

O Lyric Love

by Charles L. Harness

This story copyright 1985 by Charles L. Harness. Reprinted by permission of Linn Prentiss. This copy was created for Jean Hardy's personal use. All other rights are reserved. Thank you for honoring the copyright.

Published by Seattle Book Company, www.seattlebook.com.

* * *

This is about my high school English teacher. I adored her. She once went out on a limb for me-- to my eternal shame: she gave me a final grade that included a nonexistent term paper on Browning. I had promised I would write it and turn it in, but I delayed and dawdled and never did.

(So, my lyric love, here it finally is. With compound interest. You are long dead, but deathless.)

This one led me into research about Florence, the Renaissance, and ultimately to "The Tetrahedron."

* * *

* * *

* * *

I had long ago realized that Professor Mae Leslie identified strongly with the Victorian poet Elizabeth Barrett. She looked like Barrett and dressed like Barrett. Like Barrett's, her hair dangled in long ringlets about a pale but lively face. Like the poet, she wore no make-up. She out-Barretted Barrett in one respect: an adolescent maltreated bout with polio confined her to a wheelchair, which she maneuvered with great skill and energy. As we know, the British poet had a spinal problem and was in bed a lot, but she was certainly ambulatory on her wedding day. Which brings me to the next similarity: both women (in their own way, and in their own time) loved Robert Browning.

And I loved Mae Leslie. How do I love thee? Let me count the ways! First as a beautiful woman. Consider the stark black hair, artfully contrived into those curls. The flashing green eyes. The naturally red lips between the translucent cheeks. That body. I imagined marvelous breasts, smooth, semi-firm, capped by roseate buds. Then the erotic sweep of belly. Her hands were sonnets. And yet she was virginal. I doubted that any male hand had ever been laid on her in lust. What a waste!

For years I had gone to sleep thinking of her. She was older than I-- by six or seven years. It didn't matter to me. Her erudition was formidable, but that didn't matter either. Recognized authority on minor Victorian poets. She had written books. She lectured by video terminal all over the world: Oxford, the Sorbonne, Moscow U., and (would you believe it!) M.I.T.

She knew something about everything. The universal doctor. She could even hold her own when we discussed my undergraduate specialty, which was quantum physics, and how certain theoretical sub-particles could move forward and backward along a time axis (the "Feynman minuet"). She appreciated me. She encouraged me. As my senior year in college closed, she helped me get the graduate scholarship.

Aye, there's the rub.

So here we were in her little office in the Fine Arts Building, once again after all these years, and I knew exactly what she was thinking.

The Browning paper.

I had relived that last conference five years ago a dozen times. She had been quite disturbed, and she kept fiddling with the controls on her wheelchair. "You need an A in this course if you are going to get that scholarship in quantum physics. Are you making any progress with your paper on Browning?"

How much is any? "Some," I said. Where had the time gone? Time time time. I had six end-of-term assignments and projects. Too much time on the time project. And now Browning was left. An Appreciation of Robert Browning. Term paper for Eng Lit 205. How could it have happened? I loved this lovely stricken woman. I knew it hurt her to deny me that A and the scholarship. Well, it hurt me too. I was hurting all over. For me, for her, for my future.

"What are you doing this summer?" she had asked.

I had shrugged. "Nothing."

She brightened. "I'll give you an A. Now. You'll get the scholarship. Finish the paper this summer. Let me have it by the end of August. Promise?"

"Of course!" I had been surprised and grateful. I had stretched out my hand, as though to shake on the deal, and probably by simple reflex she had given me hers. But then I had taken that hand in both of mine, and I had laid the fingers out flat, and I had kissed the palm, and given it back to her, and left, picking my way through the stacks of books and papers.

Five years ago.

The Browning paper.

I had tried. For the next two weeks of that summer I had kept the library terminals hot, collecting data, getting microprintouts. I had even drafted a couple of preliminary pages. Who the hell was this guy Robert Browning? The husband of Elizabeth Barrett: that was his only claim to fame. In fact, a lot of the computer entries called him Robert Barrett.

