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# The Basis of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Social Thought and Poetry in the Living Conditions of Early Nineteenth Century England

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8

THE BASIS OF ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING'S  
SOCIAL THOUGHT AND POETRY IN THE LIVING  
CONDITIONS OF EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY  
ENGLAND

BY

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## CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
Preface .....	1
I. MRS. BROWNING SHOWS THE DIRECT CAUSE AND SYMPTOMS OF SOCIAL DISTRESS IN HER BEST SOCIAL VERSE.....	5
II. MRS. BROWNING SHOWS THE DISINTEGRATING EFFECTS OF SOCIAL SUFFERING.....	27
III. MRS. BROWNING'S PENETRATING INSIGHT FINDS THE SOURCE AND ONLY REMEDY FOR SOCIAL DISTRESS.....	42
IV. CONCLUSION.....	56
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	63

## PREFACE

Most people have known of Mrs. Browning as a romantic invalid - a sort of story-book character belonging to the sentimental age of the Victorians. Many more have read her poems and so have become acquainted with her intellectual interests, but few - even among her readers - have ever thought of her as a real person, taking interest in the complex life that lay beyond the petty domain of her private interests.

It was not easy for her who was an invalid from youth, to become acquainted with the happenings in the complicated world of industrial growth in the early years of the nineteenth century. But even though she was an invalid, she knew the facts about the social conditions of the period in which she lived through the ordinary sources of knowledge - visitors, letters, and especially through reading, for Mrs. Browning had acquired the habit of reading a great deal in her enforced leisure. \*

However she was not content with just knowing the disturbing social facts of this period, she wondered what she could do to remedy them. Even though she was shut up in a small London room she found a way. The seeing eye of her intellect reached out beyond the little window of her bedroom, beyond the trees in her garden, beyond the chimney-tops nearby, out into the city into what we call the slums of London, and there she visualized the sufferings endured by humanity. Not only was her heart great enough to feel these sufferings, but her mind was keen enough to

look for the cause of them. She studied the formation of society, beginning with its individuals who formed the various groups which later grew into the broader social division of classes. Mrs. Browning knew the rights and liberties of human beings who composed these divisions. She studied what government was, and what were the functions of its departments - especially those of Labor and Health - so closely related to the needs of the people. She knew what these departments should be doing and the reason nothing was being done. She saw the results of this negligence not only in deep human suffering, but in the tremendous loss of life through disease.

Mrs. Browning first wrote about the specific symptoms of suffering which resulted from all this irresponsibility. To us living in the twentieth century it would seem as if she had exaggerated the human sufferings of this period, but a study of the histories and novels dealing with this time, reveal the truth of her statements. When she pierced through the suffering crust she saw that government was to blame, and she placed the blame where it belonged.

After a further study of existing social problems, Mrs. Browning wrote about the moral effects of poverty on the home - drink, cruelty, immorality, and hate. She showed how these evil traits first grew in the individual and then marred his relationship with those who lived in his home. Gradually home-life grew so unbearable that men and women sought their amusement in the streets, where evil practises spread and fermented into hatred for those who caused their distress.

Mrs. Browning wrote about the gulf she saw widen between the poor and the rich. She noted that the existing class-strife awoke the lowest characteristics, scorn, disdain, and hate.

Not content with all this she gave a detailed example in order to show that philanthropy as then practised was useless. First she pointed to its failure by showing the useless efforts made by Romney - the philanthropist - who applied a materialistic remedy to human problems having more complex depths than he knew how to fathom. Mrs. Browning next studied the masses, and the remedies that were being applied in the form of socialistic plans. At this period the various forms of Socialism were finding a fertile field in the districts where discontent engendered by wretched living conditions was beginning to make itself felt. Mrs. Browning showed wherein these socialistic doctrines failed. She pointed out that they had forgotten to take into account the spiritual as well as the material nature of man. In order to show how this unbalanced evaluation of human nature led to failure, she took Fourierism - the form of Socialism which she considered the best then being applied, and showed exactly where lay the source of its failure. To better the plans of the reformers Mrs. Browning concluded that the soul of man should first be reached. Here she was in accord with the doctrine of the Christian Socialists who had originated their movement under the leadership of Kingsley and Maurice in order to check rebellion. She believed too that the Christian doctrine should be an aid in reform.

In doing all this Mrs. Browning used her poetic gift to write social

poetry. Her language was not at all as feeble as might be expected from an invalid, for her literary training placed words at her command. She took different groups - especially the weaker groups such as the children, the girls, and the women who were too inarticulate about their sufferings - and made them speak through the medium of her verse so that the complaint might be heard - as it were - from their lips.

Mrs. Browning believed that she should write not about the beautiful things of life, but about those things that had a hidden beauty even though their exterior was tarnished. She searched for this beauty in humanity, and she found it in the soul of man. She tried to touch it by her verse in order that the soul being alive might remedy not only its own sufferings but those of others.

She wrote about human suffering not only with insight but with courage, for she saw that the extraneous circumstances which were the cause of this distress, should be remedied. It took great courage on her part to do this, for England was still hearing from France the cries of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity. Being fearful that the same revolutionary atrocities might result in her own country, she was ready to look unfavorably upon any writing which might cause unrest among her people. England did not want to hear about the sufferings for which she was directly responsible in the first half of the nineteenth century.

## CHAPTER I

### MRS. BROWNING SHOWS THE DIRECT CAUSE AND SYMPTOMS OF SOCIAL DISTRESS IN HER BEST SOCIAL VERSE.

A great deal of the poverty and suffering in the first half of the nineteenth century was due to inaction of the government in its relation to social welfare. The ruling class believed that since the masses were inarticulate, the best policy was to leave them alone - except in case of emergency. This policy of non-interference by the state at this period, was the survival of the old doctrine of the great political economist Adam Smith, in his book The Wealth of Nations, published in 1771. Until about the middle of the century it remained one of the hindrances to any law which might help to advance the social welfare of the masses. Mrs. Browning knew what real government should be,

Genuine government  
Is but the expression of a nation, good  
Or less good.<sup>1</sup>

She knew too that the dire needs of the nation were not expressed, because of the non-interference of the different departments of government. The greatest neglect was in the lack of adequate regulations governing the conditions of labor, and of those governing health.

<sup>1</sup> E. B. Browning, The Complete Poetical Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, "Aurora Leigh," Book 8, p. 391.



In her effort to show how the government was responsible for suffering in the first half of the nineteenth century, Mrs. Browning divided the sphere of social order into different groups, and clearly pointed out the vital relations of these groups to the well-being of society in general, thus:

... all society  
 Howe'er unequal, monstrous, crazed and cursed,  
 Is but the expression of men's single lives,  
 The loud sum of the silent units.<sup>1</sup>

Mrs. Browning knew that the units in society were suffering because of the industrial growth at this time. Trade and industry had developed rapidly in the century following the invention of the spinning-jenny by Hargreaves in 1760. The manufacture of goods proceeded at a terrific rate. Cotton manufacture trebled itself between the years 1788 and 1803, as a result of the cheapening cost of production. Naturally people flocked to the cities for employment in factories, but the result was distress because human nature could not progress as fast as industrial development. Children and women were the preferred workers, because they could be made work for longer hours and at lower wages than men would accept. Consequently all workers - men, women, and children - suffered intensely. The long hours they worked were a source of profit to those in power, and as a result no law was permitted to pass which might interfere with the profit of the 'gold-heapers' which accrued from this form of slavery.

<sup>1</sup> E. B. Browning, Op. cit., "Aurora Leigh," Book 8, p. 391.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., "The Cry of the Children," p. 158.

Employers treated those whom they employed in an inhuman manner because they were not held in check by the Government. The latter believed that it was not responsible because the sufferers had not asked at this time for any change in their miserable conditions. The fact was that they had been beaten into a state of utter helplessness as a result of the Corn Laws. Many of the more poverty-stricken barely existed. Their resistance to disease was so low that when the plague came there was a tremendous loss of human life.

Mrs. Browning wanted to remedy all this suffering. Her method was to write telling social verse which would throw light on existing circumstances,

That men shall feel it catch them on the quick,  
As having the same warrant over them  
To hold and move them if they will or no ...<sup>1</sup>

She discovered the various ways in which the government was responsible for the existing suffering in each of the groups with which she dealt. When she was convinced of the truth of the 'laissez-faire' policy of the governing class in relation to the class governed, she expressed it in her various poems.

In the case of youth, the Government postponed the passing of bills which would have regulated interminable hours of employment in the mills, mines, and sempstress houses, under conditions unfavorable to life. Mrs. Browning was especially interested in the weakest group - the children -

Evermore  
My heart is sore  
For my own land's sins, for the little feet

<sup>1</sup> E. B. Browning, Op. cit., "Aurora Leigh," Book 5, p. 324.

Of children bleeding along the street.<sup>1</sup>

She wrote "The Cry of the Children" in 1842 to hasten legislation which was slow to alleviate the intensity of the prevailing suffering. She based her statement on facts, for this poem was inspired by the Parliamentary Reports of her friend - Richard Hengist Horne. On August 7, 1843, she wrote to him,

If ever you look into Blackwood this month condescend to look at me, because my 'Cry of the Children' owes its utterance to your exciting causations.<sup>2</sup>

Almost the first half of the nineteenth century had passed before the government took effective action. During the first thirty-three years there were increasing efforts made to limit the hours of employment for children. Many prominent men occupied themselves with the question. Sir Robert Peel was concerned with it in 1802; John C. Hobhouse and Michael Sadler in 1831; but their efforts were ineffectual. Sadler and Ostler had visited Manchester where they saw the factory children exhibited in procession,

... stunted, distorted, and pale as specters,  
a sight among the saddest seen on this earth,  
ever since labour became a duty of life.<sup>3</sup>

Lord Shaftesbury struggled for the Ten Hours Bill which would have limited the work of all between the ages of nine and eighteen to ten

<sup>1</sup> E. B. Browning, Op. cit., "A Curse for a Nation," p. 423.

<sup>2</sup> E. B. Browning, Letters of E. B. Browning, addressed to R. H. Horne, Aug. 7, vol. 1, p. 80.

