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Scenes of Clerical Life.—No. 1. [Jan.

Mrs Barrett Browning—Aurora Leigh.

There is some necessity, we think, at the present time, of applying the rules of criticism to the critics; for it cannot be denied that many who wear the robes of Aristarchus are no more entitled to the style of literary censor, than is the American Lynch, to the title of a legitimate judge.

Nothing can more truly demonstrate the anarchy which prevails in the republic of letters, than the fact that persons of narrow education, limited views, confined sympathies, and inordinate prejudice, take upon themselves, every day, without hesitation, the responsibilities of the reviewer; and under cover of the editorial “we,” pronounce judgment upon the efforts of their superiors. The complaint, no doubt, is an old one, but the evil has been steadily increasing. Formerly critics were scarce, and, in consequence, as well known as mastiffs in a country parish. Their deep bow-wow, even when they were unnecessarily surly, had something in it of power and significance: now, the traveller cannot pass through a village without having a whole pack of curs yelping vociferously at his heels. Powerless to bite, they are numerous enough to annoy; and they seem to consider, perhaps with reason, that incessant barking is an indispensable condition of their existence.

Instead of remaining quiet under shelter of the peat-stack or haycock, as well-conditioned animals should do when nobody is attempting to molest them, they dash forward fanatically on the advent of each newcomer on the highway, and expend a monstrous deal of unavailing breath before they sink back to their accustomed lurking-places. Possibly, upon more minute acquaintance, some of them may prove to be rather amiable tykes in their way—fellows who attack the passenger more from exuberance of spirits than from malice, and who think that there is something wonderfully clever in the utterance of the canine music. But there are others whose existence is a perpetual snarl—who have snarled from the day they were littered till now; and who will continue to snarl until they are pitched ignominiously into a quarry-hole with a stone of reasonable weight suspended to their necks. Subsequent snarling we believe to be impossible, else doubtless they would expend their last energies in snarling at the tpadgole.

When a nuisance becomes so universal as this, most people cease to regard it seriously. Many a strong nerve and equable temperament stride along without regarding their clamorous following, though those of weaker nerve are sometimes startled and disturbed. If indeed there was a common feeling in the pack—if a plausible reason could be assigned why some five-and-twenty animals of different breeds should combine in a general yelp—if it could be shown that your hat was of such a texture or so long in use that they all took offence at it, or that your coat was so monstrously bad that they deemed it your duty to protest against it, or that you walked along the road with the air of a ticket-of-leave man or a thimblebigger, their assault might, in a certain measure, be justified. But they have no common motive. The boorish ass, because he objects to your hat; another, because your breeches are not to his liking; a third, because he thinks you supercilious; a fourth, because you righteously bestowed a kick upon the carcass of a cousin of his own; a fifth, because he happens from a different parish; a sixth, because he considers barking a proof of genius; and a seventh, because from puppydom upwards he has had a tendency towards hereditary hydrophobia. Each has a separate motive for dislike, though the cry be general; and even the possession of good qualities will not protect you from their assault. Where there is envy, a very small matter indeed will serve to elicit hatred. Witness the instance of the Athenian, who asked Aristides to inscribe his own name on the shell of banishment, because he was weary of hearing him denominated “the just.”

To criticism, however stringent,
Mrs Barrett Browning—Aurora Leigh.

[Jan. 1857.]

For the application of his gifts, every author is responsible. He may exercise them well and usefully, or he may apply them to ignoble purposes. He may, by the aid of art, exhibit them in the most attractive form, or his execution may be mean and slovenly. In the one case he is deserving of praise; in the other he is liable to censure. Keeping this principle in view, we shall proceed to the consideration of this new volume from the pen of Mrs Browning, whose rare genius has already won for her an exalted place among the poets of the age. Endowed with a powerful intellect, she at least has no reason to anticipate the treatment proffered for her literary heroine, Aurora:

"You never can be satisfied with praise When men give women when they judge a book Not as men's work, but as more woman's work.
The book does honour to the sex, we hold. Among our female authors we make room For this fair writer, and congratulate The country that produces in these times Such women, competent to—spell."

Mrs Browning takes the field like Biritonart or Joan of Arc, and declares that she will not accept courtesy or forbearance from the critics on account of her sex. She challenges a truthful opinion, and that opinion she shall have.

Aurora Leigh is a story of the present time in nine books. When we say story, it must not be understood in the sense of a continuous narrative or rather poem of action, for a great portion of the work is reflective. Still there is a story which we shall trace for the information of the reader, abstaining in the mean time from comment, and not making more quotations than are necessary for its elucidation. The poem is a monologue, and the opening scene is laid in Tuscany.

The father of Aurora Leigh, an Englishman of fortune and a scholar, fell in love with a young Florentine girl, whom he first saw bearing a taper in a religious procession. They were married; but the wife died shortly after she had given birth to her sole daughter, Aurora. The widow, in a frenzy of grief, withdrew to a cottage among the mountains, and there occupied his time in the education of her child, who soon became a proficient in the classics.

"The trick of Greek And Latin he had taught me, as would Have taught me wrestling or the game of fires, if such he had known, — most like a ship-wrecked man Who heaps his single platter with goats' cheese And scarlet berries; or like any man Who loves but one, and so gives all at once, Because he has it, rather than because He counts it worthy. Thus my father gave And thus, as did the woman formerly By young Achilles, when they pinned the veil Across the boy's audacious front, and swept With tuneful laugh the silver-fretted rocks He wrapt his little daughter in his large Man's doublet, careless did it fit or no."

This mode of tuition—the same, by the way, which Dominic Sampson proposed for the mental culture of Lucy Bertram—had a strong effect upon the character of Aurora, who throughout the poem in discourses in a most learned manner. When she was only thirteen her father died, and she was brought away, must reflectively, from her pleasant Italy, to dwell in foggy England with a virgin aunt, who is thus described:

"I think I see my father's sister stand Upon the lawn of her country-house To give me welcome. She stood straight and calm, Her somewhat narrow forehead braided tight As if for taming accidental thoughts From possible pulses; brown hair pricked with grey By frigid use of life (she was not old, Although my father's elder by a year), A nose drawn sharply, yet in delicate lines; A close mild mouth, a little sourd about The ends, through speaking unrequited loves, Or pereaventure negligibly half-truths; Eyes of no colour,—once they might have smiled, But never, never forget themselves In smiling; cheeks, in which was yet a rose Of perished summers, like a rose in a book, Kept more for that than for pleasure,—if past bloom, Past fading also.
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[Jan.

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 poor-club exercised her Christian gifts Of knitting stockings, stitching petticoats, Because we are of one flesh after all, And mutual counsel (of 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 not and joy enough for any bird, Dear heaven, how silly are the things that live In thickets, and eat berries!

