## CHAPTER XXIII

### ENGLISH POETS IN FLORENCE

Casa Guidi — The Brownings — Giotto's missing spire — James Russell Lowell—Landor's early life—Fra Bartolommeo before Raphael—The Tuscan gardener—The "Villa Landor" to-day—Storms on the hillside—Pastoral poetry—Italian memories in England—The final outburst—Last days in Florence—The old lion's beguilements—The famous epitaph.

ON a house in the Piazza S. Felice, obliquely facing the Pitti, with windows both in the Via Maggio and Via Mazzetta, is a tablet, placed there by grateful Florence, stating that it was the home of Robert and of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and that her verse made a golden ring to link England to Italy. In other words, this is Casa Guidi.

A third member of the family, Flush the spaniel, was also with them, and they moved here in 1848, and it was here that Mrs. Browning died, in 1861. But it was not their first Florentine home, for in 1847 they had gone into rooms in the Via delle Belle Donne—the Street of Beautiful Ladies—whose name so fascinated Ruskin, near S. Maria Novella. At Casa Guidi Browning wrote, among other poems, "Christmas Eve and Easter Day," "The Statue and the Bust" of which I have said something in chapter XIX, and the "Old Pictures in Florence," that philosophic commentary on Vasari, which ends with the spirited appeal for the crowning of Giotto's Campanile with

the addition of the golden spire that its builder intended—

> Fine as the beak of a young beccaccia
> The campanile, the Duomo's fit ally,
> Shall soar up in gold full fifty braccia,
> Completing Florence, as Florence Italy.

But I suppose that the monologues "Andrea del Sarto" and "Fra Lippo Lippi" would be considered the finest fruit of Browning's Florentine sojourn, as "Casa Guidi Windows" is of Mrs. Browning's. Her great poem is indeed as passionate a plea for Italian liberty as anything by an Italian poet. Here also she wrote much if not all of "Aurora Leigh," "The Poems before Congress," and those other Italian political pieces which when her husband collected them as "Last Poems" he dedicated "to 'grateful Florence'"

In these Casa Guidi rooms the happiest days of both lives were spent, and many a time have the walls resounded to the great voice, laughing, praising or condemning, of Walter Savage Landor; while the shy Hawthorne has talked here too. Casa Guidi lodged not only the Brownings, but, at one time, Lowell, who was not, however, a very good Florentine. "As for pictures," I find him writing, in 1874, on a later visit, "I am tired to death of 'em, . . . and then most of them are so bad. I like best the earlier ones, that say so much in their half-unconscious prattle, and talk nature to me instead of high art." But "the older streets," he says, "have a noble mediaeval distance and reserve for me—a frown I was going to call it, not of hostility, but of haughty doubt. These grim palace fronts meet you with an aristocratic start that puts you to the proof of your credentials. There is to me something wholesome in that that makes you feel your place."

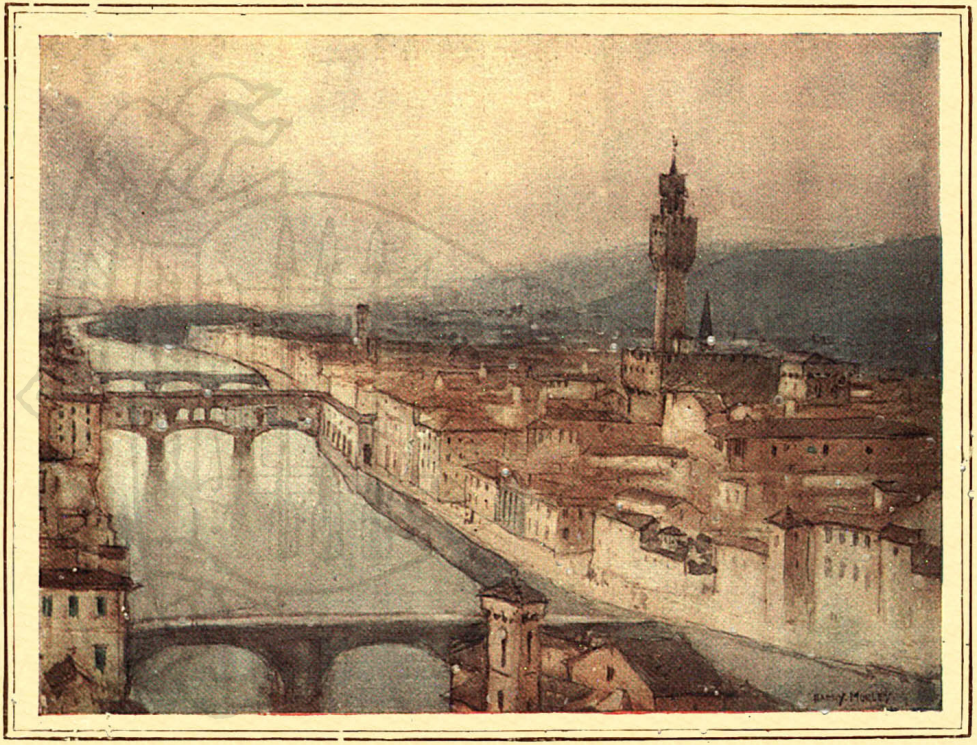
The Brownings are the two English poets who first

