

1911

The ethics of Browning

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Approved.
E. Charlton Black.
May 3, 1911.*

THESIS
THE ETHICS OF BROWNING
DELPHUS LEATON JEFFERS, A. B.

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DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH LITERATURE
E. CHARLTON BLACK, LL. D.
PROFESSOR

THESIS
THE ETHICS OF BROWNING
DELPHUS LEATON JEFFERS, A.B.

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E. CHARLTON BLACK, LL.D.
PROFESSOR

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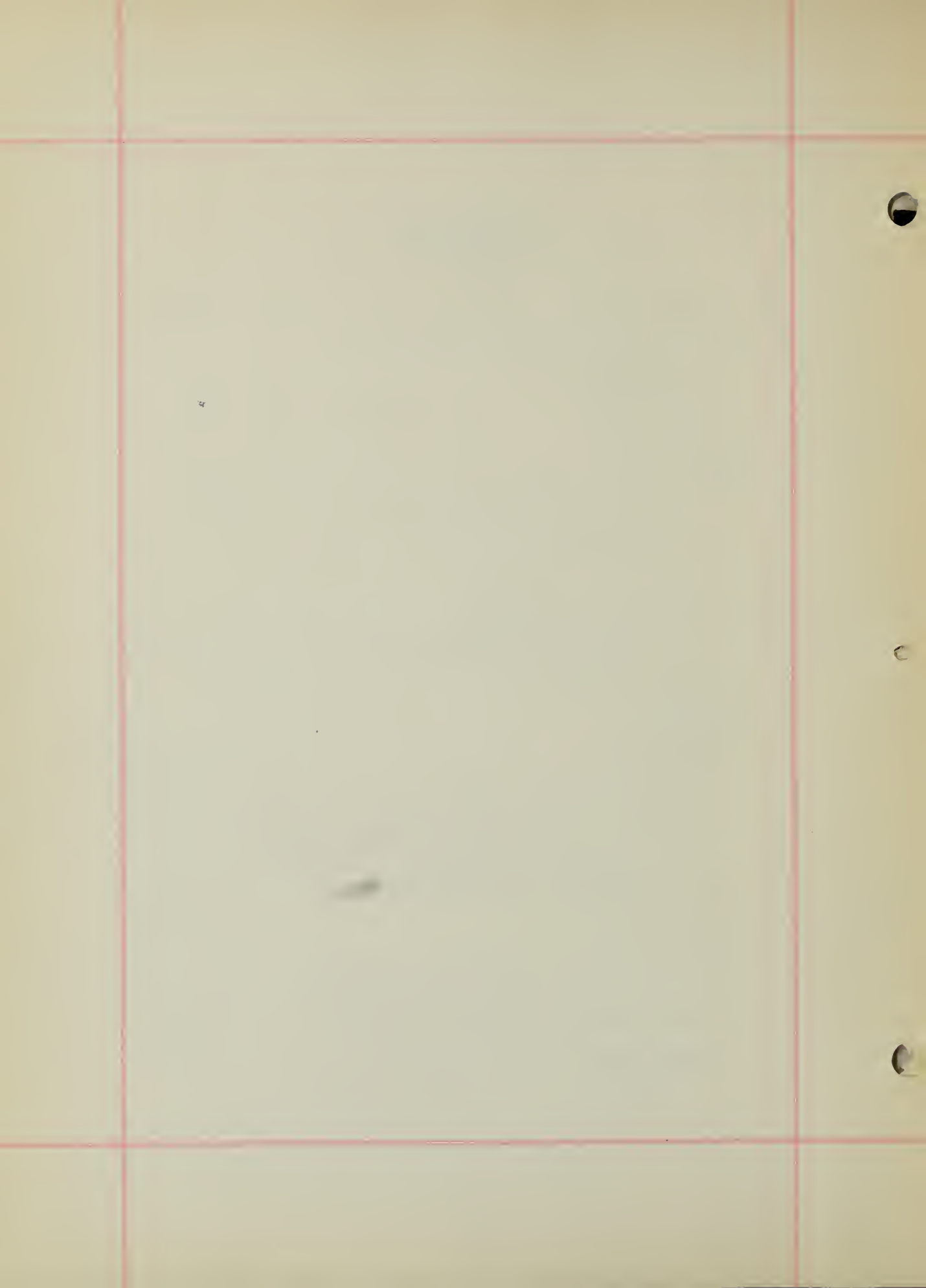
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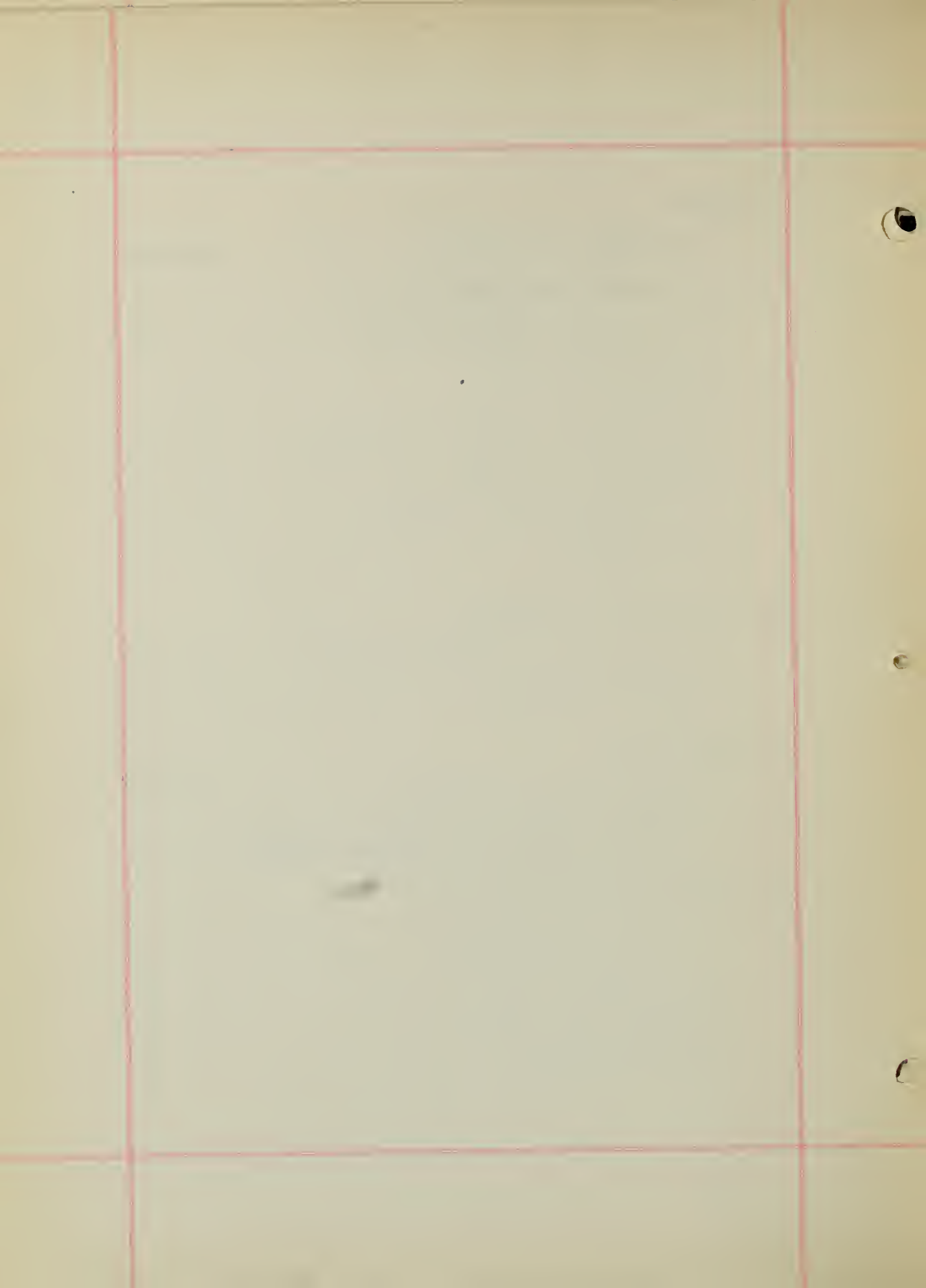
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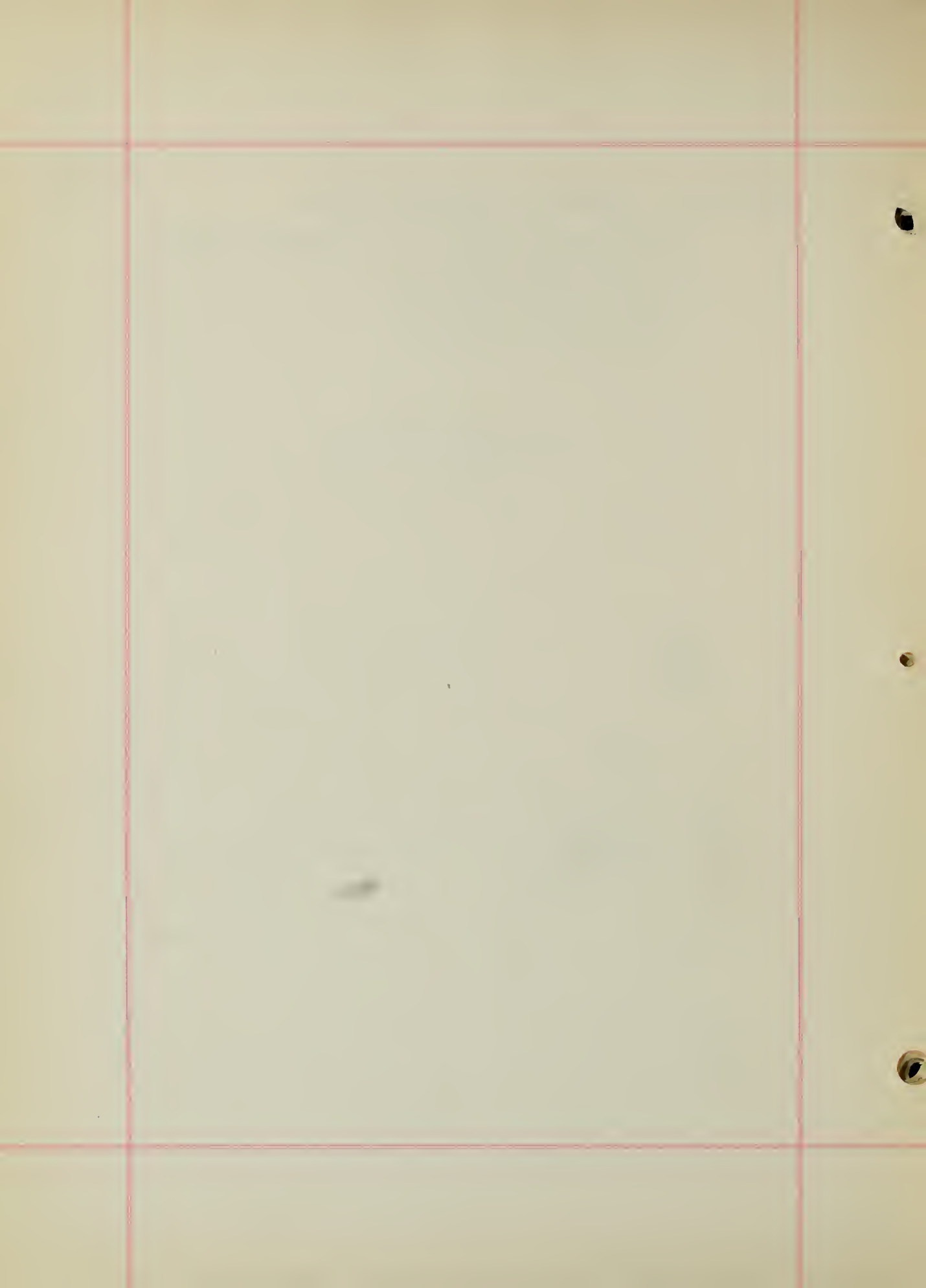
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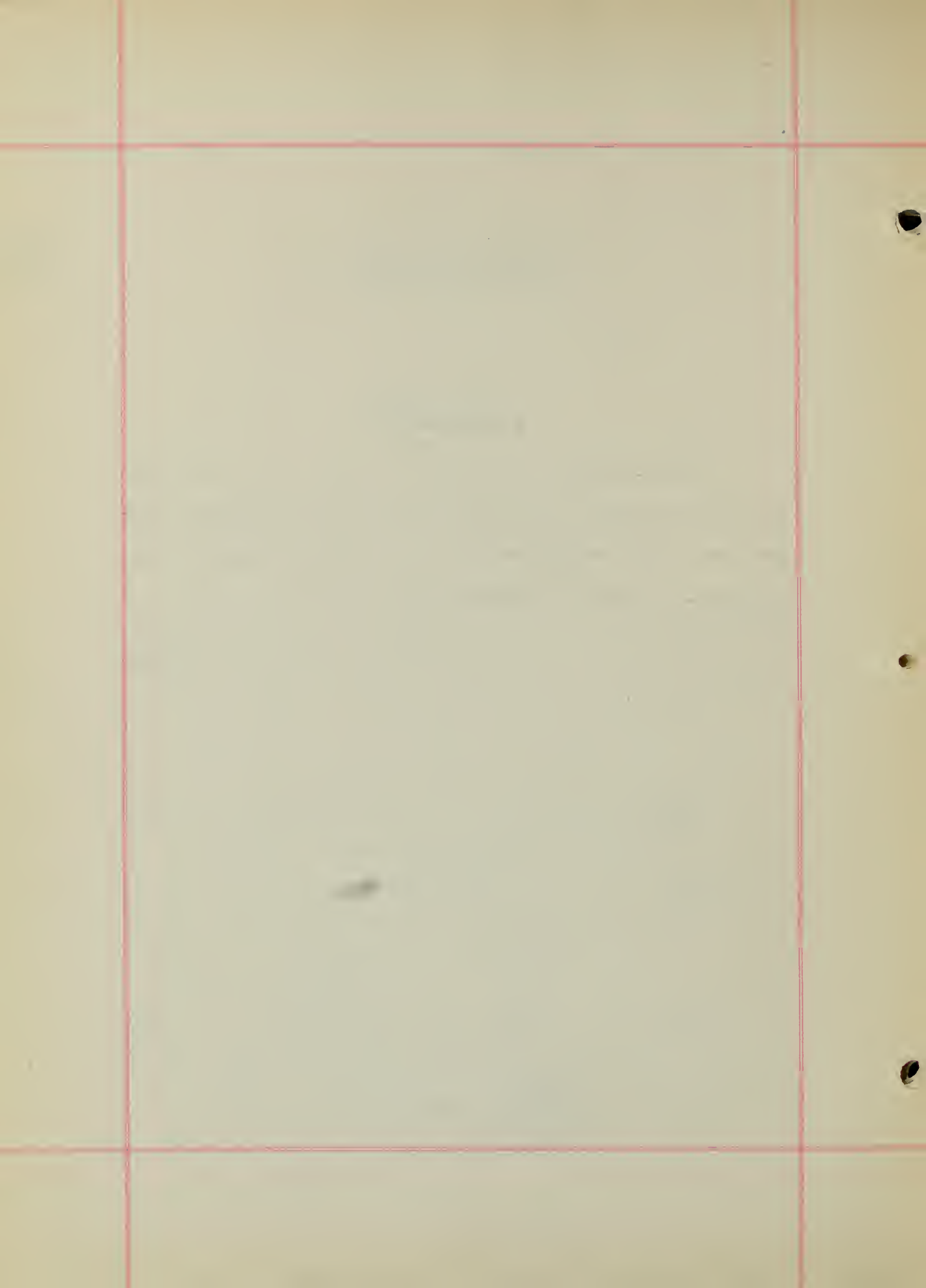
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THE ETHICS OF BROWNING