"He wrote beautiful things, significant things," Mae had insisted (arguing so futilely at the cold bar of history). "That's how they met, in the first place. She was already a great poet, and she understood *his* poetry: 'My Last Duchess.' (She liked whate'er she looked on, and her looks went everywhere.) 'How They Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix.' (I galloped, Dirck galloped, we galloped all three.) 'Home Thoughts from Abroad.' ('Oh to be in England, now that April's there.') 'Pippa Passes.' ('God's in his heaven-- All's right with the world.') And of course that remarkable little thing, 'The Pied Piper of Hamelin.' All before he met Elizabeth Barrett."

I looked it all up. Robert declared his love. At first Elizabeth rejected him. My father will never consent, she said. Besides, I am a semi-invalid. I would be a burden to you. Consent be damned! declared Robert. Arise! She did. And so they were married, and moved to Italy, and she continued her career with the greatest love poems of the nineteenth century: Sonnets from the Portuguese. And all the other marvels: Aurora Leigh, A Musical Instrument, De Profundis, Bianca Among the Nightingales. But Robert just faded away. He wrote and was ignored. She wrote and flourished.

At one of our early conferences Mae had posed an interesting speculation. "If Robert had written one really significant long poem, it might have been enough to ignite well-deserved interest in his earlier works. He might have got an entry in Poets' Dictionary, and perhaps a half column in the Encyclopedia of English Poets. But no. 'The Pied Piper' has survived, and that's all."

So now it was five years later, and I had brought Dr. Mae Leslie, plus wheelchair, in my van to my laboratory. She hadn't wanted to leave her campus cubbyhole at first. She was still mad at me. She still felt betrayed. Because to this very day I hadn't finished my Appreciation of Robert Browning. As it turned out, I had had to drop my Browning research in the middle of that first summer and get a job, or starve. That fateful August had passed, and no paper. But I had got the A, and then the scholarship. We hadn't spoken since, except for my call to her yesterday.

I got her out of the van and onto the sidewalk. She checked the controls on her wheelchair. "Lead on. I'm right behind you."

And so on into the entrance way, past the offices ("Hold my calls." "Yes, Mr. Roland"), and into the back of the main building.

She was impressed. "Is all this your lab?"

"This is it. We make things here, such as electronic gadgets for NASA, and we have several classified government research projects. All this exists because you gave me an A in Eng Lit 205."

"Which you did not earn. You still owe me a Robert Browning."

"I'm coming to that." We stood before a locked door, which I opened with a signal from a pen-light. We stepped inside. "The transmission room."

"What in the world?"

I could understand her wonder. It didn't look like much. Just a big room, nearly empty. It held a couple of tables, a computer console, and a chair or two. A few books and some apparatus lay on one of the tables, which also carried a switch panel. Soft shadowless radiants provided anonymous illumination.

I looked at my watch. I had it timed well. If it worked. And I knew it would. "Look at the table," I told her. "A book will appear on the dais in the center." As we watched, a paperback volume did in fact materialize on the raised area.

I heard her sharp intake of breath. "How did you do that?"

"It wasn't easy." I walked over and picked the book up. "It's the undergraduate catalog." I peeked into the Eng Lit section. I hesitated very briefly as a truly astonishing entry struck my eye. Then I closed it up quickly and handed it to her. "Care to check?" She flipped the pages at random, then looked up. "So what's the point?"

"Just a little preliminary test demonstration." I picked up another volume from the table. "*This* is the identical catalog. At three P.M., one hour from now, as we leave, I shall put it here on the dais-- we call it the Feynman plate-- and it will be sent into the past, which is of course here and now, at two P.M. It materializes-- *has* materialized-- on the table. In a word, it time-travels."

She just looked at me. I couldn't tell whether she believed me or not. She said noncommittally: "Go on."

"The plate is capable of transmitting up to one kilo of matter, backward in time, up to two hundred years, and to anywhere in the world."

She had to think about that. She temporized. "I suppose it's silly of me to ask if this has something to do with Robert Browning." It wasn't really a question. It was almost as though she was thinking out loud.

"We're going to send him something." I watched her face. She was not completely successful in masking her thoughts, which said, *you are crazy*. She asked politely, as though we were assembling a seminar agenda, "Just exactly what are you going to send him? The college catalog?"

