
And brains, high-blooded, ticked two centuries since.

Give it me back! The thing's restorative

90

I' the touch and sight.

That memorable day

(June was the month, Lorenzo named the Square) I
leaned a little and overlooked my prize By the low railing
round the fountain-source Close to the statue, where a step
descends: While clinked the cans of copper, as stooped and
rose Thick-ankled girls who brimmed them, and made place
For marketmen glad to pitch basket down, Dip a broad
melon-leaf that holds the wet,

100

And whisk their faded fresh. And on I read Presently,
though my path grew perilous Between the outspread
straw-work, piles of plait Soon to be flapping, each o'er two
black eyes And swathe of Tuscan hair, on festas fine;
Through fire-irons, tribes of tongs, shovels in sheaves,
Skeleton bedsteads, wardrobe-drawers agape, Rows of tall
slim brass lamps with dangling gear — And worse, cast
clothes a-sweetening in the sun: None of them took my eye
from off my prize.

110

Still read I on, from written title-page To written index,
on, through street and street, At the Strozzi, at the Pillar, at

the Bridge; Till, by the time I stood at home again In Casa
Guidi by Felice Church,

Under the doorway where the black begins With the first
stone-slab of the staircase cold, I had mastered the
contents, knew the whole truth Gathered together, bound
up in this book, Print three-fifths, written supplement the
rest.

120

“Romana Homicidiorum” — nay, Better translate — “A
Roman murder-case: “Position of the entire criminal cause
“Of Guido Franceschini, nobleman,

“With certain Four the cutthroats in his pay, “Tried, all
five, and found guilty and put to death “By heading or
hanging as befitted ranks, “At Rome on February Twenty-
Two,

“Since our salvation Sixteen Ninety Eight: “Wherein it is
disputed if, and when,

130

“Husbands may kill adulterous wives, yet ‘scape “The
customary forfeit.”

Word for word,

So ran the title-page: murder, or else Legitimate
punishment of the other crime, Accounted murder by
mistake — just that And no more, in a Latin cramp enough
When the law had her eloquence to launch, But interfilleted
with Italian streaks When testimony stooped to mother-
tongue —

140

That, was this old square yellow book about.

Now, as the ingot, ere the ring was forged, Lay gold
(beseech you, hold that figure fast!) So, in this book lay
absolutely truth, Fanciless fact, the documents indeed,
Primary lawyer-pleadings for, against, The aforesaid Five;
real summed-up circumstance Adduced in proof of these on
either side, Put forth and printed, as the practice was, At
Rome, in the Apostolic Chamber's type,

150

And so submitted to the eye o' the Court Presided over
by His Reverence

Rome's Governor and Criminal Judge — the trial Itself, to
all intents, being then as now Here in the book and nowise
out of it; Seeing, there properly was no judgment-bar, No
bringing of accuser and accused, And whoso judged both
parties, face to face Before some court, as we conceive of
courts.

There was a Hall of Justice; that came last:

160

For justice had a chamber by the hall Where she took
evidence first, summed up the same, Then sent accuser and
accused alike, In person of the advocate of each, To weigh
that evidence' worth, arrange, array The battle. 'Twas the
so-styled Fisc began, Pleaded (and since he only spoke in
print The printed voice of him lives now as then) The public
Prosecutor — "Murder's proved; "With five... what we call
qualities of bad, "Worse, worst, and yet worse still, and still
worse yet;

170

“Crest over crest crowning the cockatrice, “That beggar
hell’s regalia to enrich “Count Guido Franceschini: punish
him!”

Thus was the paper put before the court In the next
stage (no noisy work at all), To study at ease. In due time
like reply Came from the so-styled Patron of the Poor,
Official mouthpiece of the five accused Too poor to fee a
better — Guido’s luck

180

Or else his fellows’, which, I hardly know — An outbreak
as of wonder at the world, A fury fit of outraged innocence,
A passion of betrayed simplicity:

“Punish Count Guido? For what crime, what hint “O’ the
colour of a crime, inform us first!

“Reward him rather! Recognise, we say, “In the deed
done, a righteous judgment dealt!

“All conscience and all courage — there’s our Count
“Charactered in a word; and, what’s more strange,

190

“He had companionship in privilege, “Found four
courageous conscientious friends: “Absolve, applaud all five,
as props of law, “Sustainers of society! — perchance “A trifle
over-hasty with the hand “To hold her tottering ark, had
tumbled else; “But that’s a splendid fault whereat we wink,
“Wishing your cold correctness sparkled so!”

