

Browning's 'Saul.'

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'But the Spirit of the Lord departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord troubled him. . . .

'And Saul said unto his servants, Provide me now a man that can play well, and bring him to me.

'Then answered one of the servants, and said, Behold, I have seen a son of Jesse the Bethlehemite, that is cunning in playing, and a mighty valiant man, and a man of war, and prudent in matters, and a comely person, and the Lord is with him.

'Wherefore Saul sent messengers unto Jesse, and said, Send me David thy son, which is with the sheep. . . .

'And David came to Saul, and stood before him. . . .

'And it came to pass, when the evil spirit was upon Saul, that David took an harp; and played with his hand: so Saul was refreshed, and was well, and the evil spirit departed from him.'—I SAM. xvi. 14-23.

IN Browning's magnificent poem we find the following interesting development of the Scripture narrative:—

On the morning following one of his visits to the king, David wakens in a grey, dewy covert of the Kedron Valley, and recalls how by a marvellous inspiration he was led to reveal to Saul the possibility of man's final salvation. He tells over to himself the whole story of the visit, lest any circumstance connected with it should fade from his recollection.

Obedying a summons to the royal tent, he was met on his arrival there by Abner, the king's cousin, who hailed his coming with great joy. Both he and the attendants about the tent were in an agony of suspense over a prolonged and painful attack of melancholy from which the king was suffering. David had played at the palace in Gibeah before, and they knew that the sound of his harp had some mysterious power over Saul.

From the words of greeting Abner utters, we can see David as he stood before him: 'He was withal of a beautiful countenance, and goodly to look to'—

Yet now my heart leaps, O beloved! God's child, with
His dew
On thy gracious gold hair, and those lilies still living and
blue:
Just broken to twine round thy harp strings, as if no
wild heat
Were now raging to torture the desert!

After having knelt down and prayed to the God of his fathers, David made his way quickly to the tent, and groped through its ante-chamber until he came to where the fold-skirts opened into the king's apartment. Once more he prayed, and 'opened the fold-skirts and entered.' His personality was in strong contrast to the dark figure which gradually became visible to him in the gloom. But, a true child of Nature, and having a devout confidence in the Lord of hosts, David knew no fear; he made haste to offer his consolation.

Untwining the lilies from his harp, he commenced to play; at first softly and dreamily—it was a tune he used to play to his sheep at folding-time. Then strains of a more seductive nature followed. David had watched the effect of these upon the birds and upon the wild creatures that often prowled about the sheepfold. It seems natural enough to suppose that the language of the 8th Psalm is but the expression of thoughts born and cherished in those days of shepherd life: 'Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of Thy hands; Thou hast put all things under his feet; all sheep and oxen, yea, and the beasts of the field.'

But David could put his harp to other and higher uses. Continuing to play, he rose into a region of human fellowship, in work, death, marriage, and worship; then he stopped, for 'in the darkness Saul groaned.' The Levites' chorus had recalled to him the days when he, too, was in communion with God; and it was doubtless because, in the breathless stillness that followed, David heard Saul shudder, as if conscious of the grip of his evil spirit, that he broke into song, reminding him of the joy of living. At first that song was like an echo from the life of one whose daily task brought him no care, and in whom perfect health glowed, as with feet that were 'like hind's feet' he leapt from rock to rock; and rent the boughs from the fir tree with sinewy arms, that in manhood could 'bend a bow of steel.' But it passed on to speak of life's tears, loves, and triumphs, tenderly referring to her whom, in later life, he reverently named the 'handmaid of the Lord'—

Didst thou see the thin hands of thy mother, held up as
men sung
The low song of the nearly departed; and hear her faint
tongue
Joining in while it could to the witness, Let one more
attest
I have lived, seen God's hand through a lifetime, and all
was for best?

and proceeded to show the king how life's gifts—
beauty and strength, love, ambition, and triumphs
—had been showered upon him in a marvellous
measure.

Again there was a pause; and calm and strong
as a skilled physician, David watched Saul pass
through a terrific but successful struggle for
release. In describing it, David uses as his illustration the effect of the Spring sunshine upon a
mountain side, round which a year's snow was
'bound about like a breastplate'; and as we read,
there passes before us the stern, gaunt outline of
mountains, that in Bethlehem were as his familiar
friends.

But Saul was as yet released only to a state of
torpor: this life seemed to have no interest for
him. What further consolation could be given?