"No." I took the catalog from her and handed her a second book. "This."

She put it in her lap and opened the stiff vellum-veneered cover. Her eyes widened. "Well now, what have we here? Title page-- handwritten. And in Italian! Concerning the trial of Count Guido Franceschini and four confederates for murder, and their conviction and execution." Very carefully she turned a few more pages. "Now we get into printed Latin. Paper old, very old, edges crumbling. Depositions... dated... good heavens!... 1698!" She peered up at me a moment, intrigued, puzzled, then continued leafing through the book. "And finally, more handwritten pages." She closed the volume cautiously. "Bernard, what is it? What is this all about?"

"*That*," I said, "is the keystone in our campaign to rehabilitate your friend Robert Browning. The people really lived. The godawful things reported there really happened. May I tell you the story?"

"Please do."

"Well, there was this Guido Franceschini, a bachelor, and a sort of second-class Italian nobleman, and he was broke, and looking for a bride with money. A middle-aged bourgeois couple by the name of Camparini had a young and beautiful daughter, Pompilia, and the parents had a big block of treasury bonds. The bond income was to continue for the life of their children-- which meant during Pompilia's life. The Camparinis wanted the prestige of being in-laws to nobility. Besides which, Guido claimed to be rich in his own right. And so the marriage was duly arranged and the income assigned over to Guido. Then came trouble. Mama and Papa Camparini visited the newlyweds at the gloomy Franceschini castle in Arezzo, near Rome, and there their eyes were opened. The Franceschinis were at the bottom of the list of petty nobility; except for the bond income they were paupers; and they insulted the Camparinis at

every turn. Mama and Papa returned to Rome, furious, and vowing vengeance. They filed a suit in the Roman court, asking that the bond income be revoked, on the ground that Pompilia was not their daughter. Actually, they had bought her as a newborn infant from a woman of the streets and passed her off as their own child to extend the period of bond income. And now it was Guido Franceschini's turn to be furious. He threatened to kill Pompilia. Terrified, she escaped from Arezzo with the help of a priest, Giuseppe Caponsacchi. Guido rode off in pursuit, and overtook them at an inn. Adultery! he howled. A big row. Police called in. A clerical court considered the case. Pompilia was finally released to the custody of her parents, in Rome. Caponsacchi was exiled to Civita for three years. Count Guido was told to go home. And so he did. But he couldn't leave it alone. He gathered up four local cutthroats, rode to Rome, burst in on the Camparinis-- father, mother, daughter-- and killed the three of them. The five were caught, tried, and executed. Guido was beheaded, to give credit to his claim to nobility. The other four were hanged. All as reported in this old yellow book. You note here the depositions of the witnesses, the statement of the prosecutor, the pleas of defense counsel, judgment of the court, Guido's appeal to the Pope, and the three-line affirmation of His Holiness."

"Impressive." She was still noncommittal.

"There's just one little difficulty."

"Oh?"

"It's all forgery. Every page. Every word."

She opened the book at random and studied the pages again. Then she shook her head. "Forgery? I've seen old documents before. It certainly *looks* genuine."

I smiled. It was good to hear her say that. "The paper was made last month from a mix of rags, old paper, fish nets, and flax, pulped by hand in mortar and pestle, tub-sized with alum, then hand-laid. An old Italian recipe. The type was very recently reconstructed from a Manutius font characteristic of the period. The Latin and Italian texts were prepared by scholars at Columbia and Fordham. After binding in vellum, the whole was aged by exposure to u.v. light and steam. The finished product was delivered to me yesterday. Whereupon I promptly called you."

"And you're going to send it back in time to Robert Browning?"

"Yes."

"How can you be so sure he'll get it? And what is he supposed to do with it?"

"There's a lot more. Let me give you the whole picture."

"I'd like that."