Thus paper second followed paper first, Thus did the two
join issue — nay, the four,

200

Each pleader having an adjunct. "True, he killed"— So to speak — in a certain sort — his wife, "But laudably, since thus it happened!" quoth one: Whereat, more witness and the case postponed, "Thus it happened not, since thus he did the deed, "And proved himself thereby portentousest "Of cutthroats and a prodigy of crime, "As the woman that he slaughtered was a saint, "Martyr and miracle!" quoth the other to match: Again, more witness, and the case postponed.

210

"A miracle, ay — of lust and impudence; "Hear my new reasons!" interposed the first: "— Coupled with more of mine!" pursued his peer.

"Beside, the precedents, the authorities!"

From both at once a cry with an echo, that!

That was a firebrand at each fox's tail Unleashed in a cornfield: soon spread flare enough, As hurtled thither and there heaped themselves From earth's four corners, all authority And precedent for putting wives to death,

220

Or letting wives live, sinful as they seem.

How legislated, now, in this respect, Solon and his Athenians? Quote the code Of Romulus and Rome! Justinian speak!

Nor modern Baldo, Bartolo be dumb!

The Roman voice was potent, plentiful; *Cornelia de Sicariis* hurried to help *Pompeia de Parricidiis*; *Julia de* Something-or-other jostled *Lex* this-and-that; King Solomon confirmed Apostle Paul:

230

That nice decision of Dolabella, eh?

That pregnant instance of Theodoric, oh!

Down to that choice example Ælian gives (An instance I find much insisted on) Of the elephant who, brute-beast though he were, Yet understood and punished on the spot His master's naughty spouse and faithless friend; A true tale which has edified each child, Much more shall flourish favoured by our court!

Pages of proof this way, and that way proof,

240

And always — once again the case postponed.

Thus wrangled, brangled, jangled they a month, — Only on paper, pleadings all in print, Nor ever was, except i' the brains of men, More noise by word of mouth than you hear now — Till the court cut all short with "Judged, your cause.

"Receive our sentence! Praise God! We pronounce "Count Guido devilish and damnable: "His wife Pompilia in thought, word, and deed, "Was perfect pure, he murdered her for that:

250

"As for the Four who helped the One, all Five — "Why, let employer and hirelings share alike "In guilt and guilt's reward, the death their due!"

So was the trial at end, do you suppose?

"Guilty you find him, death you doom him to?

"Ay, were not Guido, more than needs, a priest, "Priest and to spare!" — this was a shot reserved; I learn this from

epistles which begin Here where the print ends — see the
pen and ink Of the advocate, the ready at a pinch! —

260

“My client boasts the clerkly privilege, “Has taken minor
orders many enough, “Shows still sufficient chrism upon his
pate “To neutralise a blood-stain: *presbyter*, “*Primæ
tonsuræ, subdiaconus*, “*Sacerdos*, so he slips from
underneath “Your power, the temporal, slides inside the
robe “Of mother Church: to her we make appeal “By the
Pope, the Church’s head!”

A parlous plea,

270

Put in with noticeable effect, it seems; “Since straight,”—
resumes the zealous orator, Making a friend acquainted with
the facts — “Once the word ‘clericality’ let fall, “Procedure
stopped and freer breath was drawn “By all considerate and
responsible Rome.”

Quality took the decent part, of course; Held by the
husband, who was noble too: Or, for the matter of that, a
churl would side With too-refined susceptibility,

280

And honour which, tender in the extreme, Stung to the
quick, must roughly right itself At all risks, not sit still and
whine for law As a Jew would, if you squeezed him to the
wall, Brisk-trotting through the Ghetto. Nay, it seems, Even
the Emperor’s Envoy had his say To say on the subject;
might not see, unmoved, Civility menaced throughout

Christendom By too harsh measure dealt her champion here.

Lastly, what made all safe, the Pope was kind,

290

From his youth up, reluctant to take life, If mercy might be just and yet show grace; Much more unlikely then, in extreme age, To take a life the general sense bade spare.

'Twas plain that Guido would go scatheless yet.

But human promise, oh, how short of shine!

How topple down the piles of hope we rear!

How history proves... nay, read Herodotus!