A train of thought occurred to David—one that
had come to him, as, lying in a grassy hollow
beside his silent sheep, he watched an eagle
wheeling overhead. To himself there was visible
but the strip 'twixt the hill and the sky, but a
world lay 'neath the eagle's ken. David's fancy
wandered to that world. He peopled it, and he
dreamed of its life as a life with which he imagined he was destined never to mix. Now his
somewhat vague thoughts of that life being
governed by a system of law and order came back
to him. In the pause they gathered definiteness,
and he felt there was in them a message for
Saul; so once more taking up his harp, he essayed
to rouse him. David had observed how that
when in nature outward beauty decayed there frequently developed a higher form of life. What if
the fan-branches and bloom of the palm tree
withered? the *fruit* remained. What if the tree
itself should decay and disappear? the *wine* of its
fruit continued to give strength to the spirit of
man. So, he urged upon the king, when in old
age *his* flesh should fail, through the *Spirit* there
was possible to him a life of deeper enjoyment
than that of youth. Not only was this so, the
results of his deeds, like the wine of the palm
fruit, would go to the enrichment of the world.

Even death would be powerless to destroy the
influence of those deeds. 'Is Saul dead?' Un-
born generations read upon the face of the rock a
record of his life. There the 'poet's sweet comment,' side by side with the word of the statesman,
tell of his fame.

The picture given us of the king as he listened
to this song is strikingly pathetic. Slowly there
comes back to him something of the old nobility
of hearing, and once more—

He is Saul ye remember in glory—ere error had bent
The broad brow from the daily communion.

But at the mention of the prospect of praise
from men in all time, we catch a glimpse of the
emotional nature so characteristic of him, and that
peculiar sensitiveness to flattery, which, united to
a lack of self-control, did so much to work his
ruin.

I touched on the praise
I foresaw from all men, to the man patient there,
And thus ended, the harp falling forward. Then first I
was 'ware
That he sat as I say, with my head just above his vast
knees,
Which were thrust out on each side around me, like oak-
roots which please
To encircle a lamb when it slumbers. I looked up to
know
If the best I could do had brought solace: he spoke not,
but slow
Lifted up the hand slack at his side, till he laid it with
care,
Soft and grave, but in mild settled will, on my brow;
thro' my hair
The large fingers were pushed, and he bent back my
head with kind power—
All my face back, intent to peruse it, as men do a
flower.
Thus held he me there with his great eyes that scrutinised
mine—
And, oh, all my heart how it loved him!

David, always sensitive to affection, yearns to
help the unhappy Saul, for in the glance of those
great scrutinising eyes of his he saw, not the
king—the ruin, the failure upon whom judgment
had been pronounced: 'Thou hast not kept the
commandment of the Lord; therefore He hath
rejected thee from being king over Israel,' but
a spark of Divine life in the faint, struggling soul
of the man. But a difficulty faced him. What
consolation was any Hebrew warranted to offer to
one in Saul's straits? On the wings of his song,
David had carried the king thus far; only, how-

ever, to gaze hopelessly on a new stretch of heaven which he felt powerless to scale.

But suddenly there flashed upon him a thought of God that meant deliverance not only for Saul, but for humanity. That thought so thrilled him, that neither harp nor song was any longer capable of giving expression to it. David was not merely elevated by the revelation. He was first humbled; and he laid aside his harp to acknowledge *himself*—body, soul, and spirit, the servant of God—the herald of *His* message to Saul. It was delivered in language impassioned and strong, as the utterance of a prophet, and in its burden—‘All’s Love, yet all’s Law’—there sounded a note of triumph; for now David understands how the chasm separating ‘God’s throne from man’s grave’ can be bridged over. The revelation of God’s heart that had come to him through the study of creation was perfected. Turn where David would, creation testified to God’s wisdom, His infinite care over His creatures, and His omnipotence; and in the thoughts of his own heart he read a testimony to the dignity of man. He had been created ‘a God, though in the germ’; for within himself David discerned the presence of those same God-like qualities. In an infinitesimal degree however; for wisdom he had but *knowledge*; for infinite care, *forethought*; and for omnipotence, the *will* to perform.

But meanwhile the faculty that stirs most strongly within him is love. It so dominates him, so overwhelms all his other faculties, that David finds it necessary to keep it in abeyance; for he would fain not only bestow on Saul all that he sang of, but bring him a higher and better blessing—

Ay, to save and redeem and restore him, maintain at the height

This perfection—succeed with life’s day-spring, death’s minute of night.