<sup>3</sup> J. L. Ludlow & L. Jones, Questions for a Reformed Parliament, pp. 280 - 281.

hours daily, but it was not till 1848 that he succeeded in securing its final success. There is a record of his work in the histories of the period. He visited factory districts, appointed committees, presented and withdrew Bills and tried in every way to pass the Ten Hours Bill. It happened that one pair of Commissioners when at Bradford had a revealing experience. They were surrounded by children - who came out of the factory at the dinner hour - singing their demand that the Bill should be passed,

We will have the Ten Hours Bill  
That we will, that we will,  
Else the land shall ne'er be still,  
Parliament say what they will  
We will have the Ten Hours Bill.<sup>1</sup>

Those who opposed the Ten Hours Bill believed that if it became law, the industries would not operate long enough, and the industrial prestige of England would suffer, so they refused to pass it, till they were compelled to do so in 1848.

The struggle to obtain the Bill was powerfully influenced by Mrs. Browning's poem, "The Cry of the Children,"<sup>2</sup> which called the attention of the public to the cruel conditions under which children worked in the factories and mines. Eventually it helped to diminish social oppression because the cry of a factory child coming through a woman's heart went to the nation's heart.<sup>3</sup> Mrs. Browning questioned the legislators, 'do they

<sup>1</sup> J. L.&B. Hammond, Lord Shaftesbury, p. 28, quoted from "The Times," June 10, 1833.

<sup>2</sup> E. W. Latimer, England in the Nineteenth Century Literature, p. 18.

<sup>3</sup> G. Gilfillan, Modern Literature and Literary Men, p. 247.

hear the children weeping?'<sup>1</sup> 'do they question why their tears are falling?'<sup>2</sup> 'do they ask them why they are weeping sore in this happy father-land?'<sup>3</sup> Mrs. Browning knew how responsible the government was for delaying the Ten Hours Bill, so instead of accusing them herself she used the more effective way of making the children accuse them,

'How long,' they say, 'how long, O cruel nation,  
Will you stand, to move the world, on a child's heart,-  
Stifle down with a mailed heel its palpitation,  
And tread onward to your throne amid the mart?'<sup>4</sup>

She had the courage to criticize the government in lines like these which are strong enough to be manly, lines that Kingsley or Henley would have jumped for joy to print in proof of their manliness.<sup>5</sup> Mrs. Browning did not exaggerate existing conditions. Cobbett gave a similar criticism in 1833 -

Now it was admitted that our great stay and bulwark was to be found in 30,000 little girls or rather in one-eighth of that number. Yes, for it was asserted that if these little girls worked two hours a day less, our manufacturing superiority would depart from us.<sup>6</sup>

It was no wonder that Mrs. Browning wrote a curse on the law-makers of her country, because they kept 'calm footing all the time on writhing bond-slaves.'<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup> E. B. Browning, Op. cit., "The Cry of the Children," p. 156.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 156.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 156.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 158.

<sup>5</sup> G.K. Chesterton, The Victorian Age in Literature, pp. 180-181.

<sup>6</sup> J.L.&B. Hammond, The Rise of Modern Industry, p. 203.

<sup>7</sup> E. B. Browning, Op. cit., "A Curse for a Nation," p. 423.

Parents were forced to permit their children to earn at an early age, because they had desperate need of their small earnings. Often the father of a household was unemployed, or even if he were employed he did not earn sufficient wages to support his children,

All these mouths we cannot feed  
And we cannot clothe these bodies.<sup>1</sup>

Often he was reduced to the level of exacting the child's earnings. Marion's father for instance when tramping the country with his wife kept to the manufacturing districts of the North, in order that -

They might have their pennyworth out of her  
Like other parents, in the factories ...<sup>2</sup>

Manufacturers knew the existing conditions of employment and took advantage of them by making the children work for long hours. This was not only in the case of children who had parents, but more so in the case of pauper children. Employers could treat this group as they liked for they made contracts with the Poor Law Guardians for these children. The latter were worked to a state of exhaustion in the factories, by overseers whose pay was in accordance with the amount of labor they could extract.<sup>3</sup> Mrs. Browning summed up the situation accurately when she described the condition of these children as 'slaves without the liberty of Christdom.'<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> E. B. Browning, Op. cit., "A Song for the Ragged Schools of London, p. 432.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., "Aurora Leigh," Book III, p. 302.

<sup>3</sup> F.W. Tickner, Women in English Economic History, p. 125.

<sup>4</sup> E. B. Browning, Op. cit., "The Cry of the Children," p. 158.

Children of tender age were employed at various tasks in factories. Most of their time was spent in the winding, preparing, mounting, and taking down of bobbins.<sup>1</sup> Such work occupied about eight out of twenty hours, but it was intermittent labor, and often the children did not go home during the whole twenty-four hours. It was no wonder they complained,

For oh, 'say the children, 'we are weary,  
And we cannot run or leap;<sup>2</sup>

At this time the machinery in the mills was in an imperfect state. It revolved so continuously and with such a clanging noise that the children grew dizzy listening to it. Mrs. Browning made the noise of the wheels almost audible in her verse,

For all day, the wheels are droning, turning;  
Their wind comes in our faces,  
Till our hearts turn, our heads with pulses burning,  
And the walls turn in their places:  
And sometimes we could pray,  
"O ye wheels"(breaking out in a mad moaning),  
'Stop! be silent for today!<sup>3</sup>

This noise was so terrific, that even when the children cried they were not heard by people passing, so they could not be helped, even if the passer-by were capable of helping them. Mrs. Browning did not exaggerate these descriptions of the suffering in the mills, for other writers of her time exposed the same conditions. For instance in

<sup>1</sup> F. Engels, The Condition of the Working Class in England, p. 141.  
<sup>2</sup> E. B. Browning, Op. cit., "The Cry of the Children," p. 157.  
<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 157.

Headlong Hall, Mr. Escot told about the diabolical mechanism in one of the cotton mills. Looking into it one night he could fancy himself on the threshold of Virgil's Hell.<sup>1</sup> It is little wonder that after Mrs. Browning had written her poem, its message was so effective that a person could 'scarcely pass a factory without seeming to hear this psalm issuing from the machinery, as it were protesting against its own abused powers.<sup>2</sup>

The chief effect of this suffering was the ruin of the health of children. Continual work for long hours daily - in an unhealthy atmosphere - left its telling marks. Children did not know what recreation was. There was no time for it in their lives of incessant toil. When they should have been playing they were weeping:

If we cared for any meadows, it were merely  
To drop down in them and sleep.<sup>3</sup>

Yet everything in nature was enjoying its springtime - the young birds, the young fawns, the flowers<sup>4</sup> - while the children suffered for long hours in close confinement. Mrs. Browning noted their unhealthy looks, and made them voice the symptoms,

And, underneath our eyelids drooping  
The reddest flower would look as pale as snow.<sup>5</sup>

1 University of California, Essays in Criticism, "Beneath the Surface," 1800-1815," by Harold Bruce, p. 220.

2 A. Gilfillan, Modern Literature and Literary Men, p. 246.

3 E. B. Browning, Q.cit., "The Cry of the Children," p. 157.

4 Ibid., p. 157.

5 Ibid., p. 157.



The atmosphere in the mills was unfavorable to human life. There was too much dust in the air. It floated about in the room where the cotton was cleaned, and also in the combing and carding rooms. Children were breathing it daily, and Mrs. Browning saw its tragic effects on their young lives,

They look up with their pale and sunken faces,  
And their looks are sad to see,  
For man's hoary anguish draws and presses  
Down the cheeks of infancy.<sup>1</sup>

Such vivid facts about physical suffering given by Mrs. Browning could not but arouse the people who were then only vaguely conscious of existing sufferings.

Mrs. Browning was also interested in the condition of labor in the mines. As we have seen, it took quite a number of years before the appalling conditions of labor in the mills was brought to light and eventually regulated. It was as late as May 1842, before conditions in the mines were exposed in the First Report of the Commissioners. By this time things had reached such a degree of degradation that England felt actually shocked, so much so, that it was possible for Lord Shaftesbury to strike a blow and have all women and girls excluded from the pit, boys under thirteen, and all parish apprentices. It excluded the employment of anyone as an engine-man under the age of twenty-one, or over the age of fifty.<sup>2</sup> Up to this time children of the ages five, six, and seven were employed, and often babies were taken into the

1 E. B. Browning, *Op. cit.*, "The Cry of the Children," p. 156.

2 J. L & B. Hammond, *Lord Shaftesbury*, p. 74.

pits to keep the rats away from their father's food.<sup>1</sup> Masters were cruel to these little children. One commissioner reported that a master wounded a little boy by throwing a piece of coal at him to speed him up. This often happened.<sup>2</sup>

The hours of daily employment for children varied, but they were rarely less than twelve. In some cases when children worked double shifts commissioners reported that they even worked thirty-six hours.<sup>3</sup> Naturally these little children were too exhausted to play. Mrs. Browning knew there was little enjoyment in their lives, so she used her poetic gift by making them plead to be left,

... quiet in the dark of the coal-shadows,  
From your pleasures fair and fine!<sup>4</sup>

In some cases children were especially necessary to push along small coal-filled carriages in the low narrow passages of the mines, because these passages did not exceed eighteen inches in height in some places. The bent posture of a child working at such a job was ill-suited to the health of any growing child. Mrs. Browning had them voice their suffering,

For, all day, we drag our burden tiring  
Through the coal-dark, underground.<sup>5</sup>

Children suffered because of the long hours they spent in the coal -

<sup>1</sup> J.L.&B. Hammond, Lord Shaftesbury, p. 70.

<sup>2</sup> J.L.&B. Hammond, The Town Labourer, quoted from Children's Employment Commission, First Report, p. 45.

<sup>3</sup> J.L.&B. Hammond, Op. cit., p. 73.

<sup>4</sup> E. B. Browning, Op. cit., "The Cry of the Children," p. 157.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 157.

dark mines. They were very dark indeed, for even the Davy Lamp was not invented until 1815.<sup>1</sup> From this fact one may form an estimate of the small number of lamps that could have been used in the succeeding decades. But even though this lack of light existed, children were still forced to sit in the dark, opening and shutting the doors on which the ventilation of the mines depended. The little ones thus employed were called 'trappers.' A commissioner reported the case of a little eight year old girl who trapped all day without a light. Her working day lasted from half-past three or four o'clock in the morning, till about five-thirty in the evening.<sup>2</sup>

Other children were employed as engine-men in the mines. Their work was to let down and draw up cages for the mine-workers. If a man held this job he would have to be paid thirty shillings each week, but a child engine-man could be employed for the same period of time and receive only five or seven shillings each week. Naturally there were many accidents because no child could do the work of a man.