L'Alas, A wild bird scarcely fledged, was brought to her cage, And she was there to meet me, Very kind, Bring the clean water; give out the fresh seed.

This prim old lady was not exactly To Miss Aurora's mind; indeed, there was not much love lost between them, for Aunt Marjory had been sorely incensed, and with good reason, as will presently appear, at her brother's marriage with a foreigner, and never thoroughly forgave the daughter. However, she did her duty by her in her own fashion, supplementing her education by giving her instruction in such things as are usually taught to English girls, an intellectual regimen which excited the profoundest disgust in Aurora. However, she had strength enough to stand the trial, though occasionally threatening to die; and her patience was at length rewarded by finding her father's books in a garret. These she devoured furiously, and lighting upon the poets, at once perceived her vocation.

"At last, because the time was ripe, I chanced upon the poets.

As the earth Plunges in fury, when the internal fires Have reached and prickèd her heart, and, throwing flat

The marts and temples, the triumphal gates And towers of observation, clears herself To elemental freedom—thus, my soul, At poetry's divine first finger-touch, Let go conventions and sprung up surprised, Convicted of the great eponyms Before two worlds."

So Aurora began to make verses, and found herself all the better for the exercise. But there were more Leights in the world than Aurora. She had a cousin, Romney Leigh, the proprietor of Leigh Hall, who, even as a youth, exhibited queer tendencies:

"Romney, Romney Leigh, I have not named my cousin hitherto, and yet I used him as a sort of friend; My elder by few years, but cold and shy, And absent—tender, when he thought of me, Which scarcely was imperative, grave be-times, As well as early master of Leigh Hall, Whereof the nightmare sat up upon his youth Repressing all its seasonable delights, And agonising with a ghastly sense Of universal hideous want and wrong, To incriminate possession. When he came From college to the country, very oft He crossed the hills on visits to my aunt, With gifts of blue grapes from the hot-houses, A book in one hand,—mere statistics (If I chanced to lift the cover), count of all The goats whose beards are sprouting down toward hell, Against God's separating judgment-hour, And she, she almost loved him,—even allowed That sometimes he should seem to sigh my way; It made him easier to be pitiful, And sighing was his gift."

This young gentleman, after his own odd fashion, has conceived an attachment for Aurora; nor is he an object of total indifference to her, though her mind is more occupied with versatility than with love. The two characters, male and female, are meant to stand in strong contrast to each other. Romney is a Socialist, bent on devoting himself to the regeneration of mankind, and the improvement of the condition of the working classes, by bringing into effect the schemes of Fourier and Owen—the aim of Aurora is, through art, to raise the aspirations of the people. The one is physical, the woman metaphysical. The one is

for increasing bodily comfort, the other for stimulating the mind. Both are enthusiasts, and both are intolerably dogmatic. Now it so happens that, on the morning of the twentieth anniversary of her birthday, Mrs Aurora calls for early, with the laudable purpose of crowning herself after the manner of Corinna, and is surprised by Romney in the act of placing an ivy wreath upon her brow. Romney has picked up a volume of her manuscript poems, which he returns, not, however, with any complimentary phrase, but rather sneeringly, and forthwith begins to read her a lecture, in a high puritanical strain, upon the vanity of her pursuits. This, of course, rouses the ire of Aurora, who retorts with great spirit on his materialistic tendency. In the midst of this discussion he has the cool taste to propose, not so much, as he puts it, through love, but because he wants a helpmate to assist him in the erection of public washing-houses, soup-kitchens, and hospitals; whereupon our high-souled poetess flies off at a tangent:

"What you love,

Is not a woman, Romney, but a cause:
You want a helpmate, not a mistress, sir—
A wife to help your ends—in her no end! Your cause is noble, your ends excellent, But I, being most unworthy of these and

Do otherwise conceive of love. Farewell,

Farewell, Aurora! you reject me thus?"

He said.

"Why, sir, you are married long ago.

You have a wife already, whom you love, Your social theory. Bless you both, I say.
For my part, I am scarcely meek enough To be the handmaid of a lawful spouse. Do I look a Hagar, think you?"

Aunt Marjory, when she hears of this refusal, is frantic, and rates Aurora soundly for rejecting a fortune laid at her feet. She explains that, by a special clause in the Leigh entail, offspring by a foreign wife were cut off from succession—that no sooner was Aurora born than the next heir, Romney Leigh's father, proposed that a marriage should be arranged between his son and the child, so that the penalties of disseverment might be avoided—and that Romney, by asking her to marry him, was in fact carrying out that intention. Otherwise Aurora is a beggar, for her aunt has no fortune to leave her. Such suggestions as these, when they occur in romance and poetry, always prove arguments in favour of obstinacy; and Aurora, even though she likes Romney, fixes upon them as insuperable obstacles to the marriage:

"Romney now was turned To a benefactor, to a generous man, Who had tied himself to marry—me, instead.

Of such a woman, with low timorous lids He lifted with a sudden word one day.
And left, perhaps, for my sake. Ah, self-tied

By a contract,—male Iphigenia, born At a fatal Aulis, for the winds to change, (But lose him—they'll not change); he

well might seem
A little cold and dominant in love!

He had a right to be dogmatical,

This poor, good Romney. Love, to him, was made
A simple law-clause. If I married him, I would not dare to call my soul my own,

Which so he had bought and paid for:

every thought
And every heart-beat down there in the bill,

Not one found honestly deductible From any use that pleased him! He might eat

My body into coins to give away
Among his other projects; change my sons, While I stood dumb as Griseld, for black babies
Or piteous foundlings; might unquestioned

My right hand teaching in the Ragged Schools,

My left hand washing in the Public Baths,

When time my angel of the Ideal stretched Both his to me in vain! I could not claim

The poor right of a mouse in a trap, to

And take so much as pity, from myself."

In short, she will be her own mistress, and work out her own independence. Her aunt dies, leaving Aurora about three hundred pounds. She peremptorily rejects a large sum of money which Romney, with delicate generosity, had attempted to place at her disposal, without allowing her to incur the sense of obligation, and starts for the metropolis:

"I go hence To London, to the gathering-place of souls.

To live mine straight out, vocally in

Harmoniously for others, if indeed
A woman's soul, like man's, be wide enough.

To carry the whole octave (that's to prove),
Or, if I fall, still, purely for myself.

Locating herself at Kensington,
She begins her literary career,
And achieves distinction. One day she
Is waited on by a certain Lady Waldemar,
Who gives her the astounding information
That her cousin Romney, whom she had not seen
For three years, is on the eve of marriage.

"To a girl of doubtful life, doubtful
Birth, starved out in London, till her course-
grained hands
Are whiter than her morals."