Interpose at the difficult minute, snatch Saul the mistake, Saul the failure, the ruin he seems now, and bid him awake

From the dream, the probation, the prelude, to find—

that this life—this continuous struggle in the face of failure—was but a ‘pain-throb’ which wrought purification in the spirit. So sublime, so pure does David believe this emotion of love to be, that did God not possess it, He, the Creator would be surpassed by His creature. But it is not so. By this Divine communication he has

gained the knowledge that in love is the bond of union between God and man. Not only does God himself possess it, He is the source from whom all love in human nature is derived; and when man in his impotence fails to respond to its promptings, then he—the All-powerful—will interpose.

As in self-abnegation, David gazes upon the vision vouchsafed to him of Saul’s Saviour—One in whom meet omnipotence and the tender compassion of a perfect manhood—and tenderly points the king to Him, we can almost catch a glimpse of reflected glory upon his fair countenance.

Would I suffer for him that I love? So would’st thou—
so wilt thou!

So shall crown thee the topmost, ineffablest, uttermost crown—

And thy love fill infinitude wholly, nor leave up nor down

One spot for the creature to stand in!

He who did most shall bear most; the strongest shall stand the most weak.

’Tis the weakness in strength that I cry for! my flesh that I seek

In the Godhead! I seek and I find it. O Saul, it shall be

A face like my face that receives thee; a Man like to me Thou shalt love, and be loved by for ever: a Hand like this hand

Shall throw open the gates of new life to thee! See the Christ stand!

In this poem of Saul, Browning reveals his highest artistic qualities. From its beginning—when David the beloved stands before Abner—to its close—when convinced of the reign of love in the world—he, in the darkness and on the hillside, is filled with a joy that knows no fear, the beauty of the poet’s thoughts is not more striking than is the swiftness of the language which expresses them. It is true that here and there one may detect touches which, on a first glance, appear to lack that certain delicacy of finish which is the result of careful retouching. But this is more than compensated for by the idea of power conveyed by the work as a whole; and the evidence that that power has been gained by the slightest possible means. Not that labour has not been bestowed, but acute calculation of result has enabled the artist to give it without hesitation. Every touch has its meaning; and one feels that not even a single part of one could be removed without injuring the poem in its completeness.

Thus we have in 'Saul' a poem both powerful and delicate,—in this keen estimate of effect is the highest delicacy,—yet fresh as the first sketch of a master.

I have characterised Browning's work as strong. This feature strikes one forcibly on a first reading of the poem. With Rembrandt-like power the gigantic and gloomy figure of the king—whose attitude and glance express more eloquently than mere words the horror of utter hopelessness—is thrown into bold relief by the contrasting presence of the shepherd lad, whose music was but the outward expression of an inward gleam, brighter than any sun. But although the contrast is managed with magnificent skill, at no time has Browning sacrificed delicacy to gain it; nor has he, while under the influence of poetic passion—if I may so express it—allowed himself to drift away from truth in portraiture. Closer study reveals that each touch has some share in forming one or other of the portraits—Saul, 'than whom there was not among the children of Israel a goodlier person,' yet the slave of a strangely emotional nature, subject to sudden likes and dislikes, and in his fits of melancholy facing the problem: 'How may a man be just before God?' or David, not merely 'the shepherd of the breezy hillside, who has learnt to look up from nature to nature's God, but the same under the strain of Divine emotion, revealing to us the part of his nature known only to God.

In the last section of the poem—a fit close to a noble work—power and delicacy so unite in giving expression to thought, as to result in a fragment of poetry worthy of immortality. It is a skilful leading of the mind of the reader back to rest, after the emotional strain excited by the climax. We follow David, as he returns to the solitude of the hillside, to the companionship of nature and nature's God. Having caught 'God's secret,' a new light is in his life; and amid echoes of earth's trouble and confusion which beset him as he walks home in the darkness, he moves full of a deep-seated peace, for to his eyes those echoes appear suppressed and quieted by that same hand so ready to open the gates of life to the sinner. Dawn on the hillside reveals to him a world governed by the law of love. There the cry of earth's pain is but a timid murmur; it is scarcely audible in the *perfect cadence* which Browning introduces as suggestive of universal peace.

Anon at the dawn, all that trouble hath withered from earth—
Not so much, but I saw it die out in the day's tender birth;
In the gathered intensity brought to the grey of the hills;
In the shuddering forests' held breath'; in the sudden wind-thrills;
In the startled wild beasts that bore off, each with eye sidling still
Though averted with wonder and dread; in the birds stiff and chill
That rose heavily as I approached them, made stupid with awe:
Even the serpent that slid away silent—he felt the new law.
The same stared in the white humid faces upturned by the flowers:
The same worked in the heart of the cedar, and moved the vine bowers,
And the little brooks witnessing, murmured, persistent and low,
With their obstinate, all but hushed voices: Even so, it is so.

