

The background of the page features a faint, light green line-art illustration of three human faces. The faces are rendered in a sketchy, expressive style, with visible outlines of the eyes, noses, and mouths. They are arranged in a triangular pattern, with one face at the top and two below it, slightly offset to the left and right. The overall effect is artistic and subtle, providing a thematic backdrop for the text.

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LITERATURE.

AURORA LEIGH. By ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING. Chapman and Hall.

"Aurora Leigh," Mrs. Browning's new poem, is a wealthy world of beauty, truth, and the noblest thoughts, faiths, hopes, and charities that can inform and sanctify our human nature. It is a gem for this age to wear with other imperishable jewels on its forehead, as it marches onward to join the past ages in the Judgment Hall of Eternity. Other gems that shine beside it there may be harder and brighter, more evenly polished, cut into more exact proportions, and set more massively than this, but none can have a richer colour or be more lucent. Ruby-like it glows with the life blood of sound humanity. It will be forgiven even a critic to become somewhat enthusiastic, nay, to use tropes and similes, in writing of this new, true, and original poem. True poem it is, though in common language it might be called a three-volume novel in blank verse. A novel it is, for all its dealings with philosophy and art in the abstract, and with social anomalies in the concrete;—for all its four hundred pages of blank verse, and its nine books or cantos. A novel, with two lovers for the hero and heroine—who misunderstand each other at the beginning, and are ingeniously kept apart until the end, when they are married. Between the beginning and the end intervenes the usual amount of incidents, changes, sketches of persons and places, conversations, scenes, reflections and comments, humorous, serious, and speculative. Yet all these things, which in a first rate prose novel are done with grace and artistic skill, in "Aurora Leigh" have the grand additional charm of genuine poetic art. Doubtless, if it be taken merely as a tale of the times, it is open to fault-finding, on the ground of "want of probability." No one for instance would contend that Romney Leigh's intended marriage in St. James's Church with a tramp's daughter is like what takes place in real life. But the poet is justified, in such a daring symbolic lesson, by her genius in teaching. She teaches so that dullards must learn and understand her warning and prophecy, and acknowledge that it is high time to comprehend such things.

In a few brief words we will sketch the story of "Aurora Leigh." The time is that of the present generation—the place chiefly England, and the persons English. Aurora Leigh is the only child of an Englishman of ancient family by an Italian lady. She is born in Italy; her mother dies in giving her birth, and her father lives a sorrowful life for her loss until Aurora is nine years old, when he dies, and is buried in Florence. She is then carried off to England, and placed under the care of a maiden aunt. She is thus described by the heroine (for the poem is an autobiography):—

"She had lived, we'll say,
A harmless life, she called a virtuous life,
A quiet life, which was not life at all,
(But that, she had not lived enough to know)
Between the vicar and the county squires,
The lord-lieutenant looking down sometimes
From the empyreal, to assure their souls
Against chance-vulgarisms, and, in the abyss,
The apothecary looked on once a year,
To prove their soundness of humility.
The poor-club exercised her Christian gifts
Of knitting stockings, stitching petticoats,
Because we are of one flesh after all
And need one flannel, (with a proper sense
Of difference in the quality)—and still
The book-club, guarded from your modern trick
Of shaking dangerous questions from the crease,
Preserved her intellectual. She had lived
A sort of cage-bird life, born in a cage,
Accounting that to leap from perch to perch
Was act and joy enough for any bird.
Dear heaven, how silly are the things that live
In thickets, and eat berries!"

Aurora is large-hearted, large-brained, strong-willed, able to conform externally to her aunt's educational laws, and to go through an entirely different educational course of her own at the same time. Nothing can be sharper and finer than the satirical touches on the education of English young ladies. Coming from such an authority, they will, we trust, have weight with those whom it concerns—especially with those patriotic optimists resembling Aurora's aunt, who

"Owned
She liked a woman to be womanly,
And English women, she thanked God and sighed
(Some people always sigh in thanking God),
Were models to the universe."

