

**THE BROWNINGS  
AND AMERICA.  
[BOSTON-1904]**

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The Brownings and America. [Boston-1904] by Elizabeth Porter Gould

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**ELIZABETH PORTER GOULD**

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**F**ROM the first of their literary career, America not only honored the Brownings, but the Brownings honored America. At an early age Mrs. Browning, as Elizabeth Barrett, had read Paine's *Age of Reason*, and in her *Essay on Mind*, published in 1826, had referred in the *Rights of Man* to his argument in the throne's defense instead of against monarchy. In the same *Essay* she had referred to Washington Irving as striking "Pierian chords." But when Edgar Allan Poe dedicated to her his little volume of thirty poems, "The Raven and other Poems; New York; Wiley and Putnam: 1845," her interest naturally became more personal. She fully appreciated the dedicatory words:

"To the Noblest of her Sex — To the Author of 'The Drama of Exile' — To Miss Elizabeth Barrett Barrett of England, I dedicate this Volume, with the most Enthusiastic Admiration, and with the most Sincere Esteem — E. A. P."

## 10 THE BROWNINGS AND AMERICA

Receiving such seemed to her, as she wrote in reply (April, 1846), "to authorize or, at least, to encourage" her to try to express what she had long felt, her sense of the high honor he had done her in his country and hers, in the dedication of his poems. "It is too great a distinction," she continues, "conferred by a hand of too liberal generosity. I wish for my own sake I were worthy of it. But I may endeavor, by future work, to justify a little what I cannot deserve anywise now. For it, meanwhile, I may be grateful, because gratitude is the virtue of the humblest." After this "imperfect acknowledgment" of her personal obligation, she goes on to thank him, as another reader would thank him, for this "vivid writing, this power which is felt! Your Raven," she declares, "has produced a sensation, a 'fit horror' here in England. Some of my friends are taken by the fear of it and some by the music. I hear of persons haunted by the 'Nevermore,' and one acquaintance of mine who has the misfortune of possessing a bust of Pallas never can bear to look at it in the twilight." She then tells that "our great poet, Mr. Browning,

## THE BROWNINGS AND AMERICA 11

the author of 'Paracelsus' and the 'Bells and Pomegranates,' was struck much by the rhythm of that poem."

From four different quarters, besides from the author himself, she had received the *Raven* when it had only a newspaper life. But though it had for her an "uncommon voice and effect," she could not feel "the immoderate joy" her friend John Kenyon felt upon reading it. "It is the rhythm which has taken him with glamour, I fancy." This, as she wrote Mr. Horne in May, 1845, "acted excellently upon the imagination, the 'Nevermore' having a solemn chime;" yet the poem did not seem to her to be the "natural expression of a sane intellect in whatever mood." She thought this should be specified in its title. She felt that some of the lyrics had power of a "less questionable sort." She even declared that Poe showed more faculty in his account of that horrible mesmeric experience (mad or not mad) than in his poems. This tale of mesmerism (*The Case of M. Valdemar*) which she wrote him she did not find in the dedicatory volume, but which was going the round of the newspapers, was



## 12 THE BROWNING'S AND AMERICA

throwing them all into "most admired disorder" and "dreadful doubts as to whether it could be true, as the children said of ghost stories." But she had to confess to the "power of the writer, and the faculty he had of making horrible improbabilities seem near and familiar."

While Miss Barrett was reading Poe's works he was reading hers; for about this time his friend Mrs. Frances S. Osgood, in sending the English poet a volume of her *Poems* from America, wrote that she ought to come to New York "only to see Mr. Poe's wild eyes flash through tears," when he read her verses. Could she then have entered the little Fordham cottage where the loved young wife Virginia was slowly dying she would have seen among the books on the little hanging bookshelf hers and Mr. Browning's holding posts of honor; and she would have seen the "quiet exultation" with which Poe drew from his pocket to read to a friend who tells it the letter he had received from Miss Barrett. It would have rejoiced his sensitive heart could he have heard years later (1851) the conversation between the Brownings and his literary friend

## THE BROWNINGS AND AMERICA 13

John R. Thompson when they declared they had formed "an ardent and just admiration" of the author of *The Raven*, and felt a "strong desire to see his memory vindicated from moral aspersion." (Harrison's Life of Poe.)

Not only the American poets, but the American magazines and papers, early appreciated this gifted woman's work; notably the *Arcturus*, a New York journal edited by Cornelius Mathews and Evert A. Duyckinck (February, 1841); the *North American Review* of July, 1842; *Graham's Magazine* of December, 1842; *Democratic Review* of July and October, 1844; and the *Evening Mirror* of December 7, 1844.

The writer in the *North American Review*, in taking up the three publications she, as Miss Barrett, had then published,\* began by confessing ignorance of the author as "to her lineage, education, tastes, and (last and not least where a lady is concerned) her personal attractions."

\* *An Essay on Mind*, with other Poems. London, 1826; *Prometheus Bound*, translated from the Greek of Æschylus, and Miscellaneous Poems by the Translator. London, 1833; *The Seraphim*, and other Poems. London, 1838.

#### 14 THE BROWNINGS AND AMERICA

But he revealed a Yankee shrewdness which must have amused the author when he stated that the solitary fact he was able to gather from her poetry was — her age; for learning on good authority that her first volume was published at the age of seventeen, a guess might be given as to result. After sixteen pages of remarks on the poems, several of which he copied, he took leave of Miss Barrett with "a sincere admiration of her genius, her learning, and the tone of moral and religious feeling which elevates and sanctifies poetry." If he had spoken plainly of her faults it was "because she could bear it." She had "great gifts," and could do "better things than she had yet done, if she would chastise the lawless extravagance of her genius, beget in the whirlwind of her inspiration a temperance that shall give it smoothness, and let in the light of day upon those mazy and mystic labyrinths of thought in which she delights to lose herself and bewilder her readers. Her faults are excesses and not defects, overflowings and not shortcomings, the wild futility of a too luxuriant, and not the hunger-bitten poverty of a meagre soul. Let her re-