Once for instance, three lives were lost when a child engine-man of nine turned away to look at a mouse at a critical moment.

Mrs. Browning knew that work in the mines was just as dangerous to a child's health as was work in the mills. She knew that children were not physically capable of doing a man's work for long hours in the damp

<sup>1</sup> F.W. Tickner, A Social and Industrial History of England, p. 535.

<sup>2</sup> J.L.&Barbara Hammond, The Town Labourer, p. 173, quoted from Children's Employment Commission, First Report, Mines, 1842, p. 71.

darkness of the pits. The government had done nothing, so she suggested what she wanted done,

Go out, children, from the mine and from the city,  
Sing out, children, as the little thrushes do;  
Pluck your handfuls of the meadow-cow-slips pretty.  
Laugh aloud, and feel your fingers run them through!<sup>1</sup>

These children worked so continuously in the mines that they needed to breathe the pure air of the country. They had no more idea of what it was like than the poor gamin in St. Giles, who said that it was like 'the yard where the gentlemen live when they go out of town.'<sup>2</sup>

It was of vital importance that children should not grow up unhealthy, for were not they the coming generation? It was furthermore essential that young girls should not be the victims of government irregularity especially as far as their health was concerned, for were not they the future mothers of the race? Young girls from the ages of fourteen to twenty could not safely endure the tedious toil exacted of them in the sempstress houses. They had to breathe foul air all the time while working in a bent posture. Often they were not able to buy sufficient nourishing food, because of the niggardly wages that were paid. Mrs. Browning gave an example of the effect of such treatment on her character - Lucy Gresham,

... the sick sempstress girl  
Who sewed by Marion's chair so still and quick,  
And leant her head upon its back to cough.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> E. B. Browning, Op. cit., "The Cry of the Children," p. 157.

<sup>2</sup> C. Kingsley, "Alton Locke, Tailor and Poet," p. 91.

<sup>3</sup> E.B.Browning, Op. cit., "Aurora Leigh," Book 4, p. 306.

It was unbearable for Mrs. Browning to think that such a vast strata of society as that represented by the weaker groups should be let suffer untold agony day by day, because government irregulation permitted employers to demand every ounce of human energy that it was possible for these victims to give while working under the most intolerable circumstances. Mrs. Browning was not imagining or exaggerating circumstances as the histories and reports dealing with this period bear evidence. She was writing about plain facts.

As in the case of the children, the government did nothing about the labor conditions under which young girls were employed as sempstresses. It was as late as 1843 when unendurable conditions were first exposed,

To induce the principles of houses to shorten the hours of work, and abolish Sunday labour, and for providing qualified assistants to meet sudden demands on pressure of work.<sup>1</sup>

Mrs. Browning knew the conditions of labor existing in these houses.

In "Aurora Leigh" she sent Marion to a famous sempstress-house in London where -

... through the days, and through the nights  
 She sewed and sewed and sewed. She dropped sometimes  
 And wondered, while along the tawny light  
 She struck the thread into her needle's eye.<sup>2</sup>

In these houses the girls had to sew by hand, because it was not

<sup>1</sup> George M. Young, Early Victorian England, Vol. 2, p. 325.

<sup>2</sup> E. B. Browning, Op. cit., "Aurora Leigh," Book3, p. 306.

until as late as 1845 that Elias Howe designed the first lock-stitch using a threaded needle and shuttle;<sup>1</sup> nor was it till 1851 that I.M. Singer patented his first sewing machine. There was a great deal of sewing to be done especially in London where the leisure class lived up to the high standard fashion then demanded of society. There were 15,000 of these girls who ate, slept, and worked in these sempstress houses often for a period of fifteen, eighteen, or twenty hours daily<sup>2</sup> - sometimes even the whole night through. In "Aurora Leigh" Mrs. Browning uses her verse to make the girls tell about this night work -

... we've used out many nights,  
And worn the yellow daylight into shreds  
Which flapped and shivered down our aching eyes  
Till night appeared more tolerable.<sup>3</sup>

Other writers of the same period complained about the unjust conditions of labor endured by this group of workers. Mrs. Gaskell gives a picture of the sewing conditions in one of these houses in Manchester,<sup>4</sup> but it does not seem as bad as those Mrs. Browning described as existing in London.

Kingsley too, was interested in the welfare of this group of workers. He believed the co-operative plan would aid them, and illustrated his thought in the character of Lady Ellerton in Alton Locke, Tailor and Poet. She went to live among the girls for one year, learned the conditions

<sup>1</sup> M.&C.H.B. Quennell, A History of Everyday Things in England, 1733-1851, p. 190.

<sup>2</sup> F. Engels, The Condition of the Working Class in England, p. 209.

<sup>3</sup> E. B. Browning, Op. cit., "Aurora Leigh," Book 4, p. 309.

<sup>4</sup> Mrs. Gaskell, Mary Barton, p. 129.

under which they suffered, and then tried to better them,

... she's got a large house here by, with fifty or more in it, all at work together sharing the earnings among themselves, and putting into their own pockets the profits which would have gone to their tyrants.<sup>1</sup>

From the accounts given by these writers of the conditions under which women and children labored, it can be seen that the employment situation was in a very bad state. Long hours for youth lessened the chance of work for men. If men secured employment, they often worked as long as eighteen hours a day - Sunday included.<sup>2</sup> Employers took advantage of the situation by employing youthful workers, and then paying them insufficient wages. Often the wages of one or two little earners had to support a household. Naturally there wasn't enough money to support all the family, so that poverty was the reward for interminable hours of labor.

When the plague came there were countless ready victims. Mrs. Browning's poem, "The Cry of the Human," treated with this loss of thousands of lives resulting from the government's inaction in the field of health. There were epidemics of cholera in England in 1832;<sup>3</sup> again in 1849, and in 1854 and 1866.<sup>4</sup> Mrs. Browning's "Cry of the Human" possibly deals with the outbreak in the thirties judging by the publication of the poem in the year 1844.

Mrs. Browning knew the reason the disease spread so rapidly,

<sup>1</sup> C. Kingsley, Alton Locke, Tailor and Poet, p. 277.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 98.

<sup>3</sup> G. M. Young, Early Victorian England, Vol. I, p. 160.

<sup>4</sup> F. W. Tickner, London Through the Ages, p. 280.

The poor die mute, with starving eyes  
On corn-ships in the offing.<sup>1</sup>

The Corn Law of 1815 had prohibited the import of corn. It was designed to prevent the entry of cheap grain<sup>2</sup> and produced a tremendous hardship on the poor, for since the price of bread was raised they could not buy it. Mrs. Browning pointed out where the responsibility lay,

The curse of gold upon the land  
The lack of bread enforces;<sup>3</sup>

Then she showed the far-reaching effects caused by the scarcity of this vital need -

Men, turned wolves by famine - pass!  
Those can speak themselves, and curse you.<sup>4</sup>

The restrictions on the importation of wheat caused a great economic struggle between the producer and consumer.<sup>5</sup> The latter won, but it was not until as late as 1846 that the Corn Laws were repealed, and then only because of the stress caused by the Irish potato famine. Mrs. Browning was aware of the long speeches which were made in Parliament for the repeal of these laws. On one occasion when she was writing to Robert Browning, she said that she was feeling as tired as if she had been making a five-hour speech on the Corn Laws.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> E. B. Browning, Op. cit., "The Cry of the Human," p. 168.

<sup>2</sup> G. Macaulay Trevelyan, History of England, p. 620.

<sup>3</sup> E. B. Browning, Op. cit., "The Cry of the Human," p. 168.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., "A Song for the Ragged Schools of London," p. 431.

<sup>5</sup> R. Fay, Corn Laws and Social England, p. 8.

<sup>6</sup> E. B. Browning, The Letters of R. Browning and E. B. Browning (Nov. 1, 1845, Vol. 1, p. 263.)



In her poem "The Cry of the Human," she showed how quickly and easily the plague claimed thousands of victims,

We tremble by the harmless bed  
Of one loved and departed;  
Our tears drop on the lips that said  
Last night 'Be stronger-hearted!'<sup>1</sup>

Those who remained alive were even worse off:"

The corpse is calm below our knee,  
Its spirit, bright before Thee:  
Between them, worse than either, we -  
Without the rest or glory.<sup>2</sup>

They missed those whom they loved and who had lived with them only yesterday. The ravages of the disease were so great that even healthy people who sat at table with them just yesterday were gone the next evening,

O God - to clasp those fingers close,  
And yet to feel so lonely!  
To see a light upon such brows  
Which is the daylight only.<sup>3</sup>

Mrs. Browning knew not only about the cause of the cholera, and the rapidity with which it took human lives, but also its symptoms which she described accurately in "Aurora Leigh," published in 1856. When Aurora Leigh was visiting Marion Earle who lived in the poorer quarters of London - which were then the home of the plague - a disreputable woman wished the plague on her -

<sup>1</sup> E. B. Browning, Op. cit., "The Cry of the Children," p. 168.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 168.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 168.

Our cholera catch you with its cramps and spasms,  
 And tumble up your good clothes, veil and all,  
 And turn your whiteness dead-blue.<sup>1</sup>

Mrs. Browning knew too the sudden end which it brought to the sufferers:

... soon all vision waxeth dull;  
 Men whisper 'He is dying;'  
 We cry no more, 'Be pitiful!  
 We have no strength for crying.'<sup>2</sup>

Other authors too tell of this terrible scourge. In Mary Barton Mrs. Gaskell describes the Manchester visitation as of a low putrid kind, '... virulent, malignant and highly infectious.'<sup>3</sup> In the same book she tells us that the people sought remedies from the druggist. For instance when John Barton told his druggist the symptoms of Davenport's illness, the ignorant druggist concocted a bottle which was very good for a slight cold, but useless to quench the raging fever.<sup>4</sup> Charles Kingsley knew how life was swept away by the disease. In Alton Locke, Tailor and Poet we find his cholera chant -

The cholera comes, - Rejoice, rejoice!  
 He shall be lord of the swarming town;<sup>5</sup>  
 And mow them down, and mow them down.