"To start, take note that my Barrett-Browning data bank includes everything known today about either or both of the poets. I've pieced together comprehensive personality profiles from old letters-- theirs and others; their literary output; reviews; biographical sketches of Elizabeth (Robert had none); maps of places and cities where they lived or visited; her surviving medical files; histories of the times; and so on. Where data are missing, I have asked the computer to give its best estimate. We can fairly predict what each of them would do or say under certain given circumstances. In this way, we can determine that on the morning of June 15, 1860, a Friday, Robert will be out for a walk in downtown Florence, Italy. The weather is clear and hot. He is timing his outing so as to be home and have a late lunch with Elizabeth. She has not been feeling well, and he wants to spend the afternoon with her. His return route lies through the square of San Lorenzo. There's a cart in the middle of the square loaded helter-skelter with pots and pans, old clothes, books, all kinds of junk. On this hot midday, this old yellow book will land on top of the heap. Browning will see it and buy it. The computer now predicts his actions, right down to the trifling sum, one lira, that he will offer for the book. (He is a man of careful economies!) My forgery will fascinate him. He'll read it as he walks home. He'll pass the Strozzi palace, cross the Arno on the San Trinita bridge; he walks down the Via Maggio; and by the time he reaches home at Casa Guidi, he'll have finished it. In his head is crystallizing the dramatic background for a magnificent work, the thing that will eventually transform the husband of Elizabeth Barrett to Robert Browning, major Victorian poet, and rival of Tennyson, Wordsworth, Byron, Shelley..." I paused.

She still was not convinced. "If you can really do this kind of thing... send matter back through time, why haven't you sent a bomb back to Hitler's bedroom, say about 1935?"

I shrugged. "I thought of that. But I'm afraid to change history so drastically. With no Hitler, would we have the modern state of Israel? And suppose I altered the past in such a way that my parents never met? No. We've got to limit the transmission to non-historic matters."

"Suppose Browning checks up on your alleged facts?"

"I'm sure he will. And he'll find the story is completely true. My material is based on data in a volume in the Royal Casanatense Library in Rome, identified as Miscellaneous Ms. 2037, '*Varii successi curiosi e degni di esser considerati.*' And there are unrelated supporting reports, such as the baptismal records of the child-wife Pompilia, of the hero priest Caponsacchi, of the villainous husband Franceschini, and so on. I have photocopies. Do you want to see them?"

"Never mind." She kept looking at me, puzzled, thoughtful. "Assume it works. Assume Browning is stimulated to write his magnum opus, his masterpiece, and it makes him famous. I keep coming back to my basic question. Why are you doing this, Bernard?"

"I owe you. With interest."

"Not this much."

"Yes, this much. This is my term paper, an Appreciation of Robert Browning. I have the facilities, the money, the technology. I can do it, finally. Permit me to pay my debt."

Debt? Ha! There was more to it than that. I had a secondary object, like a wheel within a wheel, or, as the computermen say, a nested loop. And it was this: I wanted Robert Browning to compose some lines for me that would show my love for Mae Leslie. I would call on him to declare, in exquisite rhyme or blank verse or whatever, feelings I did not know how to express. I would go to him as an illiterate peasant in the streets of Calcutta or Quito or Morocco goes to a commercial letter writer, to compose a dulcet message to a beloved. I was like the dull and inarticulate de Neuville, persuading Cyrano de Bergerac to compose love letters to Roxane. Robert, old friend, say this to her, that she is like a song, a lyric. She is part angel, part bird. And tell her, O age-lost ghost writer, that I have a wild and wonderful hunger for her.

Mae broke in on my reverie. "Well then, let's see where it stands. Browning buys the book, reads it, is impressed. He visualizes a great poetic drama. What then? Does he start drafting right away?"

"I think not. It has to simmer a bit. He has to sort out the players, define their roles. He will be Caponsacchi. Edward Barrett, Elizabeth's father, will be the tyrannical Guido Franceschini. The pure and innocent Pompilia will be Elizabeth. We bear in mind that Elizabeth has barely a year to live. She dies in June, 1861. Browning will see this much clearer following her death."

Mae sat there in her chair, silent, probably inwardly grieving at my insanity.

"There's a terminal with a CRT just behind you," I said. "Before we sent the old yellow book down the time tube, you might want to see what one of the standard references has to say, as of this day and this hour, about friend Robert."

