

TWENTY years ago Robert Browning, two years before his death, published his *Parleyings with certain People of importance in their day*. One of these parleyings is addressed to George Bubb Dodington, whose political career was so intimately connected with the people of Bridgwater. It is entirely beside the purpose of this slight chapter to deal with the writings of a great poet and prophet, or even to analyse the little poem itself. It must tell its own story, as it does perhaps with less obscurity than in many other of Browning's writings, to those who have ears to hear. It was one of the latest efforts of a man who, as Mr. Stopford Brooke truly says, *stood alone among his fellows in his unique and individual power, who has fastened himself into our hearts, added a new world to our perceptions, developed our lives and enlarged our interests*. A protest may probably arise instantly within the reader's mind against Browning's lack of clearness in his writings. It is so ; it cannot be denied. His style not only lends itself to obscurity, it gives itself up to it. The poet takes his pastime therein. His style, however, is a true expression of his thoughts.

With him, contesting ideas contend, and chase each other along his rugged lines. Half-a-dozen thoughts, expressed usually in parenthesis, are with him at the same moment, and he is content to leave none of them out. They are all contributory, and they all have their value. But they frequently overshadow the main point, and half conceal it. His canvas becomes too crowded.

All this is well enough, and his most devoted readers are entirely conscious that his method often mars the melody of his song. All that may pass. He has enriched human life immeasurably. He points men above. We are here to grow strong enough and brave enough and good enough to take our share in a further life beyond. *O fool, to claim the little cup of water earth's knowledge offers to thy thirst, or the beauty or love of earth, when the immeasurable waters of the Knowledge, Beauty, and Love of the Eternal Paradise are thine beyond the earth !*

Browning's *Parleyings* are not by any means to be reckoned as lying parallel with his best work. Their intellectual force is less evident ; their poetic charm is diluted with some loss of imaginative power. Yet his poem addressed to George Bubb Dodington, dealing as it does with the ways of a man of the most earthly type of character, of a most

selfish plan of life, and of almost no nobility of soul, spells out with bitter irony the failure of such a career as his.\* His method, Browning says, was glaringly at fault.

*Ah, George Bubb Dodington Lord Melcombe,  
no, yours was the wrong way !*

The poet presents his subject in the form of a problem, which is this. How may the politician who intends to get on, best compass his end ? He desires, it is assumed, fame, a comfortable career, wealth and position, and the applause and reverence of the public. Assuming that he may do anything he wishes in order to possess these things, how shall he essay the task ?

*Supposing that permissibly you planned  
How statesmanship — your trade — in  
outward show*

*Might figure as inspired by simple zeal  
For serving country, king, and commonweal,*

then, of course, it must be made evident that this self-denying servant of the state may also, as a duty to himself, provide for his own home-needs and wants. Public service of right demands its wage ; the politician may permissibly strive for a comfortable hearth and home, even as birds build for themselves cosy nests. A politician's public zeal must not be allowed to mar his private welfare. His zeal, indeed, must be allowed to merit

*a domicile where downy fluff  
Embeds the ease-deserving architect.*

So long as the public, thus fooled, believe in the man's zeal for his country, they will not grudge him a luxurious home. This sham zeal must be kept up, for purposes of successful deception, in the public view.

Let us assume, says Browning to Dodington, that your aim was a right one.

*Here trip you, that — your aim allowed as right —  
Your means thereto were wrong. Come, we, this  
night.*

*Profess one purpose, hold one principle,  
Are at odds only as to — not the will  
But way of winning solace for ourselves.*

Dodington's way, the poet suggests, was by attempting to deceive the public by continued assertion that he was sincerely aiming solely for their good, regardless of himself. But such falseness is useless. The crowd see through it, for they are equally shrewd.

*Not so, George !  
Try simple falsehood on shrewd folk who forge  
Lies of superior fashion day by day  
And hour by hour ? With craftsmen versed as they*

*What chance of competition when the tools  
Only a novice wields ? Are knaves such fools ?*

No ; man will not obey his equal ; only his superior. Nor will he bow down to strength alone; *intelligence must move strength's self.*" And just as force has become replaced by wit and knowledge, so knowledge — such as Dodington could claim — is easily equalled elsewhere. That cannot, *per se*, capture the multitude.