Kingsley tried to aid the stricken at the time of the cholera visitation in the fall of 1849 at Eversley, because it was difficult to get nurses, and the parishioners were very frightened.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> E. B. Browning, Op. cit., "Aurora Leigh," Book 3, p. 299.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., "The Cry of the Human," p. 168.

<sup>3</sup> Mrs. Gaskell, Mary Barton, p. 67.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 70.

<sup>5</sup> C. Kingsley, Alton Locke, Tailor & Poet, p. 73.

<sup>6</sup> C. Kingsley, His Letters & Memories of His Life. Vol. I, p.206.

Overcrowding helped the spread of the plague in these districts. In one district alone twenty thousand inhabitants lived - without regard for cleanliness, ventilation, or health. It was not unusual to find one hundred people asleep at night in one house.<sup>1</sup> Once it even happened that three persons died in one room at the same time from the epidemic.<sup>2</sup>

There were other indirect sources of the cholera due to the negligence of the legislative body in regard to social welfare. The remedial Bills which were brought in previously for the ventilation, drainage, and future construction of the houses of the poor were not adopted by the government then in power.<sup>3</sup> Home owners disclaimed any responsibility for the houses they rented, other than collecting the rent.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, poor districts were in a state of filth, ruin, and unhabitableness.<sup>5</sup> Mrs. Browning gives an idea of the ruin in St. Margaret's Court in the passage where Aurora described her visit to Marion Earle. She

... pushed  
 A little side-door hanging on a hinge,  
 And plunged into the dark, and groped and climbed  
 The long, steep, narrow stair 'twixt broken rail  
 And mildewed wall that let the plaster drop  
 To startle me in the blackness.<sup>6</sup>

It was as late as 1841 when the "Association for improving the Dwellings of the Industrial Classes" was formed through the influence

<sup>1</sup> T. Beames, The Rookeries of London, p. 31.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>3</sup> J.L.&B. Hammond, Lord Shaftesbury, p. 157.

<sup>4</sup> A. White, The Problems of a Great City, p. 139.

<sup>5</sup> F. Engels, The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844, pp. 49-53.

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<sup>1</sup> E. B. Browning, Op. cit., "Aurora Leigh," Book 3, p. 299.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., "The Cry of the Human," p. 168.

<sup>3</sup> Mrs. Gaskell, Mary Barton, p. 67.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 70.

<sup>5</sup> C. Kingsley, Alton Locke, Tailor & Poet, p. 73.

<sup>6</sup> C. Kingsley, His Letters & Memories of His Life. Vol. I, p.206.

of Lord Shaftesbury.<sup>1</sup> There were miles of 'mean streets' in the poorer quarters of the city. Mrs. Browning knew the risk one took to walk unprotected through them, so she threw a light on this situation in "Aurora Leigh." Her character Romney should not permit Aurora to walk alone through the streets,

You'll suffer me to walk with you beyond  
These hideous streets, these graves, where men alive  
Packed close with earthworms, burr unconsciously  
About the plague that slew them.<sup>2</sup>

In 1841 Lord Shaftesbury described the scenes of filth, discomfort and disease in one of these districts which he visited.<sup>3</sup> Sanitation was of the poorest and even as late as 1850, there were no sewers in some areas.<sup>4</sup> Kingsley worked in the crusade against dirt and bad drainage. The terrible revelation of the state of London water supply saddened and sickened him.<sup>5</sup> Chadwick made a report on sanitary conditions in 1842. He described the slums, the overcrowding, the neglect of arrangements for water or drains, and the revolting conditions of burial which were giving the English towns a terrible character for degradation and disease.<sup>6</sup> It was as late as 1848, after an effort of longest duration, that he secured the Public Health Act. As a result of all this neglect there was direct unvoiced physical suffering among the

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E. P. Cheyney, Modern English Reform, p. 186.

<sup>2</sup>E. B. Browning, Op. cit., "Aurora Leigh," Book 3, p. 299.

<sup>3</sup>J.L.&B.Hammond, Lord Shaftesbury, p. 157.

<sup>4</sup>F.W.Tickner, London Through the Ages, p. 280.

<sup>5</sup>C. Kingsley, His Letters and Meories of His Life, Vol. I, p. 216.

<sup>6</sup>J.L.&B. Hammond, Lord Shaftesbury, p. 167.

people. Eventually the effects of all this suffering reverted to the state itself.

Mrs. Browning summed up the entire situation in her criticism -

It is an atrocious system altogether -the system established in this England of ours ... her fools lifted into chairs of state, her wise men waiting behind them ... We need not wonder at the selection, 'Everything is rotten in the state of Denmark.'<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> E. B. Browning, Letters of E.B. Browning, addressed to R.H. Horne Vol. I, pp. 28-29.

## CHAPTER II

### MRS. BROWNING SHOWS

#### THE DISINTEGRATING EFFECTS OF SOCIAL SUFFERING

Mrs. Browning has given many facts to show how the irresponsibility of government in its dealings with society brought immediate physical suffering and poverty especially in the case of the weaker groups - the children, the girls, and the victims of disease. Now she will show the far-reaching effects of all this suffering and poverty as it penetrated into the home, the unit on which society was built, and on which the welfare of society depended. She wrote about the symptoms of this unrest which almost led to revolution, and which helped the growth of Socialism in England.

Mrs. Browning looked into the countless homes of these poor people, and saw life as they lived it daily in the slums. She studied their environment and saw there the lack of the ordinary comforts of life. She studied the relationship existing in the home between the husband and wife, and also between the parent and child. She saw that this led to intemperance with its resultant evils which eventually broke up the home. Mrs. Browning saw that in these homes there was no longer kindness, nor morality, nor love, nor peace - but cruelty, immorality, hate, and quarrels which drove the people into the streets where class-hatred fermented towards those who caused their misery. The normal life of the people was disturbed, and Mrs. Browning knew the dangers to society which might result.

Poverty was so evident in the home environment of these people that it is a wonder so many of them struggled to make their poor dwellings into homes for their families.

The conditions in the field of labor and health as already related by Mrs. Browning, had far-reaching effects into the home-life of the people. A glimpse into the dwelling-place of one of the working-men as given by a wise and humane physician - Joseph Toynbee - will give an idea of the typical poverty-stricken environment which had such a degenerating influence on human lives,

When I see the working man and his wife living in a dark, damp kitchen, or in a close attic, supplied with a deficient quantity of impure water, the odour throughout the house being most offensive - paying for this accomodation an exorbitant rent, I must confess that the wonder to me is, not that so many of the laboring class crowd the ginshops, but that so many are to be found struggling to make their wretched abodes a home for their family.<sup>1</sup>

Here we see a lack of the material essentials which constitute the physical aspects of home-life, and which if absent mar the harmonious relationship which binds together the members of the family. Men and women could not bear the terrible want in their lives, so they tried to fill their need with drink. At this time drink was easily procured. In London there were many fine gin-palaces, and it was calculated that in one week fourteen of the chief of them were visited by 269,438 persons. In Manchester a big gin-shop was entered during Saturday evening by an

<sup>1</sup> J.L.&B.Hammond, The Age of the Chartists, pp. 163-164. quoted from Health of Towns Commission, First Report, 1844, p. 340.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp. 156-7.



average of 412 persons an hour.<sup>1</sup> These people did not think of the ultimate effects of drink. Mrs. Browning was quite aware of its evil influence when she wrote about,

The gin-door's oath that hollowly chinks  
Guilt upon grief and wrong upon hate;<sup>2</sup>

For drink was the source of all the evils that a sane person will not permit to find a dwelling place in his life. All these poor people cared was to obliterate their troubles at the moment. When men had to work hard for endless hours in the mills and in the mines, they drank because they had nothing else to do in their few spare hours. Even men who worked seasonally spent their money on drink. Mrs. Browning gives an illustration of the latter type in "Aurora Leigh" in the character of Marion's father who worked occasionally,

In between the gaps  
Of such irregular work he drank and slept,  
And cursed his wife because, the pence being out,  
She could not buy more drink.<sup>3</sup>

Drink led to other evils and as a result women suffered in various ways. Kingsley gives an idea of the low life which he saw in the streets,

... a triad of fights, two drunken men,  
two jealous wives, and a brute who struck a poor  
worn-out woman for trying to coax him home.<sup>4</sup>

It grieved Mrs. Browning very much to see the degenerating effects that

<sup>1</sup> J.L.&B.Hammond, The Age of the Chartists, pp. 156-7.

<sup>2</sup> E.B. Browning, Op. cit., "The Soul's Travelling," p. 35.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., "Aurora Leigh," Book 3, p. 300.

<sup>4</sup> C. Kingsley, Yeast, p. 186.

poverty and suffering had on womanhood. She realized that a woman like herself who knew and felt their sufferings, would be their best advocate. She wanted the audience of men that she might,

... get their leave perhaps  
 For hungry orphans to say audibly  
 "We're hungry, see," - for beaten and bullied wives  
 To hold their unweaned babies up in sight,  
 Whom orphanage would better, and for all  
 To speak and claim their portion...<sup>1</sup>

Mrs. Browning knew that women in the city slums did not have the elevating influence of religion or the higher aims in life. She knew the average woman becomes hard, cynical, and even vicious without these aids. Consequently she was aware of the degeneracy in the home-lives of the women of her period,

Some people weep and curse I say  
 (And no one marvels) night or day.<sup>2</sup>

There could be no real home-life, for women's normal instincts had become so hardened they wouldn't even function in regard to their children; instead their hands that should normally be used to help quiet the cries of children were used to make them cry more. Even a sick child was not the mother's first care in life, because woman's better nature no longer existed. It had gradually degenerated to an inhuman level,

Sickly children, that whine low  
 To themselves and not their mothers,  
 From mere habit, - never so  
 Hoping help or care from others.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> E. B. Browning, Op. cit., "Aurora Leigh," Book 2, p. 287.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., "A Curse for a Nation," p. 423.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., "A Song for the Ragged Schools of London," p. 432.