"I know already. Well, okay, for the record..." She revolved toward the terminal and tapped away at the keyboard. "I'm accessing Encyclopedia of English Poets. Ah, here we are. It says 'Browning, Robert. See Barrett, Elizabeth.' Satisfied? Or shall I go for *her*?"

"No. Just print the entry. When we finish, we can call him up again and compare. Before and after, as it were. I think we're about ready. Shall I pull the switch?"

But she temporized. I could sense a growing unease, as though finally she was thinking, maybe he's right... maybe it really will work. But... but... "Bernard, have you ever done this... transmitted matter... before?"

"You saw the college catalog, and there were several times before that." (Paper clips, a pencil, a coin, traveling at farthest from one end of the table to the other, over a time span of a few hours.)

"So it's perfectly safe?"

"Well..." (Now it was my turn to hesitate. I knew a tremendous surge of energy would be required to send a full kilo back nearly two hundred years, and across nearly five thousand miles. I had never transmitted on this scale before.) I said, "There may be certain holographic hallucinations, but there is nothing physically harmful." (I hope.)

She sighed. (Had she noted the edge of uncertainty in my assurance?) "Go ahead." She rolled away

from the console.

I laid the forgery on the Feynman plate. "Mae," I said, "nothing is going to happen to us, but just in case... I want you to know that I love you." I pulled the switch.

"Bernard!"

The room began to vibrate. She shrieked. There was a tremendous crash and a blinding light. We threw our arms up over our eyes. It wasn't supposed to do this. Had a time-tesseract collapsed somewhere? My head was going around crazily. Mae... I had to reach Mae...

Things steadied. I stood up and looked about in the semi-dark.

Mae? No Mae. No tables. No computers... no lab...

I am standing on a sort of terrace-balcony. Somewhere, somewhen. I lean on the railing while I wait for my head to stop spinning. A gibbous moon lights up an eerie scene outside. Across the street, a church dome. San Felice. I hear the muted chant of nuns drifting out of the square windows. People with lanterns and torches moving in the street. A fiesta. I tug at my beard. Sometime ago, as a whim, when it was black, I shaved it off. When it grew out again it was gray. "Distinguished!" Elizabeth said.

I love this view. We're fortunate to live here at Casa Guidi, the townhouse of faded Florentine nobility. Thirteen years. Living, writing, loving. The reviewers were ecstatic over Aurora Leigh. And she's hard at work on "Bianca."

Night and people. Everything brings me back to the medicinal leaves of that strange yellow book. I see the people so clearly. Pompilia fleeing for her life. I mark her route from Arezzo. Perugia... Camoscia... Chiusi... Foligno... Castelnuovo... ah, now she is exhausted, and Caponsacchi insists they stop and rest. A grave mistake. Only four hours from Rome. Couldn't they have made it? I think the inn still stands at Castelnuovo, and there Guido overtakes them. And then one thing led to another... and finally to that final frightful night. She had twenty-two stab wounds. Or was it the father? Check that.

I walked slowly back into the bedroom. Mae lay on the divan, sleeping quietly with the thin blue coverlet ruffled around her legs. Dim-lit moonlight. No, not Mae. Elizabeth. Though the ringlets make the faces almost identical. How had Hawthorne described her? 'A pale small person, scarcely embodied at all... elfin, rather than earthly... sweetly disposed towards the human race, though only remotely akin to it.' What an astonishing person you are, Elizabeth. My angel. My bird uncaged, singing your sweet lyrics. My love.

I listened to the silences within the house. Son Pen, asleep in his little room. Wilson's night off. She's out somewhere with her young man.

My head begins to whirl again. I am moving forward in time. Months are flitting by like uncertain moths. We are still in Casa Guidi, and it is still night, and the noises within the cavernous rooms are still faint, a dark gentle background to the tragedy unfolding in the bedroom.

I hear Mae's guttural whisper. "Robert..." I hurry back in. Last night she told Pen she felt better. But I don't know. I sit in bed with her and she snuggles up across my chest. My hand rests over her heart. The beat is faint and irregular.

Is she conscious? Does she know where she is? I say softly, "Do you know me?" "Oh, Robert, I love you, I love you." She kisses me. She says, "I must tell you something." "Yes?" She whispers, "Our lives are held by God." She puts her arms around me happily. She says, "God bless you." It is incredible. I say, "Are you comfortable?" "Beautiful."