1. INTRODUCTION xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

Robert Browning is the poet of human life. "The proper study of mankind is man" and, perhaps, the greatest student the world has ever seen in this proper study is Robert Browning. His genius here found its highest interest. As the petrel finds its natural element on the stormy deep so Browning was most himself when engaged with the problems and ills that confront the human soul. In this field he is "a workman that needeth not to be ashamed". He is the great metaphysician bringing a needed ministrations to tried hearts in both the Old World and the New. The day of a true recognition of his healing has come tardily. Browning has not easily come into his own and even now the process is but half done. Indeed, the great majority of reading men and women will, perhaps, never appreciate him. His work is beyond their depth. Even the student and scholar essaying the work of this writer must dive deep and with a de-



terminated will or come up empty-handed.

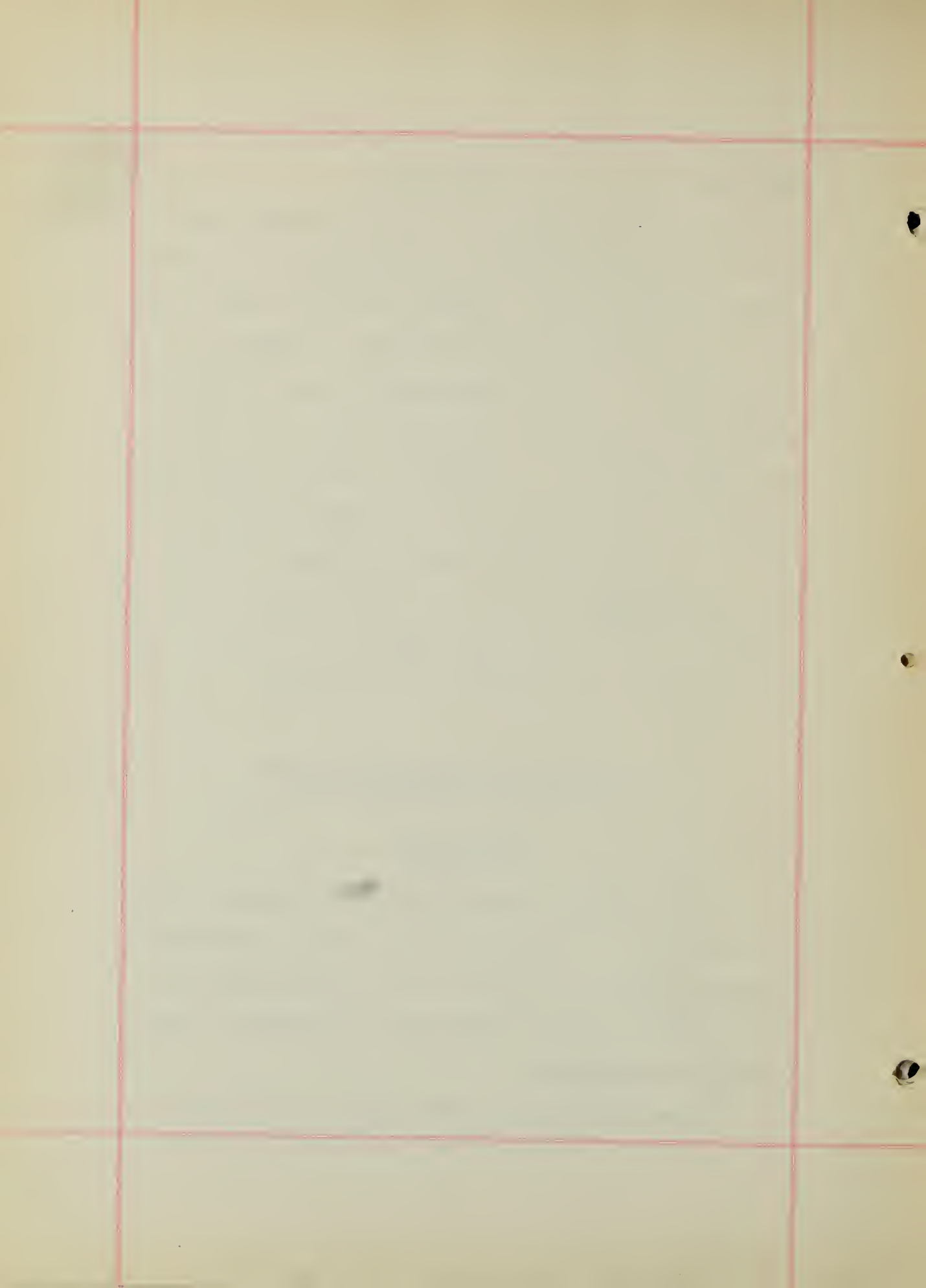
As a stranger without the gates and without note of introduction we have come to ask acquaintance of this confessedly obscure writer. Moreover, the one to whom we come is a poet torn; his life, his language, his thoughts are of poesy, while our purpose requires that we come asking him to speak to us rather as a preacher. Now a poet is not primarily a preacher or a pedagogue, yet every great poet should both teach and preach and "in each be equally skilful". In this grace Robert Browning excelled. Herein is he both great and skilful. He is never didactic; he never preaches at us; he never says, "Thou art the man!" In other words his work is constitutive, not regulative.