This Lady Waldemar is personally
In love with Romney Leigh, and
Comes to ask the aid of Aurora in
Breaking off the ill-assorted marriage.
Aurora, however, having conceived
A disgust to her visitor (which is
Not surprising, seeing that her conversation
Is so flavoured with allusions to garlic, that even the Lady
Of Shallot would have recoiled from her whispers),
Refuses to have any participation
In the matter, but resolves immediately
to see the girl, Marian Erle,
Who resides in a garret somewhere in the
Purifies of St Giles. After passing
Through the abominations of that quarter,
And receiving the maladictions
Of thief and prostitute, the poetess discovers
The object of her search, and hears her story. Marian Erle,
The selected bride of Romney Leigh,
Was the daughter of a trump
And squatter on the Malvern Hills,
And her education was essentially a
Hedge one. Her father drank
And beat his wife, and the wife in turn beat her child. When Marian arrived at the
Age of puberty, her unnatural
Mother was about to sell her as a victim to the lusts of "a squire," when the girl, in horror, ran away,
Burst a blood-vessel in her flight,
Was found senseless on the road by a
Waggoner, and conveyed to an
Hospital in a neighbouring town, where Romney Leigh was a visitor. Finding
That she was friendless and homeless,
He procured her a place in a
Sewing establishment in London,
Which she quitted to attend the
Deathbed of a poor consumptive companion, who had sunk under the
Pressure of overwork. Here Romney
Leigh again appeared, and, after
The death of her friend, proposed to
Marry her, fashioning his proposal thus:

"Dear Marian, of one clay God made us
All,
And though men push and poke and paddle in't
(As children play at fashioning dirt-pies),
And call their fancies by the name of facts,
Assuming difference, lordship, privilege,
When all's plain dirt, they come back to
it at last;
The first grave-digger proves it with a spade,
And puts all even. Need we wait for this,
You, Marian, and I, Romney.
She, at that,
Looked blindly in his face, as when one
Launches for the stars.
Through driving autumn-mists to find the sky,
He went on speaking.
Marian, I am born
What men call noble, and you, issued from
The noble people, though the tyrannous
Sword
Which pierced Christ's heart, has left the world in twain
'Twixt class and class, opposing rich to
Poor,
Shall we keep parted? Not so. Let us
Strain together, each to each,
Compress the red lips of this gaping
Wound,
As far as two souls can—ay, lean and
League,
I, from your superabundance—from your want.
You,—joining in a protest 'gainst the
Wrong
On both sides!"

While Marian is telling her story to Aurora, Romney comes in, looks
Certainly a little surprised at finding his
cousin there, but is by no means
Concerted. Naturally enough, Aurora
Supposes that he must be influenced
By a very strong passion
For the girl whom he is about to make his wife, and congratulates him,
With what sincerity we need not inquire, on having made choice of so fair
And gentle a creature. Romney, however,
Utterly denies the soft impeachment,
In so far as it implies that his affections
Were any way engaged.
Ordinary men contract marriages from
Love—he is influenced by a far
Higher principle. He says:

"You did not, do not, cannot comprehend
My choice, my ends, my motives, nor myself;
No matter now—we'll let it pass, you say.
I thank you for your generous counsels.

Which helps this present; I accept for her
Your favourable thoughts. We're fallen
On days,
We two, who are not poets, when to wed
Requires less mutual love than common
love,
For to two together to bear out at once
Upon the love story. Work in pairs,
In gay-couplings or in marriage-rings,
The difference lies in the honor, not the
work,
And such work we're bound to, I and she. But
Love,
(You poets are enhanced in this age;)
The hour is too late for catching even moths,
You've gnats instead), love!—love's fool

Is out of date, like Adam's. Set a swan
To swim the Trenton, rather than true
love
To float its fabulous plumage safely down
The cataracts of this loud transition-
time,
Wherefor, for ever, henceforth, in my ears,
Must keep me deaf to music."

In short, the man has not an atom
Of love for the girl, whom he proposes to
Wed entirely from motives of
General philanthropy.
At this Aurora shrugs somewhat disapprovingly; but,
Wishing to show kindness to her cousin—perhaps to testify her own
Indifference, which, however, is
Rather feigned than real—she suggests
That the marriage should take
Place at her house. But Master Romney
Will not hear of such an arrangement,
As it might weaken the effect of the grand moral lesson
Which he intends to convey to society:

"He answered, 'But it is,—I take my
Directly from the people,—and she comes,
As Austria's daughter to imperial France,
Bets' the eagles, blinking not her race,
From Marguerite's Court, at garret-height,
To meet
And wed me at St James's, nor put off
Her gown of serge for that. The things we
do,
We do: we wear no mask, as if we
blushed.'"

The following sketch of the company
assembled to witness the marriage ceremony
Is too racy and rich
To be omitted here. As the union
Was to be typical of the impending
Abolition of all class distinctions,
Romney determined that it should be celebrated in the presence of high
And low, and issued cards accordingly.

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A month passed so, and then the notice
Came;
On such a day the marriage at the church.
I was not backward.

Half St Giles in friezes
Was bidden to meet St James in cloth of gold,
And, after concert at the altar, pass
To eat a marriage-feast on Hampstead Heath.
Of course the people came in uncompelled,
Lame, blind, and worn—sick, sorrowful,
And worse.
The humours of the peasant social
All pressed out, poured out upon Pimlico,
Exasperating the uncustomed air.
With hideous interjection: you'd suppose
A finished generation, dead of plague,
Swept outwards from their graves into the sun
The moil of death upon them. What a
sight!
A holiday of miserable men
Is sadder than a burial-day of kings.
They clogged the streets, they clogged the church.
In a dark slow stream, like blood. To see
That sight,
The noble ladies stood up in their pews,
Some pale for fear, a few as red for hate,
Some simply curious, some just insolent,
And some in wondering scorn,—"What next?"

These crushed their delicate rose-lips from
The smile
That misbecame them in a holy place.
With brothers hems of perfumed handkerchiefs;
Those passed the salts with confidence of
Eyes
And simultaneous shiver of mordé silk;
While all the airs, alive and black with
Heads,
Crawled slowly toward the altar from the
Street,
As bruised snakes crawl and hiss out of a
hole.
With shuddering involutions, swaying
Away,
From right to left, and then from left to
Right,
In pants and pause.
What an ugly crowd Of faces rose upon you everywhere
That crammed mass! you did not
Usually see, like them in the open day:
They hide in cellars, not to make you mad
As Romney Leigh is.—Faces! 0 my God,
We call those, faces! men's and women's
Tart.

And children's:—babies, hanging like a
rat
 Forgotten on their mother's neck—poor
Mouths,
Wiped clean of mother's milk by mother's
Blow.
Before they are taught her cursing.