spring to mind in connexion with Florence; but they had had very illustrious predecessors. In August and September, 1638, during the reign of Ferdinand II, John Milton was here, and again in the spring of 1639. He read Latin poems to fellow-scholars in the city and received complimentary sonnets in reply. Here he met Galileo, and from here he made the excursion to Vallombrosa which gave him some of his most famous lines. He also learned enough of the language to write love poetry to a lady in Bologna, although he is said to have offended Italians generally by his strict morality.

Skipping a hundred and eighty years we find Shelley in Florence, in 1819, and it was here that his son was born, receiving the names Percy Florence. Here he wrote, as I have said, his "Ode to the West Wind" and that grimly comic work "Peter Bell the Third".

But next the Brownings it is Walter Savage Landor of whom I always think as the greatest English Florentine. Florence became his second home when he was middle-aged and strong; and then again, when he was a very old man, shipwrecked by his impulsive and impossible temper, it became his last haven. It was Browning who found him his final resting-place—a floor of rooms not far from where we now stand, in the Via Nunziatina.

Florence is so intimately associated with Landor, and Landor was so happy in Florence, that a brief outline of his life seems to be imperative. Born in 1775, the heir to considerable estates, the boy soon developed that whirlwind headstrong impatience which was to make him as notorious as his exquisite genius has made him famous. He was sent to Rugby, but disapproving of the headmaster's judgment of his Latin verses, he produced such a lampoon upon him, also in Latin, as made removal or expulsion a



VIEW OF FLORENCE AT EVENING FROM THE PIAZZALE MICHELANGELO

necessity. At Oxford his Latin and Greek verses were still his delight, but he took also to politics, was called a mad Jacobin, and, in order to prove his sanity and show his disapproval of a person obnoxious to him, fired a gun at his shutters and was sent down for a year. He never returned. After a period of strained relations with his father and hot repudiations of all the plans for his future which were made for him—such as entering the militia, reading law, and so forth—he retired to Wales on a small allowance and wrote "Gebir" which came out in 1798, when its author was twenty-three. In 1808 Landor threw in his lot with the Spaniards against the French, saw some fighting and opened his purse for the victims of the war; but the usual personal quarrel intervened. Returning to England he bought Llanthony Abbey, stocked it with Spanish sheep, planted extensively, and was to be the squire of squires; and at the same time seeing a pretty penniless girl at a ball in Bath, he made a bet he would marry her, and won it. As a squire he became quickly involved with neighbours (an inevitable proceeding with him) and also with a Bishop concerning the restoration of the church. Lawsuits followed, and such expenses and vexations occurred that Landor decided to leave England—always a popular resource with his kind. His mother took over the estate and allowed him an income upon which he travelled from place to place for a few years, quarrelling with his wife and making it up, writing Latin verses everywhere and on everything, and coming into collision not only with individuals but with municipalities.