Suddenly starting from a nap, as it were, A dog-sleep with one shut, one open orb,

300

Cried the Pope's great self — Innocent by name And nature too, and eighty-six years old, Antonio Pignatelli of Naples, Pope Who had trod many lands, known many deeds, Probed many hearts, beginning with his own, And now was far in readiness for God — 'Twas he who first bade leave those souls in peace, Those Jansenists, re-nicknamed Molinists, ('Gainst whom the cry went, like a frowsy tune, Tickling men's ears — the sect for a quarter of an hour

310

I' the teeth of the world which, clown-like, loves to chew Be it but a straw twixt work and whistling-while, Taste some vituperation, bite away, Whether at marjoram-sprig or garlic-clove, Aught it may sport with, spoil, and then spit forth) "Leave them alone," bade he, "those Molinists!

“Who may have other light than we perceive, “Or why is it the whole world hates them thus?”

Also he peeled off that last scandal-rag Of Nepotism; and so observed the poor

320

That men would merrily say, “Halt, deaf, and blind, Who feed on fat things, leave the master’s self “To gather up the fragments of his feast, “These be the nephews of Pope Innocent! — “His own meal costs but five carlines a day, “Poor-priest’s allowance, for he claims no more.”

— He cried of a sudden, this great good old Pope, When they appealed in last resort to him, “I have mastered the whole matter: I nothing doubt.

“Though Guido stood forth priest from head to heel,

330

“Instead of, as alleged, a piece of one — “And further, were he, from the tonsured scalp “To the sandaled sole of him, my son and Christ’s, “Instead of touching us by fingertip “As you assert, and pressing up so close “Only to set a blood-smutch on our robe — “I and Christ would renounce all right in him.

“Am I not Pope, and presently to die, “And busied how to render my account, “And shall I wait a day ere I decide

340

“On doing or not doing justice here?

“Cut off his head to-morrow by this time, “Hang up his four mates, two on either hand, “And end one business more!”

So said, so done —

Rather so writ, for the old Pope bade this, I find, with his particular chirograph, His own no such infirm hand, Friday night; And next day, February Twenty-Two, Since our salvation Sixteen Ninety Eight,

350

— Not at the proper head-and-hanging place On bridge-foot close by Castle Angelo, Where custom somewhat staled the spectacle, ('Twas not so well i' the way of Rome, beside, The noble Rome, the Rome of Guido's rank) But at the city's newer gayer end — The cavalcading promenading place
Beside the gate and opposite the church Under the Pincian gardens green with Spring, 'Neath the obelisk 'twixt the fountains in the Square,

360

Did Guido and his fellows find their fate, All Rome for witness, and — my writer adds — Remonstrant in its universal grief, Since Guido had the suffrage of all Rome.

This is the bookful; thus far take the truth, The untempered gold, the fact untampered with, The mere ring-metal ere the ring be made!

And what has hitherto come of it? Who preserves The memory of this Guido, and his wife Pompilia, more than Ademollo's name,

370

The etcher of those prints, two *crazie* each, Saved by a stone from snowing broad the Square With scenic backgrounds? Was this truth of force?

Able to take its own part as truth should, Sufficient, self-sustaining? Why, if so — Yonder's a fire, into it goes my book, As who shall say me nay, and what the loss?

You know the tale already: I may ask, Rather than think to tell you, more thereof — Ask you not merely who were he and she,

380

Husband and wife, what manner of mankind, But how you hold concerning this and that Other yet-unnamed actor in the piece.

The young frank handsome courtly Canon, now, The priest, declared the lover of the wife, He who, no question, did elope with her, For certain bring the tragedy about, Giuseppe Caponsacchi; — his strange course I' the matter, was it right or wrong or both?

Then the old couple, slaughtered with the wife

390

By the husband as accomplices in crime, Those Comparini, Pietro and his spouse — What say you to the right or wrong of that, When, at a known name whispered through the door Of a lone villa on a Christmas night, It opened that the joyous hearts inside Might welcome as it were an angel-guest Come in Christ's name to knock and enter, sup And satisfy the loving ones he saved; And so did welcome devils and their death?

400

I have been silent on that circumstance Although the couple passed for close of kin To wife and husband, were by

some accounts Pompilia's very parents: you know best.

Also that infant the great joy was for, That Gaetano, the wife's two-weeks' babe, The husband's first-born child, his son and heir, Whose birth and being turned his night to day — Why must the father kill the mother thus Because she bore his son and saved himself?

410

Well, British Public, ye who like me not, (God love you!) and will have your proper laugh At the dark question, laugh it! I laugh first.