Faces!—phew,
We'll call them vises festering to despair,
Or swords pitting to vices: not
A finger-touch of God left whole on them; 
All ruined, lost—the countenance worn out
As the garments, the will dissolve as the acts.
The passions loose and dragging in the dirt
To trip the foot up at the first free step!—
Those, faces! 'twas as if you had stirred up hell
To leave its lowest drog-fiends uppermost
In fiery swirls of slime,—such estranged fronts,
Such obdurate jaws were thrown up constantly.
To twit with your race, corrupt your blood,
And grudged to devilish colours all your dreams.
Henceforth,—though, haply, you should dream asleep
By clink of silver waters, in a muse
On Raffael's mild Madonna of the Bird.

So there they wait—that strangely assorted company—the denizens of St Giles thriving on the inhabitants of St James—both parties curious to behold the marriage which is to inaugurately the future revolution and fusion of society. Romney Leigh appears to do the honours; but time rolls on, and still the bride comes not. The fashionable stare and talk gossip; the vulgar murmur, and desire a smoke—until a rumour, to the effect that something is amiss, permeates the throng.

A murmur and a movement drew around; A naked slipper touched us. Something wrong! What's wrong? The black crowd, as an overstrained Cord, quivered in vibrations, and I saw—Was that his face I saw!—his—Romney Leigh's—Which haunts a sudden horror like a sponge Into all eyes,—while himself stood white upon
The topmost altar-stair, and tried to speak,
And failed, and lifted higher above his head
A letter, as a man who drowns and gasps.

'My brothers, bear with me! I am very weak. I meant but only good. Perhaps I meant Too proudly,—and God smacked the circumstances. And changed it therefore. There's no marriage—none. She leaves me,—she departs,—she disappears. I lose her. Yet I never forced her "ay," To have her "no" so cast into my teeth, In manner of an accusation, thus.

My friends, you are all dismissed. Go, eat and drink
According to the programme,—and farewell!'"

At this St Giles' rises in insurrection, cursing Romney as a seducer, and accusing him of having made away with the girl. There is a superb row, with threats of violence and arson, until the police enter and clear the church.

Beyond an enigmatical letter of leave-taking, which gives no explanation of her avoiding the marriage ceremony, we hear nothing of Marian for a long time. Romney retires to Leigh Hall, which he has turned into a "phalanstery," by which term, we presume, is meant an Owenite community. Miss Aurora continues her devotion to the muse, and becomes more notable daily by day; but a horrid suspicion crosses her that Lady Waldemar has found the weak side of her wealthy cousin. For, at a conversation at the house of a certain Lord Howe, she learns that the fair and intriguing Waldemar is commonly considered as Romney's pet disciple—may, that she is considered as his bride intended. In the words of Mrs Browning, which we give without the metrical divisions,—

"You may find her name on all his missions and commissions, schools, asylums, hospitals. He has had her down with other ladies, whom her snarly lead persuaded from other spheres, to his country-place in Shropshire; in the famed phalanstery at Leigh Hall, christianised from Fourier's own, in which he has planted out his sapping stocks of knolledge into social bureaus; and there, they say, she has tarried half a week, and milked the cows, and churned, and pressed the curd, and said "my sister" to the disordered lives, the assembled castaways. Such girls! Ay, sided with them at the washing-tub."

Lady Waldemar, in a very spiteful speech, confirms this impression; and Miss Aurora, who all this time has had a secret Jeering for her cousin, determines to square her balances with her publisher, and to depart for Italy.

In Paris she encounters Marian, and finds her a mother. The explanation is, that Lady Waldemar had tampered with the girl; and by representing to her that her marriage with Romney would be her social ruin, induced her to take flight on the day preceding that which had been arranged for the nuptials. The place of her future destiny was Australia, but her ladyship had confided to her the charge of an unprincipled soubrette, who either or not by design of her mistress, took Marian over to France, conveyed her to an infamous house, and sold her, while under the influence of drugs, to violation. On awakening to a sense of her situation and wrongs, the unfortunate girl became mad, and was allowed to make her escape, underwent various adventures and vicissitudes, and finally brought into the world a male child, in whom her whole existence was wrapt up, and for whom alone she lived, who she was recognised and challenged by Aurora in the streets of Paris. The sequel may be easily imagined. Miss Leigh, convinced of Marian's innocence, insisted that she, with her child, shall accompany her to Florence; and there are some letters and cross purposes, into which, for the mere sake of the story, it is not necessary to enter. In fine, Aurora, in the full belief that Lady Waldemar, whom she has sent a most insulting letter, is now the wife of her cousin, becomes melancholy and heart-sick, and time drags wearily on, until one night, watching the stars from her terrace, she is startled by the sudden appearance of Romney by the naked lighter than in his early youth, and far more humble, Romney first pays homage to her genius, and then confesses that his social schemes have proved an utter failure.

"My vain phalanstery dissolved itself; My vain women of the disorderd lives I brought in orderly to dine and sleep, Broke up those waxen masks I made them wear.
With fierce contortions of the natural face; And cursed me for my tyrannous constraint In forcing crooked creatures to live life, And set the country bounds upon my back To bite and tear me for my wicked deed Of nothing to do good without the church Or even the squares, Aurora. Do you mind Your ancient neighbours? The great book-club teas With "shew", "summaries," and "last tract," but twelve, On socialist troubles of close bonds Between the generous rich and grateful poor."

The vicar preached from "Revelations" (ill
Mrs Barrett Browning.—Aurora Leigh.

I have not so much life that I should love—
Except the child. Ah God! I could not bear
To see my darling on a good man's knees,
And know by such a look, or such a sigh,
Or such a silence, that he thought sometimes—
"This child was fathered by some cursed wretch."

For Romney—angels are less tender-wise
Than God and mothers; even you would think
While we think never. He is ours, the child;
And we would sooner vex a soul in heaven
By coupling with it the dead body's thought.
It left behind it in a last month's graves,
Than, in my child, see other than—my

We only, never call him fatherless
Who has God and his mother. O my babe,
My pretty, pretty blossom, an ill-wind
Once blew upon, now can any think
I'd have another,—one called happier,
A fathered child, with father's love and race
That's worn as bold and open as a smile,
To vex my darling when he's asked his name?

And has no answer? What! a happier child
Than mine, my best,—who laughed so loud
He couldn't sleep for pastime? Nay, I swear
By life and love, that, if I lived like some,
And loved, like some,—ay, loved you,
Romney Leigh,
As some love (eyes that have wept so much,
So clear),
I've room for no more children in my arms;
My kisses are all melted on one mouth;
It would not push my darling to a stool
To dandle babies. Here's a hand, shall keep
For ever clean without a marriage-ring,
To lend my boy, until he cease to need
One staydying finger of it, and desert
(Not miss) her mother's lap, to sit with men.
And when I miss him (not he me) I'll come
And say, "Now give me some of Romney's work,
To help our outreach orphans of the world,
And comfort grief with grief." For you, meantime,
Most noble Romney, wed a noble wife,
And open on each other your great souls,—
I need not farther you. If I dared
But strain and touch her in her upper sphere,
And say, "Come down to Romney—pay
my debt.
I should be happy with the stream of joy
Sent through me. But the moon is in my face—
I dare not,—though I guess the name he loves;
I'm learned with my studies of old days,
Remembering how he crush'd his tender lip,
When some one came and spoke, or did not come:
Aurora, I could touch her with my hand,
And fly, because I dare not."