But women were not always to blame for often grief made them hard,

The cry of the babe unheard of its mother  
 Though it lie on her breast, while she thinks of the other  
 Laid yesterday where it will not wake;<sup>1</sup>

These women knew nothing but suffering in their home lives, so they left their children all alone while they spent their time in the streets where their morals degenerated. Mrs. Browning knew this, and voiced it in "Aurora Leigh," in the character of Romney - the philanthropist - who studied and tried to remedy social conditions. He chided the young Aurora not to walk alone in the streets where -

The very women pelt their souls in mud  
 At any woman who walks here alone.<sup>2</sup>

Mrs. Browning knew there were thousands of such women who spent their nights away from home,

... eighty thousand women in one smile,  
 Who only smiled at night beneath the gas.  
 The body's satisfaction and no more ...<sup>3</sup>

Mrs. Browning saw the degeneracy to which women - the future mothers of the race - were reduced. Even their appearance bore traces of the evil lives they led habitually. She described the type in "Aurora Leigh." When Aurora was going up the rickety stair-case to visit Marion Earle a woman put her head out of a garret window,

... while a woman, rouged  
 Upon the angular cheek-bones, kerchief torn,  
 Thin dangling locks, and flat lascivious mouth,  
 Cursed at a window both ways, in and out,  
 By turns some bed-rid creature and myself,-  
 'Lie still there, mother! liker the dead dog

<sup>1</sup> E. B. Browning, Op. cit., "The Soul's Travelling," p. 35.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., "Aurora Leigh," Book 4, p. 311.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., Book 8, p. 385.

You'll be tomorrow. What, we pick our way  
 Fine madam, with those damnable small feet!<sup>1</sup>

Such being the existing conditions, woman could not be an influence for good in the home. These 'bitter-tongued mothers'<sup>2</sup> were also known to Mrs. Gaskell. She knew also the reasons for their degeneracy, and she did not blame them entirely.

Mrs. Browning knew that even in the homes which were not as poverty-stricken as those already described, there was unrest which led to the break-up of numerous homes. She knew the reason for this was that woman was not treated as a normal human being in her domestic life. She had no power over her property or her children: she could acquire no property and if she should inherit it, the property became his ipso facto;<sup>3</sup> even her children belonged to him till the Infant Custody Act in 1839 gave her the rights to her children till they were seven years old.<sup>4</sup> Woman could not be an influence for good in the home when such conditions existed. She was aware that she was only a slave, having -

Potential faculty in everything  
 Of adicating power in it:<sup>5</sup>

Such being the case it was no wonder woman wanted to break away from the home. It is this struggle which Mrs. Browning wrote about in the marriage situation between Aurora and Romney. Aurora knew that marriage in the early years of the nineteenth century had a narrowing influence on woman, so she told Romney that neither the spiritual nor mental

<sup>1</sup> E. B. Browning, Op. cit., "Aurora Leigh," Book 3, p. 299.

<sup>2</sup> Mrs. Gaskell, Mary Barton, p. 63.

<sup>3</sup> J.S.Mill, The Subjection of Women, p. 55

<sup>4</sup> M.G. Fawcett, Women's Suffrage, p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> E.B.Browning, Op. cit., "Aurora Leigh," Book 1, p. 260.

capabilities of woman were recognized as of any use in the home. Instead of marrying Romney, Aurora went to London to find some use for these faculties which were denied expression in the home.

There were other reasons too which caused a disturbance in normal home-life. Woman had found a place in industry, and in addition to cheapening the labor market for men, she neglected her home duties. Here in the field of industry, she was brought in contact with the rich class whom she saw grow in wealth resulting from the profits earned by the hard labor of the working class. As a result woman in the field of industry added fuel to the hatred seething between the classes.

As the greater part of society degenerated by the degeneration of the home - the unit on which society was built - the lower traits which exist in humanity but which are kept in control by the will and intellect, gradually became dominant in the groups and in the masses. Scorn, disdain, hate, and even crime were the increasing characteristics. Mrs. Browning had already shown how people were cruel to each other first\* in private relationships, and later in the public sphere. She showed how their hate and resentment spread further and deeper towards those who were responsible for their misery. As the poverty-stricken masses sank lower in the social scale a great division gradually grew up between them and the rich. The latter drew farther away from any contact with the poor. Mrs. Browning tells how this took place. She writes of the feelings of scorn, disdain, hate, and even crime which accompanied the widening of the social disarrangement - so she decided to expose matters in order

to bring about reform. From the first day of Queen Victoria's reign Mrs. Browning had hoped for an improvement of social conditions. This hope was in her mind as she saw the crowds greet the Queen,

The thousands press before each other  
To bless her to her face;  
And booms the deep majestic voice  
Through trump and drum, - May the  
Queen rejoice  
In the people's liberties!<sup>1</sup>

But Mrs. Browning was disappointed as the years passed by, so she made further efforts to arouse the legislators. She devoted more of her work to the suffering class than to the rich, but she often sketched the latter by way of contrast, to show how they contributed to the growth of ill-feeling, which led first to class-division, and later to revolution. The rich constantly displayed the luxuries their wealth purchased, in the eyes of the poor from whom they with-held even just wages. Mrs. Browning tells how this was done by use of her method of contrast,

The trail on the street of the poor man's broom  
That the lady who walks to her palace-home,  
On her silken skirt may catch no dust.<sup>2</sup>

Mrs. Browning also saw the rich ride about in splendid carriages. She knew the hardness of the hearts that were inside, and their indifference to the common needs of suffering humanity. She wrote about the contrast

<sup>1</sup> E. B. Browning, *Op. cit.*, "The Soul's Travelling," p. 35.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

The champ of the steeds on the silver bit;  
 As they whirl the rich man's carriage by;  
 The beggar's whine as he looks at it -  
 But it goes too fast for charity.<sup>1</sup>

This display of wealth was too much for the ordinary people who were watching, and who were not really envious, but being deprived of the necessities of life by these rich people, they grew resentful about their fate in life. Their feeling was not dulled by suffering, so they noticed every move made by the rich people, and it added to their ill-feeling which soon grew into hate.<sup>2</sup> The rich did not conceal their scorn for the poor. For instance the aristocratic ladies who were having fine clothes made in the sempstress homes for their social functions, made evident their hatred and inconsideration for the girls who slaved to have them ready on time. Often these girls sewed all night long -

... just  
 That pretty ladies might look beautiful,  
 Who said at last ... "You're lazy in that house!  
 You're slow in sending home the work, - I count  
 I've waited near an hour for't."<sup>2</sup>

Rich ladies of this type did not see the penetrating effects of the slavery endured by these girls - between the ages of fourteen and twenty - as they sat in a bent posture breathing foul air into their cramped lungs in ill-ventilated quarters. Often they were not able to buy sufficient nourishing food, because of the niggardly wages that were paid to them. Mrs. Browning saw the effects of the ill-paid tedious

<sup>1</sup> E.B. Browning, Op. cit., "The Soul's Travelling," p. 35.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., "Aurora Leigh," Book 4, p. 309

toil, so she portrayed Lucy Gresham,

... the sick sempstress girl,  
Who sewed by Marion's chair so still and quick,  
And lent her head upon its back to cough  
More freely ...<sup>1</sup>

These were the ladies who spoke in a 'low voice' in fashionable circles, whose hands were 'soft and white' though their hearts were hard. Some of them would not even permit themselves to face the facts that such dreadful social conditions existed. Of this type was Lady Howe,

Ah, to watch her face  
When good Lord Howe expounds his theories  
Of social justice and equality!

...  
She listens on, exactly as if he talked  
Some Scandinavian myth of Lemures,  
Too pretty to dispute, and too absurd.<sup>2</sup>

But Lord Howe did nothing more than talk. He was the type of loungeur who like Lord Melbourne interpreted the doctrine of 'laissez-faire' as 'let things be, don't worry.' This type provoked resentment -

... for Howe  
Stands high upon the brink of theories,  
Observes the swimmers and cries "Very fine;"  
But keeps dry linen equally, - unlike  
That gallant breaster, Romney.<sup>3</sup>

Conditions were no better in Manchester where a wealthy class had just come into existence because of the various developments in industry. Here too hatred was evident between the classes. The worker could see his employer in a short space of time move from house to house, each one grander than the last, until eventually he sold his mill, and bought an estate in the country.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> E. B. Browning, *Op. cit.*, "Aurora Leigh," Book 4, p. 306.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, Book 5, p. 332.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, Book 3, p. 289.

<sup>4</sup> Mrs. Gaskell, *Mary Barton*, p.23.



All this took place while thousands were destitute in the years 1839, 1840, and 1841.<sup>1</sup> Mrs. Gaskell saw the growth of resentment among the sufferers so she portrayed John Barton as he watched one of these rich ladies shopping for a party while he was half-starving.<sup>2</sup> Charity was of no avail. Some of the people were beaten so low that they were,

Reduced to think that the best good fortune means  
That others, simply should be kind to them.<sup>3</sup>

Others were so dependent that they became thorough beggars. Others - like John Barton - felt that charity was keeping them down, to stay down and not help themselves.<sup>4</sup> There were wrathful men who feeling the injustice rebelled,

D-n their charity and their money. I want work  
and it is my right. I want work.<sup>5</sup>

Mrs. Browning's friend, Mr. Haydon, expressed the same opinion when Peel sent him fifty pounds.<sup>6</sup> All this resentment widened the gulf between the classes and left no hope of a living wage for the working man,

... here's nought to see  
But just the rich man and just Lazarus,  
And both in torments, with a mediate gulf  
Though not a hint of Abraham's bosom.<sup>7</sup>

This social gulf as seen by Mrs. Browning was not imaginary for Mrs. Gaskell too expressed its existence in almost the same words,

<sup>1</sup> Mrs. Gaskell, Mary Barton, p. 25.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>3</sup> E. B. Browning, Op. cit., "Aurora Leigh," Book 4, p. 307.

<sup>4</sup> C. Kingsley, Yeast, p. 177.

<sup>5</sup> Mrs. Gaskell, Op. cit., pp. 130-131.

<sup>6</sup> E. B. Browning, Letters to R. Browning, Vol. II, June 26, 1846, p. 265.

<sup>7</sup> E. B. Browning, Op. cit., "Aurora Leigh," Book 2, p. 274.