She smiles. Her head falls forward. At first I think she may have fallen asleep. At worst, fainted. Anything else, unacceptable. But I know. She is dead. It is four in the morning, June 29, 1861. Tears define nothing. A time for auguries and comets.

The mists slowly cleared.

Mae was no longer in my arms. (Was she ever?) She was in her wheelchair, and we were back in my lab, and staring at each other.

She spoke first. "I thought I was... you were..."

"Illusions," I said. "I mentioned the possibility."

"Illusions... God! At the last, there, I thought I had died." Her voice faded away and she passed translucent fingers over her brow. Her face was wet, and her long curls clung plastered to her cheeks. I

passed a roll of paper towels to her, and she daubed at her face and hair. "Now what?" she asked. "Besides wrecking my hair-do and scaring me out of my wits, what have you accomplished? Everything around here seems the same."

First things first. "How do you feel?"

"All right. Just a little shaky. I need to think."

I could appreciate that. So did I.

Her thinking was not hard to follow. I had had the same thoughts many times. Consider the various possibilities. First-- the project hadn't worked. Because if it had, Robert Browning would today be a famous poet, and we would know it. But we don't know it, so he isn't, so it didn't work. Second-- but if perchance somehow it *had* worked, there must now be two parallel worlds, one with and one without the great forgery; one world in which Browning is a great poet, and one world in which he's a virtual nonentity, known only as Elizabeth's husband. Two such worlds would reconcile all the facts. (But if there are two, may there not be three... or four... or a million? Where does it stop?)

Too much of this could drive her crazy. And me too. I had to break it up. I said, "Have you recovered enough to work with the terminal again?"

She blinked. "Oh... the terminal. I think so." She rubbed her fingers together, then rolled back to the console. "For a strict comparison let's check the Encyclopedia of English Poets once more."

"Good idea."

She tapped the keys. The CRT sprang to life. "Good God!" she muttered. "Look at that!" The screen filled up. Then line after line, it overflowed. This went on for several minutes. "All about Robert Browning."

"Get a print-out," I said.

The laser printer began to hum. I walked over to the collection basket and, as the sheets folded and dropped, I dug under the pile for the very bottommost, the original encyclopedia entry. Was it still there? Was there any place in this new parallel world for a reference identifying Robert as simply the husband of Elizabeth Barrett? Aha! There it was! "Browning, Robert. See Barrett, Elizabeth." I put it back out of sight and faced her. "What did he call it?"

"Call what? Oh, the new magnum opus." Her eyes became suddenly sly. She was getting into the spirit. "Not so fast. What did your computer *predict* he would call it?"

"The Ring and the Book."

"Quite plausible. The ring would be from the inscription the Florentines made for Elizabeth on the wall of Casa Guidi: '...she made of her verses a golden ring between Italy and England.' The book would be your famous forgery. And of course the initials of the title would probably be R for Robert and B for Browning. Well, let's check. What *did* he call it? And there it is: The Ring and the Book. Bullseye! Twenty-one thousand lines. First published by Smith and Elder in four volumes, at monthly intervals, starting 21 November 1868."

I said, "Look for some contemporary reviews."

"Coming up." (She was with it now, a believer. How could she ever had doubted?) "Fortnightly Review, London Quarterly, Revue des Deux Mondes-- all unstinting praise. Ah, listen to what the Edinburgh Review says about Pompilia, Caponsacchi, and the Pope: 'In English literature the creative faculty of the poet has not produced three characters more beautiful or better to contemplate than these three.' And the Athenaeum, the lordly arbiter of English criticism, says, '... The Ring and the Book is beyond all parallel the supremest poetical achievement of our time... it is the most precious and profound spiritual treasure that England has produced since the days of Shakespeare.'" She looked up at me in wonder and silence. Finally, she turned back to the computer. "And now, how do we stand with Elizabeth Barrett?"

"Don't, Mae."

"I've got to know." She typed briefly at the keyboard. "Look at *that*. It says, see Elizabeth Barrett Browning."