2. BACK-GROUND OF BROWNING'S LIFE
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1) Parentage

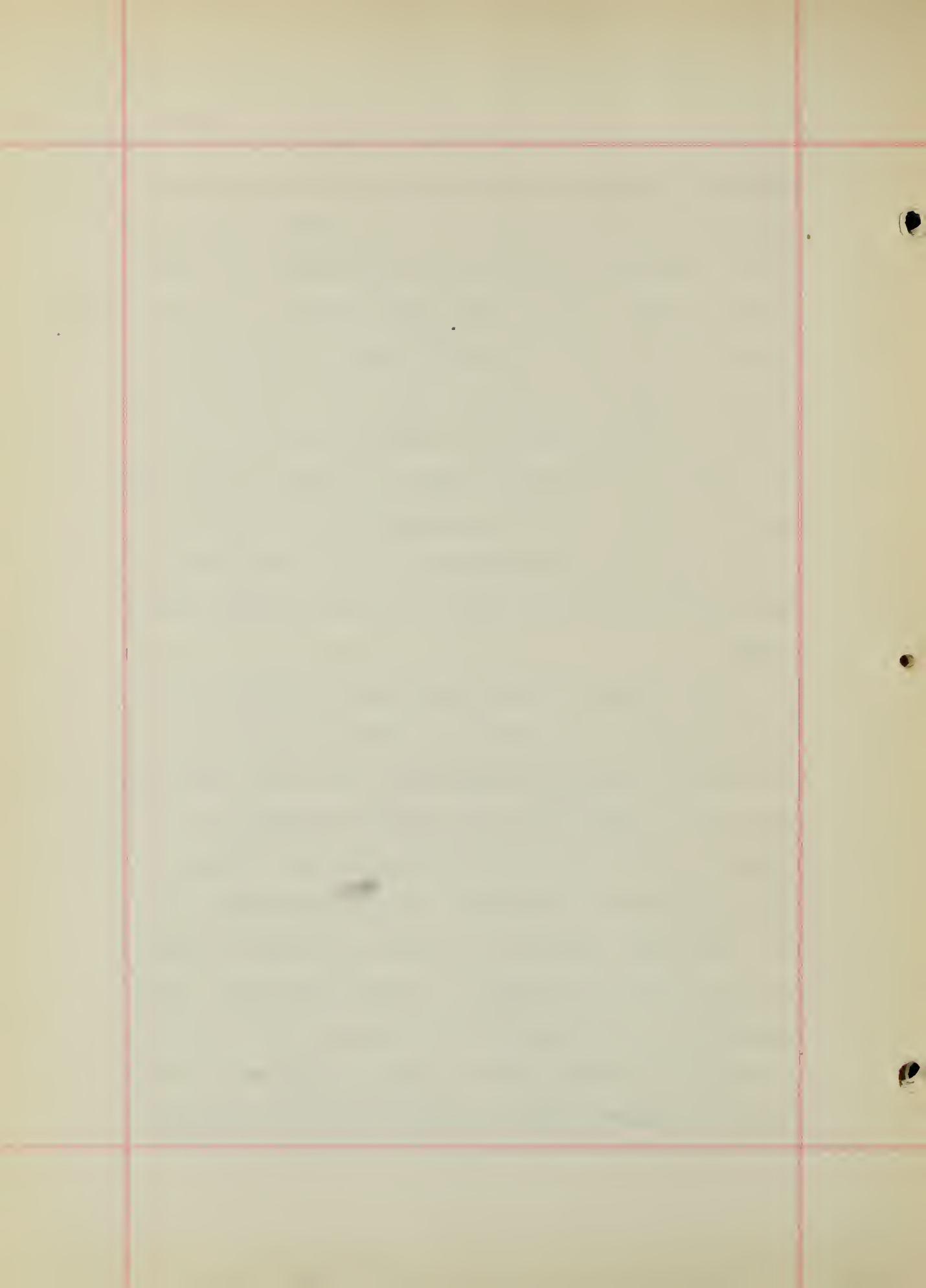
Robert Browning was well-born and wholesomely nurtured. Childhood is a time for wisdom, and wise parents are careful to implant in the child those truths which no future attack of sinister intent can ever overthrow. This Browning's parents did.

Robert Browning, the poet's father, was a clerk in



the Bank of England. In this vocation he was exact and painstaking. He was himself a man of literary taste, and as his occupation gave him some leisure each day he became a great reader. He also wrote considerable verse and with some ability. He was an earnest Christian, having been carefully reared in the Established Church, though later he turned to Congregationalism. In disposition he was kind and cheerful; in his tastes, quiet and simple. He was "passionately fond of children, and gave his own that best of gifts, appreciative companionship". He was a true father and often held the child Robert in his arms and sang him to sleep.