... we live as separate  
as if we were in two worlds, ay, as separate  
as Dives and Lazarus, with a great gulf  
betwixt us.<sup>1</sup>

Disraeli's Sybil carrying the sub-title, "The Two Nations," left no doubt as to the definite conflict then existing between the rich and the poor.<sup>2</sup> Mrs. Browning knew of the reciprocated feelings existing between the classes -

And rich men make the poor, who curse the rich,  
Who agonize together, rich and poor,  
Under and over, in the social spasm  
And crisis of the ages.<sup>3</sup>

This unrest of which Mrs. Browning gave the growing symptoms was called Chartism. The very fibre of social life was degenerating because intense physical suffering - without thought of God - led to moral evils which broke up the family unit on which society was built. Finally society was divided into classes which grew farther apart as social conditions grew worse with the passing years, until at last the country was on the verge of revolution. In 1839 a petition was framed and signed by thousands imploring Parliament to hear witnesses who would testify to the unparalleled destitution of the manufacturing districts.<sup>4</sup> Rioting existed among these people, because of a moving sense of wrong and a fierce desire to remedy the conditions of daily life. The people were

<sup>1</sup> Mrs. Gaskell, Op. cit., p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> H.D.Lockwood, Tools and the Man, p. 40.

<sup>3</sup> E.B.Browning, Op. cit., "Aurora Leigh," Book 2, p. 274.

<sup>4</sup> M.Hovell, The Chartist Movement, p. 307.

at fault as well as the government, for many of them made use of the government's delay in approving the six-point Charter, as an excuse for their own lazy procrastinations. They blamed it on the Charter, as if having that were all that was necessary for their welfare.

Mrs. Browning's interest in social conditions deepened as the years of her life passed by. In her earlier writings she had succeeded in alleviating suffering by the publication of her two poems - "The Cry of the Children" and "The Cry of the Human," dealing with problems in the field of Labor and Health respectively. She saw society degenerating to the revolutionary point, and as she delved into social conditions she became aware of a new danger threatening the social order.

People had suffered so much that they were ready to listen to any doctrine which promised relief. Thus the many forms of Socialism coming over to England from France found root in the prevailing disorder especially in the decades preceeding 1850. Thinkers of the age saw danger ahead, and wrote in order to forestall it. Charles Kingsley tells how Alton Locke read Proudhon and Louis Blanc while in prison.<sup>1</sup> If however the chaplain had recognized the names of the authors, Alton would not have been permitted to read the books. Mrs. Browning was acquainted with these writings too. She made Lady Waldemar - one of her characters in "Aurora Leigh" - display a reading knowledge of them in order that she might be able to take part in Romney's social work. In keeping with her character, Mrs. Browning did not make Lady Waldemar read them as a student might. The lacadaisical damsel -

... read Fourier through, Proudhon, Considerant, and Louis Blanc with various other of his socialists.<sup>1</sup>

These Socialists knew of the gulf existing between the poor and the rich, and they knew the reasons it existed. Consequently they used these points to make their doctrines popular with the oppressed class who could not share in the material or intellectual heritage of the human race. Socialists wanted a new order organized on a co-operative basis. Thus wealth accruing from the product would be shared among the workers instead of going to the rich. This promised hope to the suffering people, but Mrs. Browning was aware of the danger,

Now in these new theories the individual is ground down to the multitude, and society must be moving all together if it moves at all.<sup>2</sup>

She realized that if the ideas of these socialists were carried out there would be the worst and most crushing kind of despotism<sup>3</sup> but she knew too that they could never be truly successful because the point from which true reform should originate was ignored. In a single phrase Mrs. Browning summed up a few of these socialistic doctrines -

Fourier's void  
And Comte absurd - and Cabet puerile ...<sup>4</sup>

But nevertheless revolutionary and socialistic tendencies were causing

<sup>1</sup> E. B. Browning Op. cit., "Aurora Leigh," Book 3, p. 296.

<sup>2</sup> M.H.Shackford, E.B.Browning, R.H.Horne; Two Studies, p. 27, quoted from Letters to I. Blagden I:467.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 21, quoted from Letters to Miss Martin II; 61.

<sup>4</sup> E.B.Browning, Op. cit., "Aurora Leigh" Book 9, p. 408.

Mrs. Browning grave concern. She saw the very fabric of society being torn up by the growth of revolution, and she saw too not only the loss of material values, but the greater loss of the moral values on which the progress of society depended. Mrs. Browning began to study the methods of reform that were being applied in order to find out why they failed, and what could be done to better social conditions.

She knew it was time someone did something definite because Government was doing nothing. She had seen the gradual appearance of symptoms which foretold the break-up of society. Physical suffering had penetrated into the very fibre of the social order, and broke up the home - the unit on which society was built. Here Mrs. Browning saw a lowering of the status of women which affected the spiritual as well as the physical well-being of her sex, for woman could no longer be queen of the household, nor the influence for good in the home, nor the healthy mother of offspring, while surrounded by conditions which she was powerless to change.

Later she had seen the gradual widening of the social gulf which was bringing about a serious conflict between capital and labor, and here she foresaw a serious evil to the state itself, as a result of its inaction while the social order was degenerating. Mrs. Browning saw that philanthropists and socialists were trying to do something to better conditions. She studied their plans in order to find out what might be the cause of their unsuccess, and what might be a better plan to reform society, and save it from the chaos towards which it was progressing, as seen in the general unrest called Chartism.

### CHAPTER III

#### MRS. BROWNING'S PENETRATING INSIGHT FINDS THE SOURCE AND THE ONLY REMEDY FOR SOCIAL DISTRESS

Mrs. Browning wrote about the causes and symptoms of social disorder in the first half of the nineteenth century, and as she saw no signs of conditions improving with the passing years, she sought a remedy for all this disturbance. But before formulating her final views on reform, she first studied the remedies that were being applied by philanthropists and socialists. In "Aurora Leigh" Mrs. Browning depicted the character of Romney - the philanthropist - and wrote in detail about his plan to unite the divided classes. Mrs. Browning shows that he failed, because in spite of all his characteristics, he lacked the essential quality which should be present in the life of the reformer before being imparted to those to be reformed. Then Mrs. Browning showed Romney with a socialistic plan to better the poverty-stricken masses. Here again he failed because he didn't estimate the entire nature of the people with whom he was dealing. He forgot that man had more lives that needed to be saved than just the physical one, so he devoted all his efforts to the materialistic needs of man, without giving a thought to the important part the spiritual nature should take in the matter of reform.

Romney the philanthropist had studied the condition of the world which he was going to reform,

I beheld the world  
As one great famishing carnivorous mouth -  
A huge, deserted, callow, blind bird Thing  
With piteous open beak that hurt my heart.<sup>1</sup>

To him the world was gripped by a dreadful spasm of suffering. It was a 'total of distracted life.'<sup>2</sup> Romney could not stand by without seeking a remedy for this suffering. He thought too much; he pored till his black locks became grey 'with the bleaching cares of a million men.'<sup>3</sup> All his sympathies were with the distressed. He was generous of his time and of his effort in his dealings with the poor. It seemed the greater the social evil troubling humanity, the greater was his interest,

If you do not starve, or sin,  
You're nothing to him; pay the income-tax  
And break your heart upon't, he'll scarce be touched  
But come upon the parish, qualified  
For the parish stocks, and Romney will be there  
To call you brother, sister ...<sup>4</sup>

Romney did not spare his efforts in his chosen work. Besides helping cases, his work presented a public aspect which demanded energy,

The three-hour speeches from the member's seat,  
The hot committees in and out of doors  
The pamphlets 'Arguments' 'Collective Views'<sup>5</sup>

Romney devoted himself earnestly to the material welfare of the suffering class. He did not see the other side of the problem which

<sup>1</sup> E.B. Browning, Op. cit., "Aurora Leigh," Book 8, p. 384.  
<sup>2</sup> Ibid., Book 2, p. 274.  
<sup>3</sup> Ibid., Book 3, p. 296.  
<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 296.  
<sup>5</sup> Ibid., Book 4, p. 322.

Mrs. Browning later showed as being the only foundation on which true reform could succeed.

Romney tried in vain to bridge the gulf which existed at this time between the classes. He - an aristocrat - would marry Marion Earle one of the poorer class, as an example to the richer class to do the same in order to bridge the yawning social gulf. As a result of all this planning, the lowest characteristics of humanity were brought to light; scorn, suspicion, snobbery, hatred, and jealousy ending in crime with a helpless woman as the victim. The rich realized that this marriage was to set them an example,

... here's an intermarriage reasoned out,  
 A contract (carried boldly to the light  
 To challenge observation, pioneer  
 Good acts by a great example) 'twixt the extremes  
 Of martyred society - on the left  
 The well-born, on the right the merest mob  
 To treat as equals! 't is anarchical ...<sup>1</sup>

However Romney ignored their scornful views and proceeded with his plans for the marriage. Marion should come to Church from the garret where she lived, wearing her gown of serge. After the ceremony there would be a marriage-feast to which both classes should be invited:

Half St. Giles in freize  
 Was bidden to meet St. James in cloth of gold,  
 And, after contract at the altar, pass  
 To eat a marriage-feast on Hampstead Heath.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> E.B.Browning, Op. cit., "Aurora Leigh," Book 4, p. 316.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 314.



St. Giles was known to be one of the worst districts in London. It was the most populous part where the working class lived, and was situated in the immediate neighborhood of St. James. In it the remains of the old Rookery was still standing.<sup>1</sup> Mrs. Browning described those came from this place to the wedding ceremony,

Lame, blind, and worse - sick, sorrowful, and worse -  
 The humors of the peccant social wound  
 All pressed out, poured down upon Pimlico,  
 Exasperating the unaccustomed air  
 With a hideous interusion. You'd suppose  
 A finished generation, dead of plague,  
 Swept outward from their graves into the sun  
 The moil of death upon them.<sup>2</sup>

The ladies in the pews 'with broidered hems of perfumed handkerchiefs' and shiver of moire-silk,<sup>3</sup> were 'hateful, scornful, and insolent.'<sup>4</sup> when Marion was not appearing for the ceremony. All this time one of their number - Lauy Waldemar - jealous of Marion, had ruined the wedding plans and arranged that her waiting-maid should get Marion out of London,

She promised kindly to provide the means  
 With instant passage to the colonies  
 And full protection, - would commit me straight  
 To one who had once been her waiting-maid  
 And had the customs of the world, intent  
 On changing England for Australia  
 Herself, to carry out her fortune so...  
 And so, 'twas fixed; - and so, from day to day  
 The woman named came in to visit me.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> T.Beames, Rookeries of London, p. 29

<sup>2</sup> E.B.Browning, Op. cit., Book 4, p. 314.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 314.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 314.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., Book 6, p. 358.