The success of the poem as a work of art may be accounted for to a great extent in the fact that its story is that of a troubled soul seeking solace, and finding it through the medium of one who believed God to be rich in goodness and love. Browning is at home in the theme. It is his chief motive. Wherever he deals with it, there we mark his strength; for behind the hand of the artist is a deep religious conviction of the truth enforced. But while in David, Browning finds a perfect exponent of ideas that in the main are his own, the personality of the Hebrew is not lost sight of. Rather is it insisted on. Up to the time of David's inspiration, Browning's portrait of him is a careful development of that bequeathed to us in the old and well-known records, and in these days of nineteenth-century theological criticism forms an interesting possession, for the poet has caught a reflection from the *Psalms*. Somewhat imperfectly, however. In the David of the poem, one cannot but recognise characteristics possessed by the writer of the 8th, 19th, 23rd, and other *Psalms*. They are more than suggested; they are brought into action. But in David's song which touches on death, we miss the expression of that hope which gave the psalmist confidence to look forward to a life beyond the grave—the hope of immortality.

By the impassioned utterance which follows the special revelation, however, Browning renders the character of David not merely symmetrical, he

idealises it; for the Bible in its representation of the Hebrew of David's day stops short of giving him a conception of Christ, the God-Man. To him the coming Deliverer meant a Prince who should be the Saviour of his nation. Saul's misery was, therefore, quite explicable.

But although Browning here exercises his imaginative faculty, it is with the penetration of the great poet who has a *heart-grip* of his characters. Through the Bible we get more than a *glimpse* into the heart of David. One may enter. Browning has done so, and from the heart moves him; there every word David utters has its source. At the time of those visits to the king, it was a heart as yet free from the burden of any heavy sorrow; and it was pure, so that he saw God; sometimes to witness to His 'Glory' in the birth of day, or to His Omnipotence, when by night he would look up from the hillside unto the heavens to say 'What is man?' But the lilies just untwined from his harp tell of the 'still waters,' with their strips of green pasture, to feed on which, with all a shepherd's love and care, he would often lead his sheep. Then, as he guided them tenderly thither, caring for the stragglers as for erring children, his thoughts would turn to his own helpless dependence upon God. If any shadow of oreboding did cross that usually sunny spirit,

it would soon be dispelled by the presence of a characteristic thought, now the keynote of his words to Saul—God's heart is infinitely richer in love than is the heart of humanity. And in maturer life, looking back on these days, he wrote: 'The Lord is *my* Shepherd, I shall not want.' Although during his inspiration David retains his individuality,—he reasons as he reasoned before,—yet one may regard this as a supreme moment in his life, I venture to add—admirably caught and presented to us by Browning. Ruskin speaks of such portraits. 'They have,' he says, 'caught the trace of all that was most hidden, and most mighty, when . . . the call and claim of some divine motive had brought into visible being these latent forces and feelings, which the spirit's own volition could not summon, nor its consciousness comprehend, which God only knew, and God only could awaken.'

And Browning's conception of the God-Man, as Saul's deliverer, has given completeness to the ethical teaching of the poem. It is pleasing to listen to a beautiful tribute paid to music as a purifier of the soul's atmosphere: that the soul need not decay with the body, and that the influence of a human life is all but eternal are pieces of good news; but for the healing of sinful and suffering humanity there must needs be a Christ.

At the Literary Table.

THE BOOKS OF THE MONTH.

PART I.

The Old and New Testaments.

ILLUSTRATED TEACHER'S BIBLE. (*Eyre & Spottiswoode.*)

THE Queen's Printers proudly and justly claim to be the inventors of the Teacher's Bible. The first Teacher's Bible appeared in 1875: it was then the only book of its kind. And so the Queen's Printers are resolved to keep their hold of the Teacher's Bible, and wisely decide that the best way to do so is always to have the best Teacher's Bible on the market. They have just issued a new one. The feature that makes it new is a fine Appendix, which goes by the title of 'Monu-

mental Illustrations of the Holy Scriptures, edited, with Autotypes of Antiquities and of important Biblical Sites and Cities, by the Rev. C. J. Ball, M.A.' That Appendix is a work both of art and science. The illustrations are artistic, the choice and description of them thoroughly scientific. And in a Teacher's Bible such an Appendix must be of great service. To be speaking of the Exodus, and then to be able to show the class, in the very Bible one is using, a portrait of the Pharaoh of the Exodus, is to waken the dullest girl and settle the most restless boy into instant and lively interest. So this new edition is a model for other Teacher's