He settled in Florence in 1821, finding rooms in the Palazzo Medici, or, rather, Riccardi. There he remained for five years, which no doubt would have been a longer period had he not accused his landlord, the Marquis, who was then

the head of the family, of seducing away his coachman. Landor wrote stating the charge; the Marquis, calling in reply, entered the room with his hat on, and Landor first knocked it off and then gave notice. It was at the Palazzo Medici that Landor was visited by Hazlitt in 1825, and here also he began the "Imaginary Conversations," his best-known work, although it is of course such brief and faultless lyrics as "Rose Aylmer" and "To Ianthe" that have given him his widest public.

On leaving the Palazzo, Landor acquired the Villa Gherardesca, on the hill-side below Fiesole, and a very beautiful little estate in which the stream Affrico rises.

Crabb Robinson, the friend of so many men of genius, who was in Florence in 1830, in rooms at 1341 Via della Nuova Vigna, met Landor frequently at his villa and has left his impressions. Landor had made up his mind to live and die in Italy, but hated the Italians. He would rather, he said, follow his daughter to the grave than to her wedding with an Italian husband. Talking on art, he said he preferred John of Bologna to Michelangelo, a statement he repeated to Emerson, but afterwards, I believe, recanted. He said also to Robinson that he would not give £1000 for Raphael's "Transfiguration," but ten times that sum for Fra Bartolommeo's picture of S. Mark in the Pitti. Next to Raphael and Fra Bartolommeo he loved Perugino.

Landor soon became quite the husbandman. Writing to his sisters in 1831, he says: "I have planted 200 cypresses, 600 vines, 400 roses, 200 arbutuses, and 70 bays, besides laurustinas, etc., etc., and 60 fruit trees of the best qualities from France. I have not had a moment's illness since I resided here, nor have the children. My wife runs after colds; it would be strange if she did not take them; but she has taken none here; hers are all from Florence. I

have the best water, the best air, and the best oil in the world. They speak highly of the wine too; but here I doubt. In fact, I hate wine, unless hock or claret. . . .

"Italy is a fine climate, but Swansea better. That however is the only spot in Great Britain where we have warmth without wet. Still, Italy is the country I would live in. . . . In two [years] I hope to have a hundred good peaches every day at table during two months: at present I have had as many bad ones. My land is said to produce the best figs in Tuscany; I have usually six or seven bushels of them."

I have walked through Landor's little paradise—now called the Villa Landor and reached by the narrow rugged road to the right just below the village of S. Domenico. Its cypresses, planted, as I imagine, by Landor's own hand, are stately as minarets and its lawn is as green and soft as that of an Oxford college. The orchard, in April, was a mass of blossom. Thrushes sang in the evergreens and the first swallow of the year darted through the cypresses just as we reached the gates. It is truly a poet's house and garden.

In 1833 a French neighbour accused Landor of robbing him of water by stopping an underground stream, and Landor naturally challenged him to a duel. The meeting was avoided through the tact of Landor's second, the English consul at Florence, and the two men became friends. At his villa Landor wrote much of his best prose—the "Pentameron," "Pericles and Aspasia" and the 'Trial of Shakespeare for Deer-stealing"—and he was in the main happy, having so much planting and harvesting to do, his children to play with, and now and then a visitor. In the main too he managed very well with the country people, but one day was amused to overhear a conversation over the hedge be-

tween two passing contadini, "All the English are mad," said one, "but as for this one . . . !" There was a story of Landor current in Florence in those days which depicted him, furious with a spoiled dish, throwing his cook out of the window, and then, realizing where he would fall, exclaiming in an agony, "Good God, I forgot the violets!"