I didn't know what to say. Keeping quiet just now was one of the few smart things I've done in my life.

"It was a risk we ran," she said thoughtfully. "They were one entity, really. The more of her, the less of

him. And vice versa. Each wanted the other to be appreciated and understood and famous. This was her wish for him, and his for her. She would have wanted it this way. Hmm. The Ring and the Book. I want to read this great thing."

I said, "The computer predicted he would dedicate it to her. For now, why don't we just look for the dedication? Plug in the poem. The dedication ought to be somewhere near the beginning."

"All right. Here we go."

* * *

PART 1

* * *

Do you see this ring?

["I'm skimming," said Mae.]

...

Do you see this square old yellow book?

[And on, and on. Robert takes his time. Makes it all clear. Ah, here we are, these lines to Elizabeth, closing Part 1:]

O lyric love, half angel and half bird,

And all a wonder and a wild desire--

* * *

Her voice broke. "I can't. It's too personal. She had been dead several years when he wrote that. All for her. He remembered... everything. He opened his heart. Oh, Bernard, what have we done?"

Well, Robert, I thought, you got my message, loud and clear. And you magically transformed it. But it was *my* message, to *Mae*, and now was the time to tell her. I wanted to say, Mae darling, that dedication was my declaration to *you*. But I couldn't speak. Mae saw it as a love letter to Elizabeth. And of course the lines were no longer just for Elizabeth: they had now entered the public domain and were the sacred property of every woman who was ever loved, or ever would be. So be it.

I tried to reassure her. "We did exactly what they both wanted. And the world is better for it."

"Do you think so? Well..." She shrugged. (Was she still bothered about Elizabeth, fading into the background?) She studied the CRT. "He didn't stop with the Ring. A lot of later things. Everything works now, everything sells. Browning clubs at Oxford and Cambridge. They explain Sordello to the mystified. Swinburne is elated with 'Fifine at the Fair': '...far better than anything Browning has yet written.' The Browning Society of London is chartered in 1881. Oxford and Cambridge give him honorary degrees."

I broke in. "Anything about what finally happened to the old yellow book?"

"Hold on. Here we are. After his death his son donated it to the library of Balliol College, at Oxford."

"What do you have on his death?"

"He died while visiting Venice, 12 December 1889. He had wanted to be buried next to Elizabeth, in the Protestant Cemetery at Florence, but because of Italian regulations and red tape, this was not possible. So he was buried in the Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey, next to Tennyson, and facing Chaucer." She paused. There was not much more to say. "I guess that's the end of it. Somehow, I'll have to catch up with Robert. Read the Ring, of course, and all his later poems. Study his bio. And the critics, contemporary and modern. He seems to have aged well."

"I know a good start," I said. "It's right here in the catalog."

"Really?"

The game was not over. An hour ago I had noted a fascinating entry in the time-traveled college catalog. Eros had one more shaft in his quiver. I said, "Remember, in our new parallel world, our little catalog reflects all changes resulting from Robert's rehabilitation. Ah, here. Eng 301, Travel Seminar,

Summer Session. An appreciation of Elizabeth Browning, minor Victorian poetess, wife of Robert Browning. Visit scenes of her childhood, youth, and marriage: Hope End, Wimpole Street. The marriage flight. Then that week in Paris. Next, Pisa, and finally Casa Guidi in Florence."

"Curious. Who's the tour instructor?"

"You are."

"No!" She grabbed the catalog, read slowly aloud, while she turned white. "I *can't*. I'm a semi-invalid."

"So was Elizabeth. I'll go with you. I'll help you up and down all those stairs. I'll take the questions about Robert. Where did they stay in Paris? The Hôtel de Ville, in the Rue d'Evêque, both now long gone." I may have regarded her with a look more leer than lyric (this being the nature of a man of purpose). "Do you know what they did on their last night there?"

She studied me with an innocence suggestive of Pompilia Franceschini, but with just a touch of Mata Hari and Lucrezia Borgia (such being the nature of a woman of purpose). "I know that it's exactly one minute before three o'clock, and that if you don't put that catalog on your funny time-plate, we may both wind up in a world where none of this ever happened."