The mother of Browning was Sarah Ann Wiedemann. She was the daughter of a German ship-owner who had come to Dundee and had married a Scotch wife. By these sturdy parents she was brought up in the Church of Scotland, but in later life, and like her husband, she became a Dissenter. She was a woman of refinement - gentle, affectionate, musical, and deeply religious. The poet's love for this noble mother was deep and fervent. The news of her death, which reached him in Florence soon after his own child was born, brought to his rugged nature an agony of suffering. "He has loved his mother", wrote Mrs. Browning, "as such passionate

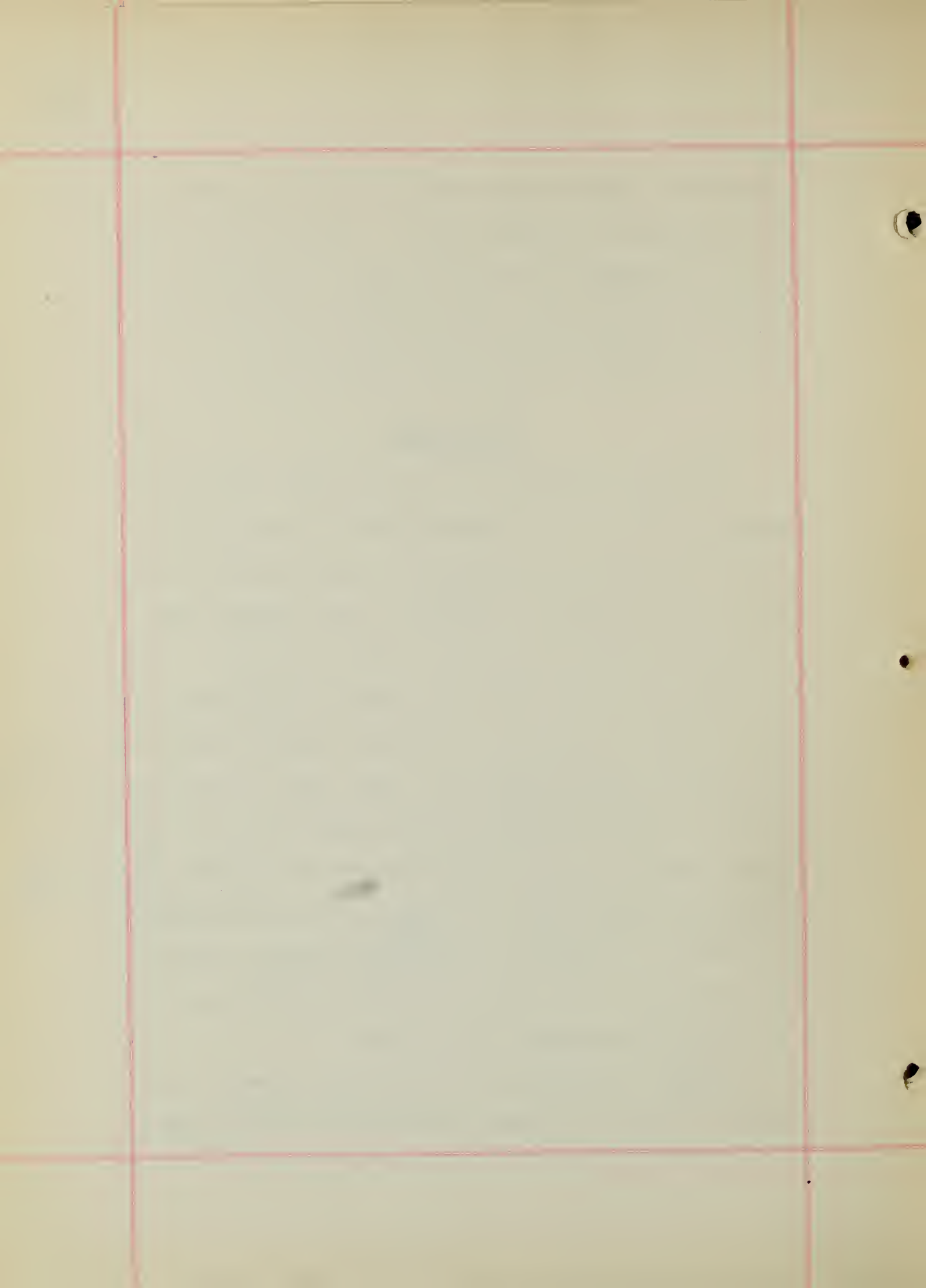


natures only can love, and I never see a man so bowed down in an extremity of sorrow - never. - - Robert was too enraptured at my safety and with his little son, and the sudden reaction was terrible". What a testimony this is to the powerful influence of the mother in Browning's life!

2) Education

From the beginning much was planned and hoped by the parents for their son's education, and when they trusted that he would turn to artistic or literary lines they were not to be disappointed. Perhaps the least important part of Browning's education came from school and books. As can be said of many a boy today he had "an indifferent experience of formal schooling in his youth". Following this he had private tutors and later spent two years in London University. He did not however, take a degree for he was naturally drawn to art. The refined tastes of his father and mother reappeared in his own. He had learned both French and Greek, and afterwards translated Aeschylus and Euripides, but he was more deeply interested in poetry and painting, in music, sculpture, and the stage.

Browning possessed, and, we may say, inherited, the nature of a poet. He dwelt on deep thoughts even in early



youth. He could lie for hours and look away to the spires of London while lost in meditation. He loved to walk alone after dark while his active mind was busy in imagination. He loved the silence of the midnight and the quiet of the dawning day. And who is the poet? Yes, it is he who brings a message to men in the form of verse, but it is as truly he who loves a beautiful sunset, or the song of the nightingale, or the silence of the midnight watches. Such an affection at once bespeaks the poet's heart and such an affection had Browning. That he made poetry his choice has proved a blessing to many who otherwise might never have known of his life or his work.

While growing into manhood Browning became skilful in the manly sports of his time and developed a robust physical body. His boyhood years had already given him much of that out-of-door life so necessary to arrounding health. The country-like home at Canterwell gave him access to open fields and running brooks. Here orchard and garden, sunshine and rain, birds and butterflies, ministered to the highest of all - the life of the child. Here the boy had "pet owls and monkeys, magpies and hedge-hogs, an eagle, and snakes even". Here he developed a close observation of the many forms of lower life and learned to love them well.