And so Marian departs. But now
Comes an awful disclosure—Romney is blind.
The blow struck by the poacher had destroyed the visual nerves,
And for that unfortunate Lord of Leigh, the glory of the sun, moon,
And stars, was but a remembrance. So Aurora, who had always loved him,
even though she would not allow it to herself—and whom he had never ceased to love amidst his perverted dreams of duty—gives her whole woman's heart to the helpless; and the poem closes with the interchange of vows and aspirations.

Such is the story, which no admirer of Mrs Browning's genius ought in evidence to defend. In our opinion it is fantastic, unnatural, exaggerated;
and all the worse, because it professes to be a tale of our own times. No one who understands of how much value probability is to a tale,
can read the foregoing sketch, or indeed, peruse the poem, without a painful feeling that Mrs Browning has been perpetrating in essentials, an extravaganza or caricature, instead of giving to the public a real life-like picture; for who can accept
truthful representation, Romney's proposal to educate an ignorant uneducated girl whom he does not love; or that scene in the church, which is absolutely of Rabelaisian conception! We must not be seduced by beauty
and power of execution from entering our protest against this radical error, which appears more glaring as we pass from the story to the spot point, which is the delineation of character.
Aurora Leigh is not an attractive character. After making the most liberal allowances for pride, and fanaticism for art, and indolent independence, she is incongruous and contradictory both
in her sentiments and in her actions. She is not a genuine woman; one half
of her heart seems bounding with the beat of humanity, while the other half is ossified. What we miss in her is instinctiveness, which is the greatest charm of women. No doubt she displays it now and then, and sometimes very consistently, but it is not made the general attribute of her nature; and in her dealings with Romney Leigh, instinct disappears altogether. For we hold it absolutely impossible that a woman, gifted as she is represented to be, would have character in a man, whom she respected only, in the desperate folly of wedding an uneducated girl from the lowest grade of society, whom
he did not love, simply for the sake of a theory thereby making himself a public laughingstock, without the least chance of advancing the progress of his own preposterous opinions. There is nothing heroic in this; there is nothing reconcilable with duty. The part which Aurora takes in the transaction, degrades rather than raises her in our eyes;
nor is she otherwise thoroughly amiable; for, with all deference to Mrs Browning, and with ideas of our own perhaps more chivalric than are commonly promulgated, we must maintain that woman was created to be dependent on the man, and not in the primary sense his lady and his mistress. The extreme independence of Aurora detracts from the feminine charm; she is uninteresting in love, which we otherwise might have felt in so intellectual a heroine. In fact, she is made to resemble too closely some of the female portraits of George Sand, which never were to our liking. In fact, it is a wretched and depressing picture, of a man of the world, who has taken any kind of interest. Though honourable and generous, he is such a very decided
noodle that we grudge him his prominence in the poem, do not feel much sympathy for his misfortunes, and cannot help wondering that Aurora should have entertained one spark of affection for the tolerable a milk-sop. Excess of enthusiasm we can allow; and folly, affecting to talk the words of wisdom, meets us at every turning; but Romney is a walking hyperbole. The character of Marian is very beautifully drawn and well sustained, but her thoughts and language are not those of a girl reared in the midst of sordid poverty, vice, and ignorance. This is an error in art which we are sure Mrs Browning, upon mature consideration, will acknowledge; and it might easily have been avoided by her simply in making Marian's origin and antecedents a few shades more respectable, which would still have left enough disparity between her and Romney to produce the effect which Mrs Browning desires. Lady Waldemar is a disgusting character. Romney Briining intended her to appear as despicable; but it was not therefore necessary to make her talk coarse and revolting. As an example let us cite the following passage:—

"Of a truth, Miss Leigh,
I have not, without struggle, come to this.
I took a master in the German tongue,
I gained a little wise;
But, after all, this love!—you eat of love,
And do as vile a thing as if you eat
Of garfield—which, whatever else you eat,
Tastes uniformly acid, till your pouch
Reminds you of your onion. Am I coarse?
Well, love's coarse, nature's coarse—ah,
there's the rub!
We fair fine ladies, who park out our lives
From common sheep-paths, cannot help the crowds
From flying over,—we're as natural still
As Blossomsha. Drape us perfectly
In Lyons velvet,—we are right, for that,
Lay-figures, look you! we have hearts within,
Warm, live, improvis'd, indecent hearts,
As ready for distracted ends and acts
As any distressed soundness of them all
That Romney groans and toils for. We catch love
And other fevers, in the vulgar way.
Love will not be outwitted by our wit,
Nor cut out by our mine.
Persisted, spite of efforts. All my cards
Turned up but Romney Leigh; my Ger
At germaine Werthorim; my Paris rounds
Returned me from the Champs Elysées just
A ghost, and sighing like Didou's. I came home
Uncured,—convicted rather to myself
Of being in love—in love! That's coarse
Now I'm talking garlic."

In this there is neither truth, power,
or humour. The offence against
taste is so rank that it cannot easily be forgiven.

In poetry, passages such as that which we have quoted are intolerable, because, by juxtaposition with others, exquisite in themselves, they impair our capacity for enjoyment,
Anything very hideous or revolting taints the air around it, and produces a sensation of loathing, from which we do not immediately recover. Hence poets, even when their situations are of the most tragic nature—even when they are dealing with subjects questionable in morality—do, for the most part, sedulously avoid anything like coarseness of expression, and frame their language so as to convey the general idea without presenting special images which are calculated to disgust. Indeed, whilst reading this poem, which abounds in references to art, we have been impressed with a doubt whether, with all her genius, accomplishment, and experience, Mrs Browning has ever thought seriously of the principles upon which art is founded. For genius, as we all know, or ought to know, is not of itself sufficient for the construction of a great poem. Artists, like architects, must work by rule—not slavishly indeed, but ever keeping in mind that there are certain principles which experience has tested and approved, and that to deviate from these is literally to court defeat.

Not that we should implicitly receive the doctrines laid down by critics, scholiasts, or commentators, or pin our faith to the formula of Longinus; but we should regard the works of the great masters, both ancient and modern, as permissible for instruction as well as for delight, and be cautious how we innovate. We may consider it almost as a certainty that every leading principle of art has been weighed and sifted by our predecessors; and that most of the theories, which are paralleled as discoveries, were deliberately examined by them, and rejected because they were false or impracticable. In the fifth book of this poem there is a dissertation upon poetry, in which Mrs Browning very plainly indicates her opinion that the chief aim of a poet should be to illustrate the age in which he lives.