Australia was a 'prison beyond the seas' in these days. The first settlement was made in 1788 and the first settlers were just convicts. There was a rush for gold there in 1851, but the type who went were mostly adventurers.<sup>1</sup> This, then was the place she had planned for Marion. Mrs. Browning tells us that she was put on 'the shifted ship to Sidney or to France,'<sup>2</sup> and that it arrived in France where Marion was the innocent victim of the drugged cup in the foreign house,<sup>3</sup> which left her a social outcast forever. The tale may have shocked the 'Mamas of England,'<sup>4</sup> and may have scandalized respectable women,<sup>5</sup> but it was -

The human element in man - bruised, bleeding, all but dead under the pressure of evil circumstances ... that has here ceased any longer to be silent, and is speaking in a sister's voice to Time and to Eternity - to Earth and Heaven.<sup>6</sup>

By giving this illustration of the tragic ending of one of the supreme efforts of Romney, Mrs. Browning showed that philanthropy was not a sufficient remedy to relieve the distress between the classes. Mrs. Browning proceeded further in her analysis of the situation. She saw on one hand the reformer - Romney - and on the other side the masses he was struggling to elevate. She wanted to get at the root of the distress for the tragedy of the situation lay in the fact that after

<sup>1</sup> A. Caldecott, English Colonization & Empire, p. 98.

<sup>2</sup> E.B. Browning, Op. cit., "Aurora Leigh," Book 6, p. 359

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 359.

<sup>4</sup> D. Bush, Mythology and the Romantic Tradition, p. 269.

<sup>5</sup> F.R.G. Duckworth, Browning; Background and Conflict, p. 23

<sup>6</sup> G. Gilfillan, Literature and Literary Men, p. 246.

all this work Romney did not do things the right way; he expended energy on the symptoms and not the source. He could not see the real source because he himself was immersed in the materialism of the age. He had crossed out the spontaneities of all his personal life, and he had forgotten that God existed. He tells us,

But I, I sympathize with man, not God:  
 (I think I was a man for this chiefly),  
 And when I stand beside a dying bed,  
 'Tis death to me.<sup>1</sup>

Romney failed to see what Mrs. Browning points out,

... the man most man  
 Works best for men, and if most man indeed  
 He gets his manhood plainest from his soul.<sup>2</sup>

From her analysis Mrs. Browning reached the conclusion that the soul played a most important part in reform,

It takes a soul  
 To move a body: it takes a high-souled man,  
 To move the masses, even to a cleaner sty.<sup>3</sup>

Having found out that failure lay in the philanthropist himself, and that his plan only scratched the surface, Mrs. Browning delved deeper into the cause of the prevailing distress among the masses. Here she found the same spiritual need as she already had seen in the life of the philanthropist. She knew socialists were applying their plans, and she knew also they were failing, so she proceeded to show the reason for their failure in the last books of "Aurora Leigh." She worked out the results of her study by applying Fourierism which

<sup>1</sup> E. B. Browning, Op. cit., "Aurora Leigh," Book 2, p. 274.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., Book 4, p. 323.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., Book 2, p. 277.

was the form of Socialism she thought best. She pointed out exactly where it failed, and what should be the essentials of true reform. She planned a phalanstery in "Aurora Leigh" based on Fourieristic principles, in order to show clearly the conclusions she drew from her studies.

By working out this phalanstery she showed how and wherein it failed, as did all of Fourier's phalansteries. The motive of action of Fourierism was to replace individual competition and private property by a self-acting unit, which if successful could be applied to the whole country by multiplying the units. Mrs. Browning's character Romney gave his ancestral home - Leigh Hall - with all its accumulated treasures, to be used as a retreat for wretched humans.<sup>1</sup> This was in accordance with the spirit of the socialists, for their leaders had been ready to sacrifice wealth, social position, and even life itself for their cause.<sup>2</sup> Fourierists believed that if buildings and lands could be found ready, the phalanstery might be installed in nine months.<sup>3</sup> Romney had his phalanstery christianized from Fourier's own. Fourier's plan was to assemble 1500 - 1600 persons of graduated degrees of fortune, age, character, passions, and faculties, so that it would be easy for them to harmonize quickly.<sup>4</sup> Of the forty phalansteries thus

<sup>1</sup> E. B. Browning, Op. cit., "Aurora Leigh," Book 8, p. 392.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Kirkup, A History of Socialism, p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> D. O. Wagner, Social Reformers, p. 226.

<sup>4</sup> Fourier, Sels. from Works of Fourier, p. 139.

assembled almost all failed.

We have seen that for the planning of a Fourier phalanstery the best members of society were not chosen. Neither did Romney select his charges. He picked 'men and women of disordered lives;' 'wicked London tavern-thieves and drabs'<sup>1</sup> and castaway girls.'<sup>2</sup> According to the principles of Fourierism Romney could accept the rich class<sup>3</sup> too, so he permitted Lady Waldemar to join the group,

He had her down,  
With other ladies whom her starry lead  
Persuaded from their spheres, to his country-place  
In Shropshire, to the famed phalanstery  
At Leigh Hall ...<sup>4</sup>

Mrs. Browning did not mention what was done with Lady Waldemar's capital, but the principles of Fourierism permitted individual ownership of capital under such social regulation that it would no longer involve wrong to others.<sup>5</sup> Every inmate of a Fourier phalanstery should be well treated.<sup>6</sup> In carrying out this idea Romney believed in equality, in order that harmony would exist between the members. Even Lady Waldemar said 'my sister to the lowest drab of all assembleu castaways.'<sup>7</sup> Everyone had to work in these phalansteries, for only so could men satisfy their passions.<sup>8</sup> The greatest problem was

<sup>1</sup> E. B. Browning, Op. cit., "Aurora Leigh," Book 8, p. 391.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., Book 5, p. 335.

<sup>3</sup> D.O.Wagner, Social Reformers, p. 229.

<sup>4</sup> E.B.Browning, Op. cit., Book 5, p. 335.

<sup>5</sup> T. Kirkup, A History of Socialism, p. 290.

<sup>6</sup> D.O.Wagner, Social Reformers, p. 227

<sup>7</sup> E.B.Browning, Op. cit., Book 5, p. 335.

<sup>8</sup> H.D.Lockwood, Tools and the Man, p. 82.

to make labor attractive, for they recognized its worth and dignity.<sup>1</sup>

Agriculture was introduced in order to weaken industrial attraction.<sup>2</sup>

All members of the community - rich as well as poor - shared in the daily tasks in the home-life of the community. Mrs. Browning tells us that Lady Waldemar had to do many disagreeable jobs in order to live there. She who always had servants to perform her every whim, now had to wash clothes in order to live in the phalanstery for such life demanded equality of labor from its members. When her aristocratic men associates in London heard this they were amused,

Conceive, Sir Blaise, those naked perfect arms,  
Round glittering arms, plunged elbow-deep in suds  
Like wild swans hid in lilies all-a-shake.<sup>3</sup>

Romney's weak point was soon obvious. Like Fourier and Rousseau he believed that it was important for man to find satisfaction in his feelings,<sup>4</sup> but this was expecting too much of man. Here Romney - like Fourier - did not estimate the 'ungenerate residuum' in human nature.<sup>5</sup> He expected reform too soon from people whose passions had been habitually uncontrolled. Romney had tried in vain to teach them control of their passions. He tells us they -

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 straight.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> H.D.Lockwood, Tools and the Man, p. 83.

<sup>2</sup> D.O.Wagner, Social Reformers, p. 227.

<sup>3</sup> E.B. Browning, Op. cit., "Aurora Leigh." Book 5, p. 335.

<sup>4</sup> H.D.Lockwood, Tools and the Man, p. 82.

<sup>5</sup> T. Kirkup, A History of Socialism, p. 33.

<sup>6</sup> E.B.Browning, Op. cit., "Book 8, p. 391.

After all his kindness to them - they burned everything in Leigh Hall, and nothing was left only one stone stair.<sup>1</sup> In return for all his devotion he received ingratitude. He was even 'nicked on the forehead'<sup>2</sup> with a beam by marion Marle's father, while he was carrying out a burden from the burning phalanstery.

Romney had expected too much from people who had been in the habit of leading evil lives. He had forgotten that progress could only come through struggle. He realized too late that the natural element alone on which he based his reform meant failure,

That I failed  
Is certain. Stye or no stye, to contrive  
The swine's propulsion towards the precipice  
Proved easy and plain.<sup>3</sup>

In working out his socialistic plans, Romney showed how the masses reacted because the moral element in their character was ignored. We have already seen how philanthropy failed because Romney - the philanthropist - being merely a materialist - did not realize that man had a spiritual nature which should be considered in any plan dealing with human reform.

Since philanthropy and socialism failed because they did not attack reform at the source, and since well-meaning philanthropists and socialists did not know why they failed, Mrs. Browning decided that she

<sup>1</sup> E. B. Browning, Op. cit., "Aurora Leigh," Book 8, p. 393.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., Book 9, p. 404.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., Book 8, p. 385.

would point out exactly where their failure lay, and what they should do to succeed.

First she analyzed the character of the reformer himself in treating with the reason for the failure of philanthropy, and found missing in his character the starting point of all true reform. He was a materialist, and did not recognize in himself or in others the spiritual element which is one of the important composites of man's nature. Considering Romney as a socialist Mrs. Browning showed how the very plans he made were materialistic like himself. They failed intrinsically even before they were applied, because they were but partial plans for the reform of man. They did not deal with all the material of which life consists, mind, body, and soul. Mrs. Browning wrote scathingly about these -

... special outside plans  
Phalansteries, material institutes ...  
Preferred by modern thinkers, as they thought  
The bread of man indeed made all his life,  
And washing seven times in the People's Baths  
Were sovereign for a people's leprosy.<sup>1</sup>

The French socialistic theories of which Mrs. Browning gave an example in the case of Fourierism, dealt only with the extraneous elements of man's life, but they never reached that part of man which elevates the other two - his soul:

Your Fouriers failed  
Because not poets enough to understand  
That life develops from within.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> E. B. Browning, Op. cit., "Aurora Leigh," Book 6, p. 345.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., Book 8, p. 386.