Aurora's account of her self-education and secret omniverous reading contains some fine passages on books and their power over a young mind; still finer passages on true poetry and the differences between that and the poetic eruption to which youths and maiden are liable, and which they mistake for Apollo's heat in the blood. The second book is occupied with a declaration of love to Aurora on her twentieth birthday by her cousin, Romney Leigh—the head of the house and the heir of her aunt. This Romney turns out an ideal man—made up of the best things in many of our best public men, with something existing only in a poet's brain superadded. Maurice and Kingsley, Lord Shaftesbury, Mr. Sidney Herbert, and the Duke of Bedford, combine to form Romney Leigh—Fourrier, Comte, and Owen also help to fill out his personality. Aurora really loves him, but offended by the manner of his asking, she rejects his love. On the death of her aunt she is left free but poor—and scornful all advice or help from Romney, she comes to London and becomes an authoress. It does not detract from her success that she is a beauty and has by right of birth the *entrée* into the most aristocratic circles. Much of what is written here concerning art and poetry is excellent. Take the following:—

"Nay, if there's room for poets in the world
A little overgrown, (I think there is)
Their sole work is to represent the age,
Their age, not Charlemagne's,—this live, throbbing age.
That brawls, cheats, maddens, calculates, aspires,
And spends more passion, more heroic heat,
Betwixt the mirrors of its drawing-rooms,
Than Roland with his knights, at Roncesvalles,
To flinch from modern varnish, coat or flounce."

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Than Roland with his knights, at Roncesvalles,
To flinch from modern varnish, coat or flounce,
Cry out for togas and the picturesque,
Is fatal,—foolish too. King Arthur's self
Was commonplace to Lady Guenever;
And Camelot to minstrels seemed as flat,
As Regent-street to poets.

Never flinch,
But still, unscrupulously epic, catch
Upon the burning lava of a song,
The full-veined, heaving, double-breasted Age:
That, when the next shall come, the men of that
May touch the impress with reverent hand, and say
'Behold,—behold the paps we all have sucked!
That bosom seems to beat still, or at least,
It sets ours beating. This is living art,
Which thus precepts, and thus records true life.'
What form is best for poems? Let me think
Of forms less, and the external. Trust the spirit,
As sovran nature does, to make the form;
For otherwise we only imprison spirit,
And not embody. Inward evermore
To outward,—so in life, and so in art,
Which still is life."

She and her cousin carry out their theories of life, and find that they have both erred through arrogance and want of love and self-knowledge. While Aurora becomes famous as a poetess, Romney becomes famous as a social reformer, and in the third and fourth books we have the first part of the story of Marian Erle, the vagabond's child, whom Romney intends to marry. To our thinking, all that concerns this girl is more lovely and poetic than anything else in the poem. The touching sweetness of the girl, the contrast of her ignorance and low estate, with the condition and character of Aurora, the sickening tragedy which follows her forced separation from Romney, and the love for her babe, for which alone she lives, are not excelled in pathos by anything we know in the range of poetry or fiction, nor in terrible truth by any social misery and crime in yesterday's police reports. Oh! how common are the elements of true poetry, and how rare the hand that hath the cunning to bring the soul out of them by a touch. Lady Waldemar, the woman of the world, who loves Romney and does wrong to win him, is vigorously painted. And she calls forth some of the authoress's keenest satire. There is much satire, double-edge, sharp, and stiff in this poem. Humour and wit are not scarce in its pages. Passion, pathos—the deepest tenderness, the loftiest aspiration are abundant. Pictures of English scenery, of English society, are painted to the life. All that borders on the infinite—love, human genius, and human virtue are touched with luminous fire, and so we call "Aurora Leigh," after one eager reading, a poem of this age—for this age and for all time. Thanks and honour to the poet. When Romney and Aurora understand each other, at last, the poem concludes thus:—

"The world waits
For help. Beloved, let us love so well,
Our work shall still be better for our love,
And still our love be sweeter for our work,
And both, commended, for the sake of each,
By all true workers and true lovers born."