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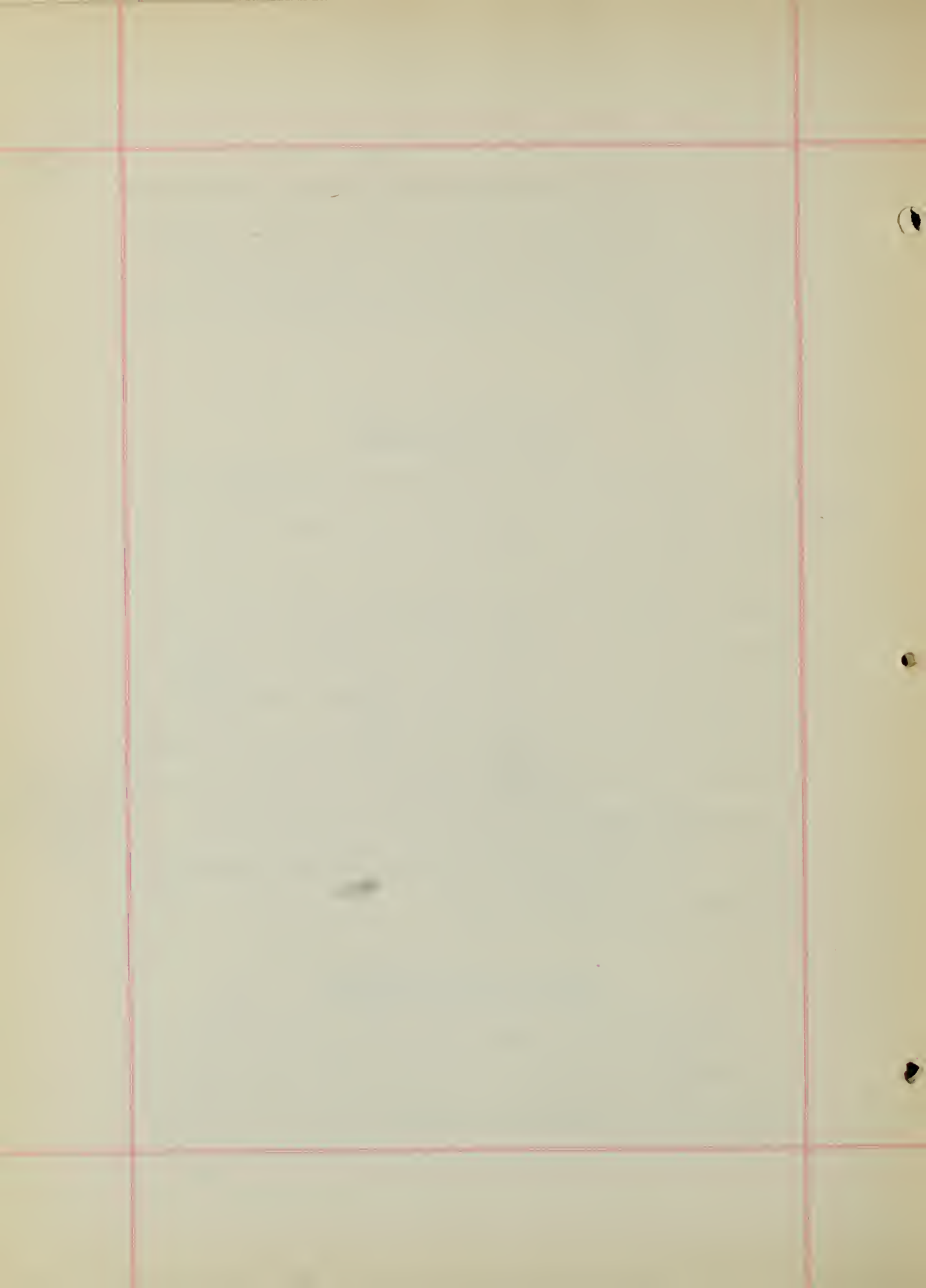
Just such a back-ground as we have here noted was essential to one who was to become a great ethical teacher. Without such a parentage and without such liberality in training we may question whether the Browning we so admire had ever been.

3. BROWNING AS A WRITER XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

If it be true that no man can say what poetry means except what it means to himself let us concede that this is doubly true of Browning's poetry. His works, like the continent of Africa, are still undergoing exploration. Some portions we know. They are ours by right of conquest and minister to us richly from their abundant resources. Other portions there are that have been explored by comparatively few while the many push on in search of the Transvaal land of this "obscure" author seeking the mines of reputed wealth. In this search, however, as in the Scripture promise, "He that seeketh findeth".