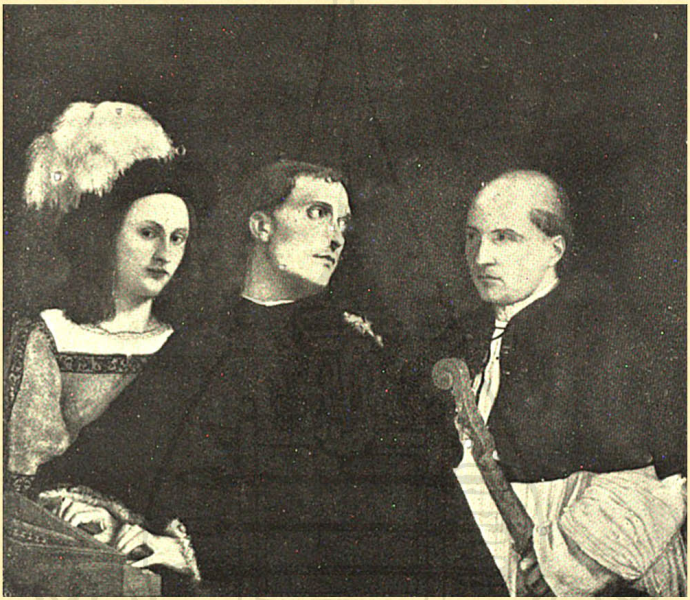
Such was Landor's impossible way on occasion that he succeeded in getting himself exiled from Tuscany; but the Grand Duke was called in as pacificator, and, though the order of expulsion was not rescinded, it was not carried out.

In 1835 Landor wrote some verses to his friend Ablett, who had lent him the money to buy the villa, professing himself wholly happy—

> Thou knowest how, and why, are dear to me
> My citron groves of Fiesole,
> My chirping Affrico, my beechwood nook,
> My Naiads, with feet only in the brook,
> Which runs away and giggles in their faces;
> Yet there they sit, nor sigh for other places—

but later in the year came a serious break. Landor's relations with Mrs. Landor, never of such a nature as to give any sense of security, had grown steadily worse as he became more explosive, and they now reached such a point that he flung out of the house one day and did not return for many years, completing the action by a poem in which he took a final (as he thought) farewell of Italy:—

> I leave thee, beauteous Italy! No more
> From the high terraces, at even-tide,
> To look supine into thy depths of sky,
> The golden moon between the cliff and me,
> Or thy dark spires of fretted cypresses
> Bordering the channel of the milky way.
> Fiesole and Valdarno must be dreams,
> Hereafter, and my own lost Affrico
> Murmur to me but the poet's song.



THE CONCERT

FROM THE PAINTING BY GIORGIONE IN THE PITTI

Landor gave his son Arnold the villa, settling a sum on his wife for the other children's maintenance, and himself returned to Bath, where he added to his friends Sir William Napier (who first found a resemblance to a lion in Landor's features), John Forster, who afterwards wrote his life, and Charles Dickens, who named a child after him and touched off his merrier turbulent side most charmingly as Leonard Boythorn in "Bleak House". But his most constant companion was a Pomeranian dog; in dogs indeed he found comfort all his life, right to the end.

Landor's love of his villa and estate finds expression again and again in his verse written at this time. The most charming of all these charming poems—the perfection of the light verse of a serious poet—is the letter from England to his youngest boy, speculating on his Italian pursuits. I begin at the passage describing the villa's cat :—

Does Cincirillo follow thee about,
Inverting one swart foot suspensively,
And wagging his dread jaw at every chirp
Of bird above him on the olive-branch?
Frighten him then away! 'twas he who slew
Our pigeons, our white pigeons peacock-tailed,
That feared not you and me—alas, nor him!
I flattened his striped sides along my knee,
And reasoned with him on his bloody mind,
Till he looked blandly, and half-closed his eyes
To ponder on my lecture in the shade.
I doubt his memory much, his heart a little,
And in some minor matters (may I say it?)
Could wish him rather sager. But from thee
God hold back wisdom yet for many years!
Whether in early season or in late
It always comes high-priced. For thy pure breast
I have no lesson; it for me has many.
Come, throw it open then! What sports, what cares
(Since these are none too young for these) engage
Thy busy thoughts? Are you again at work,

Walter and you, with those sly labourers,
Geppo, Giovanni, Cecco, and Poeta,
To build more solidly your broken dam
Among the poplars, whence the nightingale
Inquisitively watch'd you all day long?
I was no of your council in the scheme,
Or might have saved you silver without end,
And sighs to boot without number. Art thou gone
Below the mulberry, where that cold pool
Urged to devise a warmer, and more fit
For mighty swimmers, swimming three abreast?
Or art thou panting in this summer noon
Upon the lowest step before the hall,
Drawing a slice of watermelon, long
As Cupid's bow, athwart thy wetted lips
(Like one who plays Pan's pipe), and letting drop
The sable seeds from all their separate cells,
And leaving bays profound and rocks abrupt,
Redder than coral round Calypso's cave?