"But poets should exert a double vision; should have eyes to see near things as comprehensively as if afar they took their point of sight, and distant things, as intimately deep, as if they touched them. Let us strive for this, I do distrust the poet who discerns no character or glory in his times, and trundles back his soul five hundred years. Past moat and drawbridge, into a castle-court, Oh! not to sing of lizards or of toads Alive! the dithere!—twere excusable; But of some black chief, half knight, half sheep-like, false for want of an extravagant for the occasion. And that's no wonder: death inherits death.

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 braves, cheats, madmen, calculates, aspirers, And spends more passion, more heroic heat, Between the mirrors of its drawing-rooms, 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 mistrust seems as flat As Regent Street to poets. Never flinch, But still, unscrupulously epic, catch Upon the burning lava of a song. The full-veined, heavy, 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 presents, and thus records true life.

This, in our apprehension, would lead to a total misapprehension of ideal. It is not the province of the poet to depict things as they are, but so to refine and purify as to purge out the grosser matter; and this he cannot do if he attempts to give a faithful picture of his own times. For in order to be faithful, he must necessarily include much which is abhorrent to art, and revolting to the taste, for which no exactness of delineation will be accepted as a proper excuse. All poetical characters, all poetical situations, must be idealized. The language is not that of common life, which belongs essentially to the domain of prose. Therein lies the distinction between a novel and a poem. In the first, we expect that the language employed by the characters shall be strictly natural, not excluding even imperfections, and that their sentiments shall not be too cleverly or extravagantly for the occasion. In the second, we expect idealization—language more refined, more adorned, and more forcible than that which is ordinarily employed; and sentiments purer and loftier than usual.

When dealing with a remote subject the poet can easily effect this, but not so when he brings forward characters of his own age. We have been told that both the late John Kenble and his sister Mrs Siddons have become so accustomed to the flow of blank verse that they carried the trick of it into private life, and used solely to try the rible faculties of the company by demanding beef or beer in tragic tones and rhythm. That which would have sounded magnificently on the stage was ludicrous at a modern table. Mrs Browning has evidently felt the difficulty, but she cannot conquer it. In this poem she has wilfully altered the changes of sound, prose with bursts of splendid poetry; and her prose is all the worse because she has been compelled to dislocate its joints in order to make it read like blank verse. Let us again revert to the experiment of exhibiting one or two of these passages printed in the usual form:

"We are sad to-night. I saw,—(good-night, Sir Blaise! oh, Smith—he has slipped away) I saw you across the room, and stayed, Miss Leigh, to keep a crowd of lion-hunters off, with faces toward yours. There were three: a spacious lady five feet ten, and fat, who has the devil in her (and there's room) for walking to and fro upon the earth from Chippewa to China; she requires your autograph upon a tinted leaf 'twixt Queen Pomare's and Emperor Soulouque's; pray give it; she has energies, though fat; for me, I'd rather see a rick on fire than such a woman angry. Then a youth fresh from the backwoods, green as the undergrowth, asks modestly, Miss Leigh, to kiss your shoes, and adds, he has an epic in twelve parts, which when you've read, you'll do for his boot—all which I saved you, and absord next week both manuscript and man."

"Is that poetry? Assuredly not. Is it prose? If so, it is as poor and faulty a specimen as ever was presented to our notice. It would not pass muster even in a third-rate novel, where sense is an element of minor consideration, and style is habitually disregarded. Here is an extract from an epistle by Lady Waldemar:

"Parted. Face no more, voice no more, love no more! wiped wholly out like some ill temper from heart and slate—ay, spit on, and so wiped out utterly by some coarse scholar. I have been too coarse, too human. Have we business in our rank with blood in the veins? I will have heart enough; not even to keep the colour at my lip. A rose is pink and pretty without blood,—why not a woman? When we've played in vain the game be reverting, who have resources still, and can play on at leisure, being adored: here's Smith already swearing at my feet that I'm the typo She. Away with Smith!—Smith snarls of Leigh, and, henceforth, I'll admit no Socialist within three crinolines, to live and have his being. But for you, though insolent your letter and absurd, and though I hate Smith, do you Smith! For when you have seen this famous marriage tied, a most unspotted Erle to a noble Leigh (his love astray on one he should not love, howbeit you should not want his love, beware, you'll want some comfort. So I leave you Smith; take Smith!"

What a rare specimen of a rhetorical fashionable letter! Still more singular is the effect when the mob becomes articulate:

"Then spoke a man, 'Now look to it, coves, that all the beef and drink be not fetched from us like the other fun; for beer's still easier than a woman is. This gentry is not honest with the poor; they bring us up to trick us.' 'Go it, Jim,' a woman screamed back, 'I'm a tender soul; I never bungled a child at two years' old, and I steal from him, but I sobbed for it next moment—and I've had a plague of seven. I'm tender; I've no stomach even for beef, until I know about the girl that's lost—that killed, mayhap. I did disbelieve, at first, the fine lord meant no good by her or us. He maybe got the upper hand of her by holding up a wedding-ring; and then . . . all which I saved you, and absord next week both manuscript and man."

Mrs Barrett Browning—Aurora Leigh.
said that the character of Marian Erle is beautifully drawn and well sustained, and yet it is the humblest of them all. But in depicting her, Mrs Browning has abstained from all meanness. If she errs at all, it is by making the girl appear more refined in thought and expression than justified by her previous history, but that is an error on the safe side, and one which may be readily excused. Marian, little better than a pariah-girl, does undoubtedly attract our sympathies more than the polished and high-minded Aurora, the daughter of a noble race—not certainly as the bride of Romney, but as the mother of a hapless child. There, indeed, Mrs Browning has achieved a triumph; for never yet—not in her "Cry of the Children," one of the most pathetic and tear-stirring poems in the English language—has she written anything comparable to the passages which refer to Marian and her babe. Take for example this description:—

"I saw the whole room, I and Marian there Alone. 

Alone? She threw her bonnet off,

Then sighing as 'twere sighing the last time,

Approached the bed, and drew a shawl away:

You could not peel a fruit you fear to bruise

More calmly and more carefully than so—

Nor would you find within, a rosier flushed Pomegranate—

There he lay, upon his back,

The yearling creature, warm and moist with life

To the bottom of his dimples—to the ends

Of the lovely tumbled curls about his face;

For since he had been covered over much to keep him from the light, both his cheeks

Were hot and scarlet as the first live rose

The shepherd's heart-blood ebbed away into,

The faster for his love. And love was here

As instant! In the pretty baby-mouth,

Shut close as if for dreaming that it sucked:

The little naked feet drawn up the way

Of nestled birdlings; everything so soft

And tender,—to the little holdfast hands,

Which, closing on a finger into sleep,

Had kept the soul of.