1) Mental Characteristics

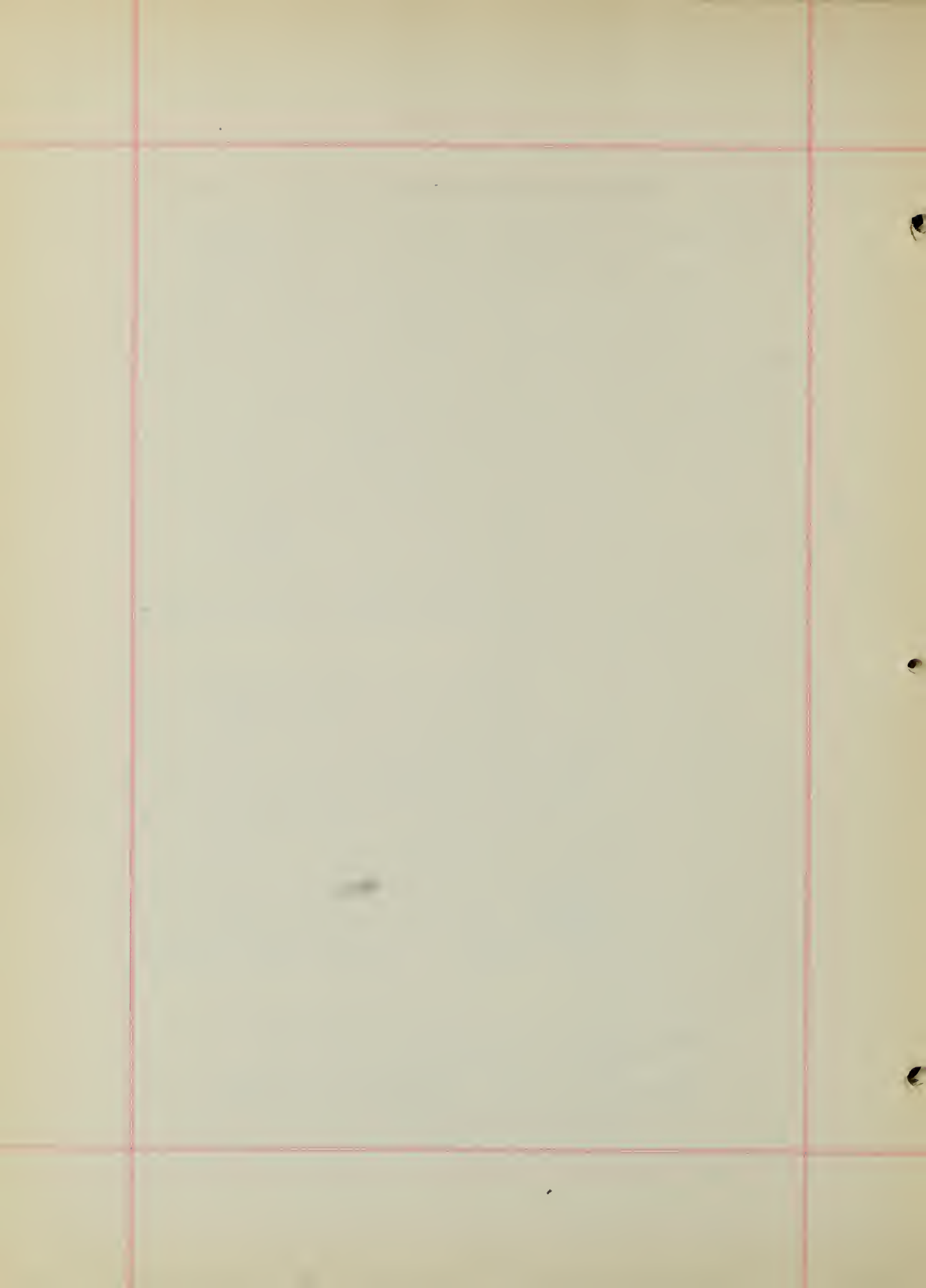
Every poet like every other man of work has his bent, his choices. The poets of the first half of the eighteenth century found an attractive and wide subject in the field



of nature. Wordsworth was there most at home. He loved solitude and the language of field and flower rather than that of men. Not so with Browning. His favorite ^{subject} was human life. Here he found a study real and purposeful. The human mind, with its psychological moods and its varying interests, requires that careful study that at once appealed to the virile and scrutinizing powers of Browning. "My stress", he says, "lay on the incidents in the development of the soul, little else is worth study". Such a study as Browning here indicates can be made successfully only by one who has a penetrating power of analysis, and this he himself possessed in a very marked degree.

While Browning is analytic he is also scientific and constructive. He sees and conserves all that is of value. His mining is not done by the hydraulic process which allows the finer particles of gold to be carried through the sluice-way and be lost in the lower-levels. He discovers and cherishes the smaller qualities of good. He sees the force of the seemingly trivial. These form life; omitted, life may be ruined.

*"That low man seeks a little thing to do,
Sees it and does it:
This high man, with a great thing to pursue
Dies ere he knows it.*



*That low man goes on adding one to one,
 His hundred's soon hit;
 This high man, aiming at a million,
 Misses an unit".**

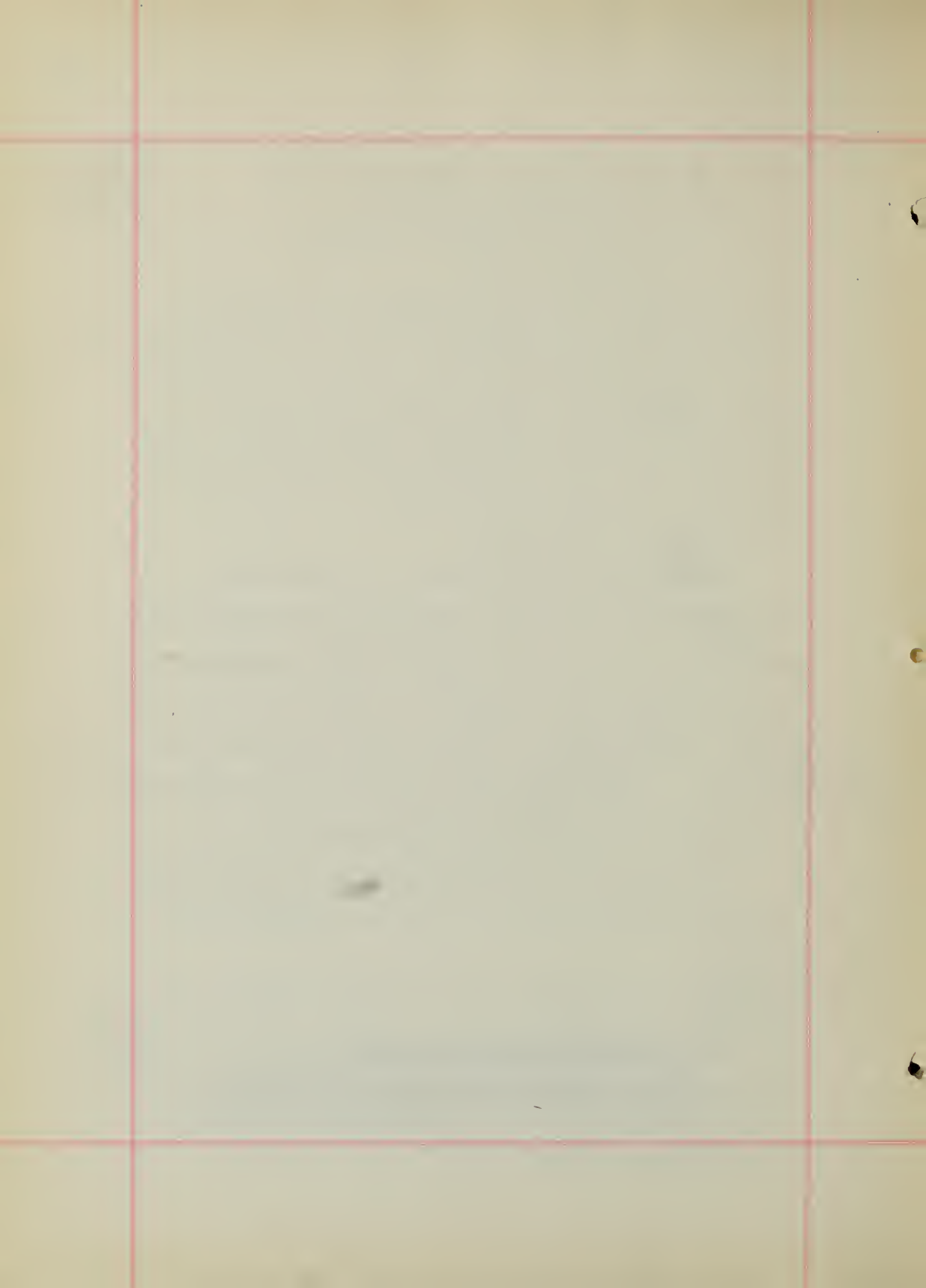
Browning is the deep-searching man of knowledge and of power. "He knows more about us than we know ourselves; he knows everything". He was not one, like Addison, who "had nothing to say" yet could say it with a charming grace and suavity that never failed to please. Browning has a message and he will be heard.