However there was one socialist in England whose plans for the betterment of society coincided with those of Mrs. Browning. This was Charles Kingsley who planned a counter-movement to that of the French Socialists. He was quite popular at this time because of his novels dealing with the social questions of the day. He tried to turn the unrest called Chartism into Christian Socialism. In other words he believed that man had another nature - a spiritual one - which materialistic reformers had not taken into account. Kingsley believed that the six-point Charter which the people were begging to have passed, was only an outside remedy. According to the writings of Kingsley it was not from without but from within that reform was needed.<sup>1</sup> This too was Mrs. Browning's idea of getting at the root of the evils then troubling mankind,

Inward evermore  
To outward, so in life, and so in Art  
Which still is life.<sup>2</sup>

Mrs. Browning showed that those who tried to better society, and who wished any measure of true success must

... comprehend  
Humanity and so work humanly  
And raise men's bodies still by raising souls.<sup>3</sup>

Mrs. Browning was aware of the tremendous task it was to attempt to reform humanity when each individual presented a different problem, but she knew that all men had souls no matter what their

<sup>1</sup> C. Kingsley, Alton Locke, p. 85.

<sup>2</sup> E. B. Browning, Op. cit., "Aurora Leigh," Book 5, p. 327.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., Book 8, p. 386.

appearance might be, even though it were,

An ounce of common ugly dust  
 An artisan's palm or a peasant's brow  
 Unsmooth, ignoble save to me and God.<sup>1</sup>

Mrs. Browning knew that God made that soul, and so her plan for reform had to include His doctrines. Mrs. Browning did not advocate any special religion but more general enthusiasms.<sup>2</sup> However she realized that the Christian Doctrine was necessary,

Subsist no rules of life outside of life  
 No perfect manners without Christian souls.<sup>3</sup>

Here Mrs. Browning was in direct accord with the doctrines of Christian Socialism for according to Kingsley and Maurice the needs of the average man were almost naive - physical welfare, manliness, tenderness for the weak and direct appeal to God for the solution of daily problems.<sup>4</sup>

Throughout all her work Mrs. Browning was deeply concerned with the needs of humanity. She pleaded for the physical welfare of man by exposing the conditions in the fields of Labor and Health in her earlier poems. She condemned government for its negligence in not passing laws which might have benefited humanity. We have seen that Mrs. Browning was primarily concerned with the weaker groups of humanity. She chose the children and girls who were suffering daily, and then she chose the women who suffered in their home-lives. She did so in order to awaken public opinion so they might be aided.

<sup>1</sup> E.B. Browning, Op. cit., "Aurora Leigh," Book 6, p. 344.

<sup>2</sup> A.C. Benson, Essays, p. 229.

<sup>3</sup> E.B. Browning, Op. cit., "Aurora Leigh," Book 9, p. 408.

<sup>4</sup> S.T. Williams, Studies in Victorian Literature, p. 281.

In regard to appeal to God for the solution of daily problems, Mrs. Browning made Romney - who had tried to reform society with socialistic and philanthropic 'outside' plans - finally see that God's way of beginning reform by first reaching the soul of man, was the best way<sup>1</sup> not only in her age - but in any age.

<sup>1</sup> E. B. Browning, Op. cit., "Aurora Leigh," Book 8, p. 393.

## CONCLUSION

Mrs. Browning was conscious throughout all the poems discussed in this Thesis that literature dealt with life. She was aware of the wide scope that word "life" encompassed. She knew that the human beings who possessed this priceless treasure were complex creations. Each had a heart, body, mind, and soul to be considered. Being a true poet she was not one-sided in her outlook. Her Sonnets from the Portuguese - which are not discussed in this Thesis because they do not deal with the social values - have reached the heights of literary fame. Although her social poetry rarely rises to a high rank in literature, yet it still holds its place in the great body of literature. No literary period from the beginning of literature is devoid of the various forms of social literature, though some periods place more emphasis on this trend than others. Even Chaucer is the social chronicler of the England of his period. No historical document gives us the people of Richard II's time as does "The Canterbury Tales." All the social abuses prevalent in the existing institutions of his time appear in his poetry, but are kept in bounds by the predominance of the character he sketched or the narrative he related. In the same way Mrs. Browning made her narrative predominate in "Aurora Leigh," so much so that we forget the historical and social elements present while reading through the nine books - unless we have to analyze her poetry for scholarly purposes.

Mrs. Browning fulfilled her aim in three ways in regard to social conditions in the first half of the nineteenth century. First her writings pointed out that government was responsible for the existing social suffering. Secondly, she showed how this suffering led to the corruption of the very heart of society - the home-life - and gradually to the disintegration of the whole frame-work of society. Thirdly, she pointed out that philanthropists and sociologists failed, and by means of an examination of their plans, she showed the starting point at which reform should begin if it were to succeed in her age - or indeed in any age.

In the first place Mrs. Browning showed how the legislative body neglected to pass laws in keeping with the industrial progress of the period especially in regard to the fields of Labor and Health. Mrs. Browning knew how closely these two fields were interwoven with human welfare, so she made them her special study. In the field of Labor she dealt with the question of employment as it concerned the weaker groups - the children and the young girls. She wrote about the suffering of the little children who labored for interminable hours, and she described the symptoms of ill-health which were beginning to appear. She did not hesitate to accuse the government for its cruelty in keeping the children in a condition of slavery in a supposedly free country. She knew that the Ten Hours Bill - which would have shortened the working days for children to ten hours - was being postponed yearly in Parliament. Her poem "The Cry of the Children" made the little

ones themselves accuse those responsible for their distress. The poem placed greater stress on human suffering than on the factors which influenced it. It was so effective that people could not pass by a mill without remembering that the children inside were suffering. This poem is regarded as one of the best of Mrs. Browning's poems. It is even quoted in a number of our modern Anthologies.

In the field of Labor Mrs. Browning also studied the employment question in regard to the sempstresses who worked long hours daily - sometimes all night long - in order that rich ladies might have their gowns ready in time for their social functions. Mrs. Browning pointed out the symptoms of ill-health beginning among this group in the character of Lucy Gresham, because she realized how dangerous ill-health might be in consideration of the fact that many girls who belonged to such groups, were to be among the future mothers of the race.

Mrs. Browning saw how closely the field of Health was related to that of Labor, and here too she saw that government was inactive. There was delay in the legislative department in regard to the Corn Laws, which if passed would have reduced the price of bread for half-paid workers, and saved them from starvation. But the Bill was not passed until under stress of the Irish potato famine. Consequently Mrs. Browning wrote "The Cry of the Children" describing the suffering caused by the plague which found countless easy victims as a result of poverty and starvation. In "Aurora Leigh" Mrs. Browning showed too the indirect causes of the plague, due to insanitary conditions which eventually were cleaned up under Chadwick's regime.

Mrs. Browning showed the far-reaching effects of all this suffering and poverty. In order to do so she began with the heart of society - the home - and she showed how suffering and poverty broke up the home. Mrs. Browning was interested in the human beings who suffered thus, so she studied the situation deeper to see what could be done for them. Men and women deprived of the ordinary comforts of life in their homes, visited the gin-palaces, and spent most of their time afterwards in the street. Naturally this did not help their morals, and gradually drink led to cruelty and immorality. Instead of peace and harmony in the home there was weeping and cursing. Women grew hard-hearted, and left their homes to find pleasure in street-life. Of course children were neglected and often they were left at home sick and hungry with no one to care for them. Mrs. Browning wanted to save the best values in womanhood, and so she exposed the evils which were then threatening this important social group. Many women themselves sought an escape from home-life in the industrial world. This cheapened the labor market for men, and it helped to deepen the existing hatred for the rich class. Envy gradually grew as women in industry saw the luxuries wealth purchased for their employers, while they slaved for long hours at low wages.

Soon the lower characteristics of human nature became evident. The degeneration which had begun in private relationships now spread further into the public sphere. A great gulf widened between the two classes - the rich and the poor. Mrs. Browning never divorced the framework of the social order from the individuals of whom it was composed. It was

always the inarticulate human beings who were important to her and not the historical facts or social institutions, only in so far as the latter concerned the people. It was the suffering of the human minds and suffering of the souls of men, women, and children that mattered to Mrs. Browning.

As the gulf grew wider with the passing years, the unrest eventually broke out in Chartism. The leaders of this movement implored Parliament to listen to the distress of the manufacturing districts. The leaders had yet to learn the starting point from whence all true reform might be expected. Neither did philanthropists like Romney know how to solve the problem. However many reformers were busy trying to work out some plan to aid the unfortunate. Often it was not the best plan as in the case of Socialism. Mrs. Browning was aware of the socialistic doctrines which were coming over to England from France and she condemned them. She knew their belief was in common ownership of wealth, and here she saw a danger to the individual earner. She saw too that those leaders who were advocating even the best of socialistic theories - Fourierism - were failing because they did not know where was the real starting point of true reform. Mrs. Browning decided to give a few illustrations to show wherein the reformers failed.

She gave an illustration of the failure of philanthropy in "Aurora Leigh." Here she took into consideration both the reformer and those to be reformed. Romney - the philanthropist - tried to unite



the classes which had grown so far apart, but he failed. He himself was a materialist, and his plan did not take into consideration the complete nature of man - which is not merely materialistic. It was impossible for Romney to consider in others the values of which he himself was not conscious.

Mrs. Browning studied the problem deeper and then showed Romney forming socialistic plans for the betterment of society. She illustrated her point by giving in detail the Fourieristic plan he formulated and worked out unsuccessfully. She pointed out the same reason for failure - the consideration of the mere materialistic nature of man. He was working from a wrong starting point as Mrs. Browning pointed out. He should have begun with the soul and then the outside needs would gradually have taken care of themselves. Having arrived at the soul as the starting point of all true reform, Mrs. Browning realized that the Christian Doctrine was the best remedy to apply. Here her views coincided with those of Charles Kingsley who tried to stem the revolution by his counter-movement - Christian Socialism. Kingsley believed men needed Christ in their lives, and Mrs. Browning made Romney - after having tried out philanthropy and socialism as remedies for social distress - to finally try God's way. This conclusion - at which Mrs. Browning arrived after her long years of study - is definitely opposed to philanthropy and sociology as then practised because these did not consider man's life in terms other than his material needs.

In this Thesis there has been a gradual development in the growth of Mrs. Browning's thought. From a mere onlooker on life - as she proved herself in her earlier poems - she became a real humanitarian, finding a remedy which could be applied to social suffering not only in the first half of the nineteenth century, but in any age .

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