

**THE RING AND THE  
BOOK, IN FOUR  
VOLUMES. VOL. III**

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The ring and the book, in four volumes. Vol. III by Robert Browning

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**ROBERT BROWNING**

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THE  
RING AND THE BOOI

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VII.  
POMPILIA.

I AM just seventeen years and five months old,  
And, if I lived one day more, three full weeks ;  
'T is writ so in the church's register,  
Lorenzo in Lucina, all my names  
At length, so many names for one poor child,  
—Francesca Camilla Vittoria Angela  
Pompilia Comparini,—laughable !  
Also 't is writ that I was married there  
Four years ago : and they will add, I hope,  
When they insert my death, a word or two,—

Omitting all about the mode of death,—  
This, in its place, this which one cares to know,  
That I had been a mother of a son  
Exactly two weeks. It will be through grace  
O' the Curate, not through any claim I have ; 15  
Because the boy was born at, so baptized  
Close to, the Villa, in the proper church :  
A pretty church, I say no word against,  
Yet stranger-like,—while this Lorenzo seems  
My own particular place, I always say. 20  
I used to wonder, when I stood scarce high  
As the bed here, what the marble lion meant,  
With half his body rushing from the wall,  
Eating the figure of a prostrate man—  
(To the right, it is, of entry by the door) 25  
An ominous sign to one baptized like me,  
Married, and to be buried there, I hope.  
And they should add, to have my life complete,  
He is a boy and Gaetan by name—  
Gaetano, for a reason,—if the friar 30  
Don Celestine will ask this grace for me  
Of Curate Ottoboni : he it was

Baptized me : he remembers my whole life  
As I do his grey hair.

All these few things 35

I know are true,—will you remember them?  
Because time flies. The surgeon cared for me,  
To count my wounds,—twenty-two dagger-wounds,  
Five deadly, but I do not suffer much—  
Or too much pain,—and am to die to-night. 40

Oh how good God is that my babe was born,  
—Better than born, baptized and hid away  
Before this happened, safe from being hurt!  
That had been sin God could not well forgive :  
He was too young to smile and save himself. 45  
When they took, two days after he was born,  
My babe away from me to be baptized  
And hidden awhile, for fear his foe should find,—  
The country-woman, used to nursing babes,  
Said “Why take on so? where is the great loss? 50  
“These next three weeks he will but sleep and feed,  
“Only begin to smile at the month’s end ;

" He would not know you, if you kept him here,  
 " Sooner than that ; so, spend three merry weeks  
 " Snug in the Villa, getting strong and stout,                    55  
 " And then I bring him back to be your own,  
 " And both of you may steal to—we know where !"  
 The month—there wants of it two weeks this day !  
 Still, I half fancied when I heard the knock  
 At the Villa in the dusk, it might prove she—                    60  
 Come to say " Since he smiles before the time,  
 " Why should I cheat you out of one good hour ?  
 " Back I have brought him ; speak to him and judge !"  
 Now I shall never see him ; what is worse,  
 When he grows up and gets to be my age,                    65  
 He will seem hardly more than a great boy ;  
 And if he asks " What was my mother like ?"  
 People may answer " Like girls of seventeen"—  
 And how can he but think of this and that,  
 Lucias, Marias, Sofias, who titter or blush                    70  
 When he regards them as such boys may do ?  
 Therefore I wish some one will please to say  
 I looked already old though I was young ;  
 Do I not . . say, if you are by to speak . .



Look nearer twenty? No more like, at least, 75  
 Girls who look arch or redden when boys laugh,  
 Than the poor Virgin that I used to know  
 At our street-corner in a lonely niche,—  
 The babe, that sat upon her knees, broke off,—  
 Thin white glazed clay, you pitied her the more : 80  
 She, not the gay ones, always got my rose.  
*Pectis in fact mixed w fancy.*  
How happy those are who know how to write!  
 Such could write what their son should read in time,  
 Had they a whole day to live out like me.  
 Also my name is not a common name, 85  
 "Pompilia," and may help to keep apart  
 A little the thing I am from what girls are.  
 But then how far away, how hard to find  
 Will anything about me have become,  
 Even if the boy bethink himself and ask ! 90  
 No father that he ever knew at all,  
 Nor ever had—no, never had, I say !  
 That is the truth,—nor any mother left,  
 Out of the little two weeks that she lived,  
 Fit for such memory as might assist : 95

As good too as no family, no name,  
Not even poor old Pietro's name, nor hers,  
Poor kind unwise Violante, since it seems  
They must not be my parents any more.  
That is why something put it in my head 100  
To call the boy "Gaetano"—no old name  
For sorrow's sake ; I looked up to the sky  
And took a new saint to begin anew.  
One who has only been made saint—how long ?  
Twenty-five years : so, carefuller, perhaps, 105  
To guard a namesake than those old saints grow,  
Tired out by this time,—see my own five saints !

On second thoughts, I hope he will regard  
The history of me as what someone dreamed,  
And get to disbelieve it at the last : 110  
Since to myself it dwindles fast to that,  
Sheer dreaming and impossibility,—  
Just in four days too ! All the seventeen years,  
Not once did a suspicion visit me  
How very different a lot is mine 115  
From any other woman's in the world.

The reason must be, 't was by step and step  
 It got to grow so terrible and strange.  
 These strange woes stole on tiptoe, as it were,  
 Into my neighbourhood and privacy, 120  
 Sat down where I sat, laid them where I lay ;  
 And I was found familiarised with fear,  
 When friends broke in, held up a torch and cried  
 " Why, you Pompilia in the cavern thus,  
 " How comes that arm of yours about a wolf? 125  
 " And the soft length,—lies in and out your feet  
 " And laps you round the knee,—a snake it is !"  
 And so on.

Well, and they are right enough,  
 By the torch they hold up now : for first, observe, 130  
 I never had a father,—no, nor yet  
 A mother : my own boy can say at least  
 " I had a mother whom I kept two weeks !"  
 Not I, who little used to doubt . . . / doubt  
 Good Pietro, kind Violante, gave me birth? 135  
 They loved me always as I love my babe  
 (—Nearly so, that is—quite so could not be—)