While we stood there dumb—

For oh, that it should take such innocence

To prove just guilt, I thought, and stood there dumb;

The light upon his eyelids pricked them wide.
Seemed oozing forth to incarnadine the air;
Push out through fog with his dilated disc,
And startle the slants roofs and chimney-pots
With splashes of fierce colour. Or I saw
Fog over the great town, wailing fog:
Involve the passive city, strangling it.
Alive, and draw it off into the void,
Spires, bridges, streets, and squares, as if
a sponge
Had wiped out London,—or as noon
had clapped together and utterly struck out
the Intermediate time, undoing themselves
in a flash. Ye secrets see such things,
Not despicable. Mountains of the south,
When, drunk and mad with elemental wines
They rend the seamless mist and stand up bare,
Make fewer singers, haply. No one sings,
Descending Sinai; on Parmenides mount,
You take a mule to climb, and not a mule,
Except in fable and figure; forests chant
Their anthems to themselves, and leave you dumb.
But sit in London, at the day's decline,
And view the city perish in the mist
Like Pharaoh's armaments in the deep Red Sea,
Sun,
The chariots, horsemen, footmen, all the host,
Sucked down and choked to silence—then,
surprised
By a sudden sense of vision and of tune,
You feel as conquerors though you did not fight,
And you and Israel's other singing-girls
Ay, Miriam with them, sing the song you choose."

There can be no doubt as to the power which is here exhibited, but in our opinion the passage is overwrought. There is a prodigality of illustration which mars the general effect by creating confusion. In marked contrast to it is our next extract, Aurora, returning to Italy, is watching on deck for the first glimpse of her native land.

"That night we spent between the purple heaven
And purple water: I think Marian slept;
But I, as a dog-swatch for his master's feet,
Who cannot sleep or eat before he hears,
I sate upon the deck and watched all night,
And listened through the stars for Italy."

I felt the wind soft from the land of souls;
The old miraculous mountains heaved in sight.
One straining past another along the shore,
The way of grand dull Odysseyan ghosts
A thirst to drink the cool blue wine of seas
And stars on voyagers. Pink pulsing pink,
They stood: I watched beyond that Tyrian belt
Of intense sea betwixt them and the ship,
Down all their sides the misty olive-woods
Dissolving in the weak complacent moon,
And still disclosing some brown convent-tower
That seems as if it grew from some brown rock—
Or many a little lighted village, dropt
Like a fallen star, upon so high a point,
You wonder what can keep it in its place
From sliding headlong with the waterfalls
Which drop and powder all the myrtle-groves
With spray of silver. Thus to my Italy
Was stealing on us. Genoa broke with day;
The Doric's long pale palace striking out,
From green hills in advance of the white town.
A marble finger dominant to ships,
Seen glimmering through the uncertain grey of dawn."

That is poetry—splendid, magnificent poetry, without intermixture of conceits or far-fetched images. Our younger poets, who, as a class, aspire to dazzle rather than to please, might derive a very useful lesson from the study of these extracts. The first is undoubtedly gorgeous, but it is so overlaid with ornament that it leaves no distinct impression on the mind; the second is a perfect picture, which once seen can never be forgotten. To these we are tempted to add a third, descriptive of Florence:

"I found a house, at Florence, on the hill
Of Belsguardo. 'Tis a tower that keeps
A post of double observation of the valley of Arno (holding as a hand
The cutted-parched city) straight toward Fiesole
And Mount Morello and the setting sun,—
The Vallombrosan mountains to the right,
Which sunrise fills as full as crystal cups
Wine-filled, and red to the rim because
It's red.
No sun could die, nor yet be born, unseen
By dwellers at my villa; morn and eve
Were magnified before us in the pure
Illimitable space and pause of sky,
Intense as angels' garments blanched with God.
Less blue than radiant. From the outer wall
Of the garden, dropped the mystic floating grey
Of olive-trees (with interrumphtions green
Of maize and vine) until 'twas caught
And torn
On that abrupt black line of cypress
Which signed the way to Florence. Beautifully
The city lay along the ample vale,
Cathedral, tower and palace, piazza and street;
The river trailing like a silver cord
Through all, and curving loosely, both before
And after, over the whole stretch of land
Sown whitely up and down its opposite slopes,
With farms and villas."

The reader will find in the volume itself descriptions almost as vivid and charming as the above of English scenery; for Mrs Browning, which has brought them out, is not overcharged with carmine, can paint such things as perfectly as Morland, Gainsborough, or Constable. Witness the few following lines, which we cannot deny ourselves the pleasure of extracting:

"I flattered all the beautiful country
As poets use... the skies, the clouds, the fields,
The happy violets hiding from the roads
The primroses run down to, carrying gold—
The tangled hedgerows, where the cows push out
Impatient horns and tolerant churning mouths,
'Twixt dripping ash-boughs, hedgerows all alive
With birds and gnats and large white butterflies,
Which break as if the May-flower had caught life
And palpitated forth on the wind,—
Hills, rocks, woods, nestled in a silver mist,
Farms, granges, doubled upon the hills,
And cattle grazing in the watered vales,
And cottage-chimneys smoking from the woods,
And cottage-gardens smilling everywhere,
Dotted with smell of orchards. 'See,'
I said,
'And see! is God not with us on the earth?
And shall we put Him down by aught we do?
What says there's nothing for the poor and vile
Save poverty and wickedness I behold.'
And ankle-deep in English grass I leaped,
And slapped my hands, and called all very fair."

Nor is the great genius of Mrs Browning less conspicuous in other portions of the poem which relate to the natural affections. Once and again, whilst perusing this volume, have we experienced a sensation of regret that one so admirably gifted should have wasted much of her power upon what are, after all, mere artistic experiments, when, by adhering throughout to natural sentiment and natural expression, she might have produced a work so noble as to leave no room for cavilling or reproach. The tendency to experiment, which is simply a token of a morbid craving for originality, has been the bane of many poets. Their first victory being won, they think it incumbent on them to shift their campaigning ground, and alter their strategy, forgetful that the method which has brought them success, and which they intuitively adopted because it was most suited to their powers, is precisely that most likely to insure them a future triumph. For ourselves, we are free to confess that we have not much faith in new theories of art; we are rather inclined to class them in the same category with schemes for the regeneration of society. Mrs Browning, beyond all modern poets, has no need of resorting to fantasies for the sake of attracting an audience. For whenever she deserts her theories, and touches a natural chord, we acknowledge her as a mistress of song. In proof of which we cite the description of Marian Erle, the outpost girl, when waking from her trance in the hospital:

"She stirred;—the place seemed new and strange as dawn.
The white strait bed, with others strait and white,
Like graves dug side by side, at measured lengths,
And quiet people walking in and out,
With wonderful low voices and soft steps,
And apparitional equal care for each.
Astonished her with order, silence, law;
And when a gentle hand held out a cup,
She took it, as you do at sacrament,
Half awed, half melted,—not being used,
Indeed,
To so much love as makes the form of love
And courtesy of manners. Delicate drinks
And rare white bread, to which some day
Were turned in observation. O my God,
How sick we must be, ere we make men just!"

