

**THE RING AND THE
BOOK. IN FOUR
VOLUMES. VOL. I**

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The ring and the book. In four Volumes. Vol. I by Robert Browning

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ROBERT BROWNING

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BOOK. IN FOUR
VOLUMES. VOL. I**

THE RING AND THE BOOK.



I.

THE RING AND THE BOOK.

Do you see this Ring?

 'T is Rome-work, made to match

(By Castellani's imitative craft)

Etrurian circlets found, some happy morn,

After a dropping April ; found alive 5

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

And but one, fits such slivers of pure gold 10

As this was,—such mere ooziings 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, 15
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
With gold's alloy, and, duly tempering both, 20
Effects a manageable mass, then works,
But his work ended, once the thing a ring,
Oh, there 's re-ristination ! Just a spirt
O' the proper fiery acid o'er its face,
And forth the alloy unfastened flies in fume ; 25
While, self-sufficient now, the shape remains,
The rondure brave, the lilyed loveliness,
Gold as it was, is, shall be evermore :
Prime nature with an added artistry—
No carat lost, and you have gained a ring. 30

What of it? 'T is 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 35
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,
(Mark the predestination !) when a Hand, 40
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 45
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.

This book,—precisely on that palace-step 50
 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, 55
 (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
 In baked earth, (broken, Providence be praised !) 60
 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 65
 A pile of brown-etched prints, two *crasie* each,
 Stopped by a conch a-top from fluttering forth
 —Sowing the Square with works of one and the same
 Master, the imaginative Siennese

Great in the scenic backgrounds—(name and fame 70
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 75
Stood left and right of it as tempting more—
A dogscared Spicilegium, the fond tale
O' the Frail One of the Flower, by young Dumas,
Vulgarized Horace for the use of schools,
The Life, Death, Miracles of Saint Somebody, 80
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 : 85
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
 I' the touch and sight. 90

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 : 95
 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,
 And whisk their faded fresh. And on I read 100
 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, 106
 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.
 Still read I on, from written title-page 110
 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 115
 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.
 "*Romana Homicidiorum*"—nay, 120
 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 125
 " By heading or hanging as befitted ranks,
 " At Rome on February Twenty Two,