Truth must prevail, the proverb vows; and truth — Here is it all i' the book at last, as first There it was all i' the heads and hearts of Rome Gentle and simple, never to fall nor fade Nor be forgotten. Yet, a little while, The passage of a century or so,

Decads thrice five, and here's time paid his tax,

420

Oblivion gone home with her harvesting, And left all smooth again as scythe could shave.

Far from beginning with you London folk, I took my book to Rome first, tried truth's power On likely people. "Have you met such names?

"Is a tradition extant of such facts?

"Your law-courts stand, your records frown a-row: "What if I rove and rummage?" "— Why, you'll waste "Your pains and end as wise as you began!"

Every one snickered: "names and facts thus old

430

“Are newer much than Europe news we find “Down in today’s *Diario*. Records, quotha?”

“Why, the French burned them, what else do the French?

“The rap-and-rending nation! And it tells “Against the Church, no doubt — another gird “At the Temporality, your Trial, of course?”

“— Quite otherwise this time,” submitted I; “Clean for the Church and dead against the world, “The flesh and the devil, does it tell for once.”

“— The rarer and the happier! All the same,

440

“Content you with your treasure of a book, “And waive what’s wanting! Take a friend’s advice!

“It’s not the custom of the country. Mend “Your ways indeed and we may stretch a point: “Go get you manned by Manning and new-manned “By Newman and, mayhap, wise-manned to boot “By Wiseman, and we’ll see or else we won’t!

“Thanks meantime for the story, long and strong, “A pretty piece of narrative enough, “Which scarce ought so to drop out, one would think,

450

“From the more curious annals of our kind.

“Do you tell the story, now, in off-hand style, “Straight from the book? Or simply here and there, “(The while you vault it through the loose and large) “Hang to a hint? Or is there book at all, “And don’t you deal in poetry, make-believe, “And the white lies it sounds like?”

Yes and no!

From the book, yes; thence bit by bit I dug The lingot truth, that memorable day,

460

Assayed and knew my piecemeal gain was gold — Yes;
but from something else surpassing that, Something of mine
which, mixed up with the mass, Made it bear hammer and
be firm to file.

Fancy with fact is just one fact the more; To-wit, that
fancy has informed, transpierced, Thridded and so thrown
fast the facts else free, As right through ring and ring runs
the djereed And binds the loose, one bar without a break.

I fused my live soul and that inert stuff,

470

Before attempting smithcraft, on the night After the day
when — truth thus grasped and gained — The book was
shut and done with and laid by On the cream-coloured
massive agate, broad 'Neath the twin cherubs in the
tarnished frame O' the mirror, tall thence to the ceiling-top.

And from the reading, and that slab I leant My elbow on,
the while I read and read I turned, to free myself and find
the world, And stepped out on the narrow terrace, built

480

Over the street and opposite the church, And paced its
lozenge brickwork sprinkled cool; Because Felice-church-
side-stretched, a-glow Through each square window fringed
for festival, Whence came the clear voice of the cloistered
ones Chanting a chant made for midsummer nights — I
know not what particular praise of God, It always came and
went with June. Beneath I' the street, quick shown by
openings of the sky When flame fell silently from cloud to
cloud,

490

Richer than that gold snow Jove rained on Rhodes, The
townsmen walked by twos and threes, and talked, Drinking
the blackness in default of air — A busy human sense
beneath my feet: While in and out the terrace-plants, and
round One branch of tall datura, waxed and waned The
lamp-fly lured there, wanting the white flower.

Over the roof o' the lighted church I looked A bowshot to
the street's end, north away Out of the Roman gate to the
Roman road

500

By the river, till I felt the Apennine.

And there would lie Arezzo, the man's town, The
woman's trap and cage and torture-place, Also the stage
where the priest played his part, A spectacle for angels —
ay, indeed, There lay Arezzo! Farther then I fared, Feeling
my way on through the hot and dense, Romeward, until I
found the wayside inn By Castelnuovo's few mean hut-like
homes Huddled together on the hill-foot bleak, Bare, broken
only by that tree or two

510

Against the sudden bloody splendour poured Cursewise
in his departure by the day On the low house-roof of that
squalid inn Where they three, for the first time and the last,
Husband and wife and priest, met face to face.

Whence I went on again, the end was near, Step by step,
missing none and marking all, Till Rome itself, the ghastly
goal, I reached.

Why, all the while — how could it otherwise? —