I think it feets the saints in heaven to see
How many desolate creatures on the earth
Have learnt the simple dues of fellowship
And social comfort, in a hospital,
As Marian did. She lay there, stunned,
Half tranceed,
And wished, at intervals of growing sense,
She might be sicker yet, if sickness made
The world so marvellous kind, the air so hushed,
And all her wake-time quiet as a sleep;
For now she understood (as such things were)
Mrs Barrett Browning—Aurora Leigh.

How sickness ended very oft in heaven,
Among the unspoken raptures. Yet more sick
And merrier happy. Then she dropped her lids,
And, folding up her hands as flowers at
Would lose no moment of the blessed time.”

One more quotation, and we have done with extracts. We have thought it our duty to point out what seemed to us the serious faults: but not, on that account, are we blind to the many beauties of the poem. We envy the imagination that can conceive a sweeter picture than this:—

“Marian’s good,
Gentle and loving,—lets me hold the child,
Or draws him up the hills to find me flowers,
And fills these vases, ere I’m quite awake,—
The grandioso red tulips, which grow wild,
Or else my purple lilies, Dante blew
To a larger bubble with his prophet-breath;
Or one of those tall flowering reeds which stand
In Arno like a sheaf of sceptres; left
By some remote dynasty of dead gods,
To suck the stream for ages and get green,
And blossom whenever a hand divine
Had warmed the place with iochor. Such
I’ve found
At early morning, laid across my bed,
And waked up pelted with a childish laugh
Which even Marian’s low precocious blush;
Had vainly interposed to put away,—
While I, with shut eyes, smile and motion for
The dewy kiss that’s very sure to come
From mouth and cheeks, the whole child’s face at once
Dissolved on mine,—as if a nosegay burst
Its string with the weight of roses over-blown,
And drop upon me. Surely I should be glad.

The little creature almost loves me now,
And calls my name. ‘Alolis,’ stripping off
The rs like thorns, to make it smooth enough
to take between his dainty, milk-fed lips,
God love him!”

It has been well remarked that the chief defect of modern British poems consists in the carelessness of their construction. Plot, arrangement, and even probability, are regarded as things of minor moment; and the whole attention of the artist is lavished upon expression. This, if we are to judge from antecedents, is a symptom of literary decadence. The same tendency is observable in the later literature of Greece and Rome; and yet, it may be remarked within a narrower sphere—as, for example, in the writings of Euripides—the last of the great Hellenic triumvirate. Sophocles dwelt in energy and majestic strength; Sophocles in his development of the passions; Euripides in expression—but, with Euripides, Athenian tragedy declined. It is ever an evil sign when mere talk is considered by a nation as something preferable to it, which shows that sound and pretension are becoming more esteemed than sense and deliberate purpose. We might, upon this text, say something the reverse of complimentary to a large body of politicians; but we refrain from mingling the political with the poetic element. It is, however, impossible to deny the fact that, by many, brilliant writing, or writing which seems brilliant, is esteemed as of the highest kind, without regard to congruity or design. This is a grievous error, which cannot be exposed too broadly; and to it we trace the almost total extinction, in our own day, of the British drama. Our great dramatists, with Shakespeare at their head, succeeded in gaining the attention of the public by the interest of their plots, far more than by the felicity of their diction; and until that truth is again recognised and acted on, we need not expect a resuscitation of the drama. Also be it remembered that a plot—that is, a theme—well-considered, developed, and divided, must, to make it effective, be adequately and naturally expressed. Adequate expression is no more than the proper language of emotion; and emotion must be traceable to some evident and intelligible cause. All this is disregarded by our “new poets,” as they love to style themselves, who come upon their imaginary stage, tearing their hair, proclaiming their inward wretchedness, and spouting sorry metaphysics in still sorrier verse, for no imaginable reason whatever. One of them has the curse of genius upon him, and seems to think that delirium is the normal state of the human mind.

Another rails at Providence because he has not been placed in a situation which he supposes commensurate to his merits. A third, when he sets his characters in motion, pulls the strings so violently as to make them leap like fantocci. A fourth is a mere crowder, and spins merciless rime-roles about the heart of the coming age.” Now, with the exception of the crowder, each of these men has some intellect and power; but they do not know how to apply it. They think that the public will be content to receive their crude thoughts as genuine notes of issue from the Bank of Genius, if so be that they are dressed up in a gaudy, glittering, and hyperbolical form; and they ransack, not only earth and sea, but heaven itself for ornaments. All this while they forget that there is no meaning in their talk; that people who are desirous to hear a story, do not call the ministrel in for the purpose of listening to his disappointed aspirations, or the bleatings of his individual woes, but because they require of him, as a professed member of the greatest craft since the prophets disappeared, a tale of energy or emotion that shall stir the heart, or open one of the many fountains of our common sympathy. We could wish—though wishes avail not for the past—that Mrs Browning had selected a more natural and intelligible theme which would have given full scope for the display of her extraordinary powers; and we trust that she will yet reconsider her opinion as to the abstract fitness for poetical use of a subject illustrative of the times in which we live. It may be that there is no difficulty which genius cannot conquer; at the same time, we cannot commend the wisdom of those who go out of their way on purpose to search for difficulties. It is curious to observe that poets in all ages have shrunk from the task of chronicling contemporaneous deeds. These are first consigned to the tumble of the museum of history; nor is it until time has done its consecrating office, that poetry ventures to approach them. The bards of old touched their harps, not for the glorification of their compatriots, but in memory of the deeds of their ancestors. No one supposes that the time has yet arrived when the Peninsular War or the sea-victories of Britain can be taken up as proper critical themes, though Nelson and Wellington have both entered into the famous mansions of the dead. This universal repugnance to the adoption of immediate subjects for poetical treatment, seems to us a very strong argument against its propriety; and certainly Mrs Browning has not succeeded, by practice, in establishing her theory. There is sound truth in the observation that no man ever yet was a hero in the eyes of his valet, and the remark is equally just if we extend it from individuals to the masses. We select our demigods from the dead, not from the living. We cannot allow fancy to be tramelled in its work by perpetual reference to realities.

Still, with all its faults, this is a remarkable poem; strong in energy, rich in thought, abundant in beauty; and it more than sustains that high reputation which, by her previous efforts, Mrs Browning has so honourably won.