In 1853 Landor put forth what he thought his last book, under the title "Last Fruit off an Old Tree". Unhappily it was not his last, for in 1858 he issued yet one more, "Dry Sticks faggotted by W. S. Landor," in which was a malicious copy of verses reflecting upon a lady. He was sued for libel, lost the case with heavy damages, and once more and for the last time left England for Florence. He was now eighty-three. At first he went to the Villa Gherardesco, then the home of his son Arnold, but his outbursts were unbearable, and three times he broke away, to be three times brought back. In July, 1859, he made a fourth escape, and then escaped altogether, for Browning took the matter in hand and established him, after a period in Siena, in lodgings in the Via Nunziatina. From this time till his death in 1864 Landor may be said at last to have been at rest. He had found safe anchorage and never left it. Many friends came to see him, chief among them Browning, who was at once his adviser, his admirer and

his shrewd observer. Landor, always devoted to pictures, but without much judgment, now added to his collection; Browning in one of his letters to Forster tells how he has found him "particularly delighted by the acquisition of three execrable daubs by Domenichino and Gaspar Poussin most benevolently battered by time". Another friend says that he had a habit of attributing all his doubtful pictures to Correggio. "He cannot," Browning continues, "in the least understand that he is at all wrong, or injudicious, or unfortunate in anything. . . . Whatever he may profess, the thing he really loves is a pretty girl to talk nonsense with."

Of the old man in the company of fair listeners we have glimpses in the reminiscences of Miss Kate Field in the "Atlantic Monthly" in 1866. She also describes him as in a cloud of pictures. There with his Pomeranian Giallo within fondling distance, the poet, seated in his arm-chair, fired comments upon everything. Giallo's opinion was asked on all subjects, and Landor said of him that an approving wag of his tail was worth all the praise of all the "Quarterlies". It was Giallo who led to the profound couplet—

He is foolish who supposes
Dogs are ill that have hot noses.

Miss Field tells how, after some classical or fashionable music had been played, Landor would come closer to the piano and ask for an old English ballad, and when "Auld Robin Gray," his favourite of all, was sung, the tears would stream down his face. "Ah, you don't know what thoughts you are recalling to the troublesome old man."

But we have Browning's word that he did not spend much time in remorse or regret, while there was the composition of the pretty little tender epigrams of this last period to amuse him and Italian politics to enchain his

sympathy. His impulsive generosity led him to give his old and trusted watch to the funds for Garibaldi's Sicilian expedition; but Browning persuaded him to take it again. For Garibaldi's wounded prisoners he wrote an Italian dialogue between Savonarola and the Prior of S. Marco. The death of Mrs. Browning in 1861 sent Browning back to England, and Landor after that was less cheerful and rarely left the house. His chief solace was the novels of Anthony Trollope and G. P. R. James. In his last year he received a visit from a young English poet and enthusiast for poetry, one Algernon Charles Swinburne, who arrived in time to have a little glowing talk with the old lion and thus obtain inspiration for some fine memorial stanzas. On September 17th, 1864, Death found Landor ready—as nine years earlier he had promised it should—

> To my ninth decade I have totter'd on,
> And no soft arm bends now my steps to steady;
> One who once led me where she would, is gone,
> So when he calls me, Death shall find me ready.

Landor was buried, as we saw, in the English cemetery within the city, whither his son Arnold was borne less than seven years later. Here is his own epitaph, one of the most perfect things in form and substance in the English language:—

> I strove with none, for none was worth my strife,
> Nature I loved, and next to Nature, Art;
> I warmed both hands before the fire of life,
> It sinks, and I am ready to depart.

It should be cut on his tombstone.