*men have got to know  
Such wit as what you boast is nowise held  
The wonder once it was, but, paralleled  
Too plentifully, counts not, — puts to shame  
Modest possessors like yourself who claim,  
By virtue of it merely, power and place  
— Which means the sweets of office.*

The mere pretence of disinterestedness, then, has failed. So also has the assumption of the possession of a greater and wider knowledge of things. That plea is worn out, save for the real genius, which Dodington was not. What then was the secret of this desired power over men? He comes now to the gist of his argument. Man can only be moved by a touch of that which is beyond Man.

*Who would use  
Man for his pleasure needs must introduce  
The element that awes Man. Once for all  
His nature owns a Supernatural  
In fact as well as phrase —*

What? Magic; Mystery? These are outworn in our day, yet formerly they served their purpose well. *Omne ignotum pro magnifico.* The wizard, even the quack, knew well what he was about. They pretended to appeal to something uncanny, something non-earthly, something from another realm, impalpable and elusive. Thus they succeeded in their time, and the method — though not the means — holds good still.

*Folk fear to jeopardise their soul,  
Stumble at times, walk straight upon the whole-  
That's nature's simple instinct : what may be  
The portent here, the influence such as we  
Are strangers to ?*

*Exact the thing I call  
Man's despot, just the Supernatural  
Which, George, was wholly out of — far beyond  
Your theory and practice.*

Or the politician might have recourse to the old catch-phrases; *Hearth and Home, the Altar, love of England, hate of Rome* ; such lying ideals have served men in their day. But these will hardly avail now; the crowd see

through them, *and find the greed and selfishness at source.*

There is another resource. Let the politician adopt a more perfect disguise. Its disguise lies in its denial of disguise ;

*truth that looks like lies,  
Frankness so sure to meet with unbelief?*

Let him pretend to hold himself as it were in scorn ; and them ! Show plainly that he is not accountable to the ordinary rules of life. Something beyond these are his Master, his Inspiration. This plan used, you may freely, says Browning to him,

*induce  
The puppets now to dance, now stand stock-  
still.*

Now knock their heads together, at your will For will's sake only — while each plays his part Submissive : why? through terror at the heart:

The crowd is cowed ; utterly in subjection. It can make nothing of such a man, who seems to be beyond the ken of mortals, and to have no fear of them. Nay, he has no fear of himself; can he be inspired ?

*Can it be — this bold man, whose hand we saw  
Openly pull the wires, obeys some law  
Quite above Man's — nay, God's? On face fall  
they.\**

Exactly, the mystery which clings to the actions of a brilliant schemer such as this, may be — has been — successful. The man who surrounds himself with awe is the man who wins. It is the plan of the false Messiahs and the false prophets and the Mahdis and brilliant rascals of every age. It has within it a suggested touch of the supernatural — that is enough. *On face fall they.*

Why, then, could not Dodington adopt this role? It was far beyond him, out of his sight. A man cannot even pretend to what he cannot apprehend. To feign implies to know what is feigned. Dodington's grossness was too earthly and too material for such high chicanery; he must use, as he did, clumsier tools. He gained his Peerage, but nothing of men's respect. He won half his ambition, but he utterly missed the other half. It was above, aloof from his reach ; in a world apart.

*This was the secret missed, again I say,  
Out of your power to grasp conception of,  
Much less employ to purpose. Hence the scoff  
That greets your very name : folk see but one  
Fool more, as well as knave, in Dodington.*

Browning's warning is perfectly true to life. Dodington did not even impose upon the people in our borough whom he had

bribed. They rejected him at last. To inspire them, even ever so feebly, was out of his power, and so he failed in all that wise men hold to be worth winning.

Thus did Robert Browning rebuke the ambitious Member of Parliament for Bridgwater. Posterity, beyond doubt, will confirm the verdict which he has given.



P. 1

*\*Author's Note.* — I venture to commend the study of this little poem most earnestly to any student of the history and doings and people of Bridgwater. It is contained in a most accessible form in Volume VIII in the small eight-volume edition of Browning's Works. Volume VIII costs 2s. 6d. Published by Smith, Elder, & Co.

p.2

*Author's Note.* — Browning was exceedingly well read in Hebrew lore and tradition. I have always thought that in this passage he is referring to the incident mentioned in i Kings xviii., verses 38 and 39. There the Prophet, openly invoking the Divine Aid, convinces the people. They fell upon their faces. Elijah, of course, was a real Prophet. But what is real always finds its imitators. Dodington was unable even to imitate any touch with what is Divine. Thus he failed.