He is the most masculine poet of modern times. He grips everything he touches. Whatever he undertakes becomes a man's job. We feel he would have succeeded anywhere. Had he turned to law, as his father had at first hoped he would do, his clients might rest assured that their cause was in the hands of a master and their adversaries might expect to be shot through and through by a relentless logic.

Had science been his chosen work never had laboratory yielded its secrets more swiftly and more surely than to him.

If medicine had won him to its ranks Paracelsus himself would have been rivalled as a medical reformer by this man of genius. His own health "mocked the doctor's rules" as well as the invalid whims of Miss Barrett's father. He

* *A Grammarian's Funeral*, p. 280.



believed in health and would have it for all.

How enriched would the ministry have been by the rugged, whole-souled Browning! Even as a poet he is a mighty reasoner "of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come". In the pulpit throngs would have listened to a seer denouncing sin with a Rooseveltian energy, and with a faith against which no psychical seismograph might ever record a tremor while life and words would thunder forth the mighty truth,

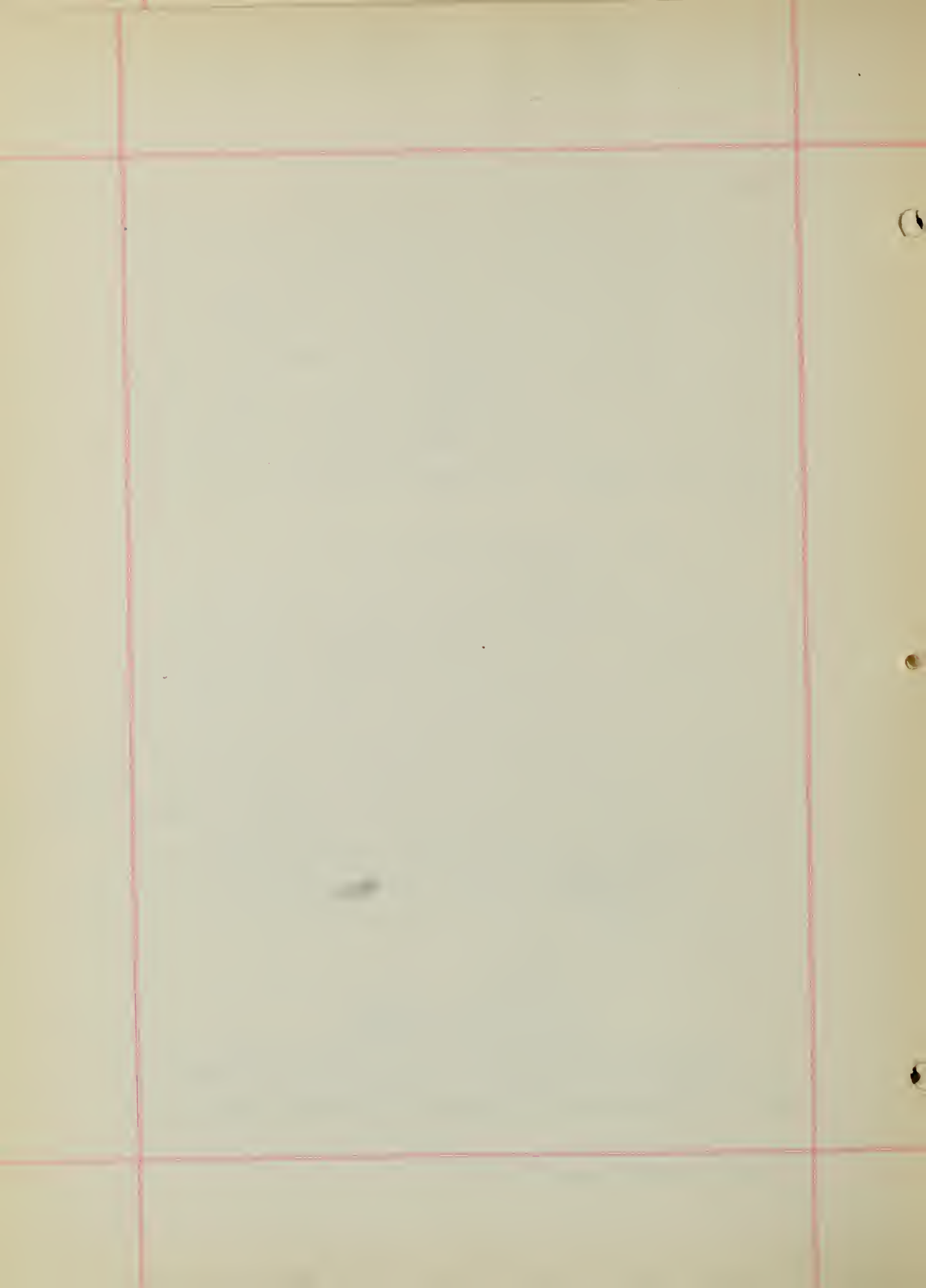
*"Thy soul and God stand sure".**

Great as Browning might have been in any of these fields, however, we feel that he is greater still in that he is the greatest ethical poet of his age, and perhaps of any age. He has the penetration of a lawyer, the vision of a scientist, the optimism of a successful physician, and the faith and love of a prophet of God. Because he possesses these high qualifications and yet chooses to speak as a poet, he is a recognized leader among many brethren. He is "The Poet's Poet".

2) His Chief Interest

The silver thread running through all of Browning's work is his interest in the soul-struggle which comes to

* *Rabbi Ben Ezra, p. 385¹.*

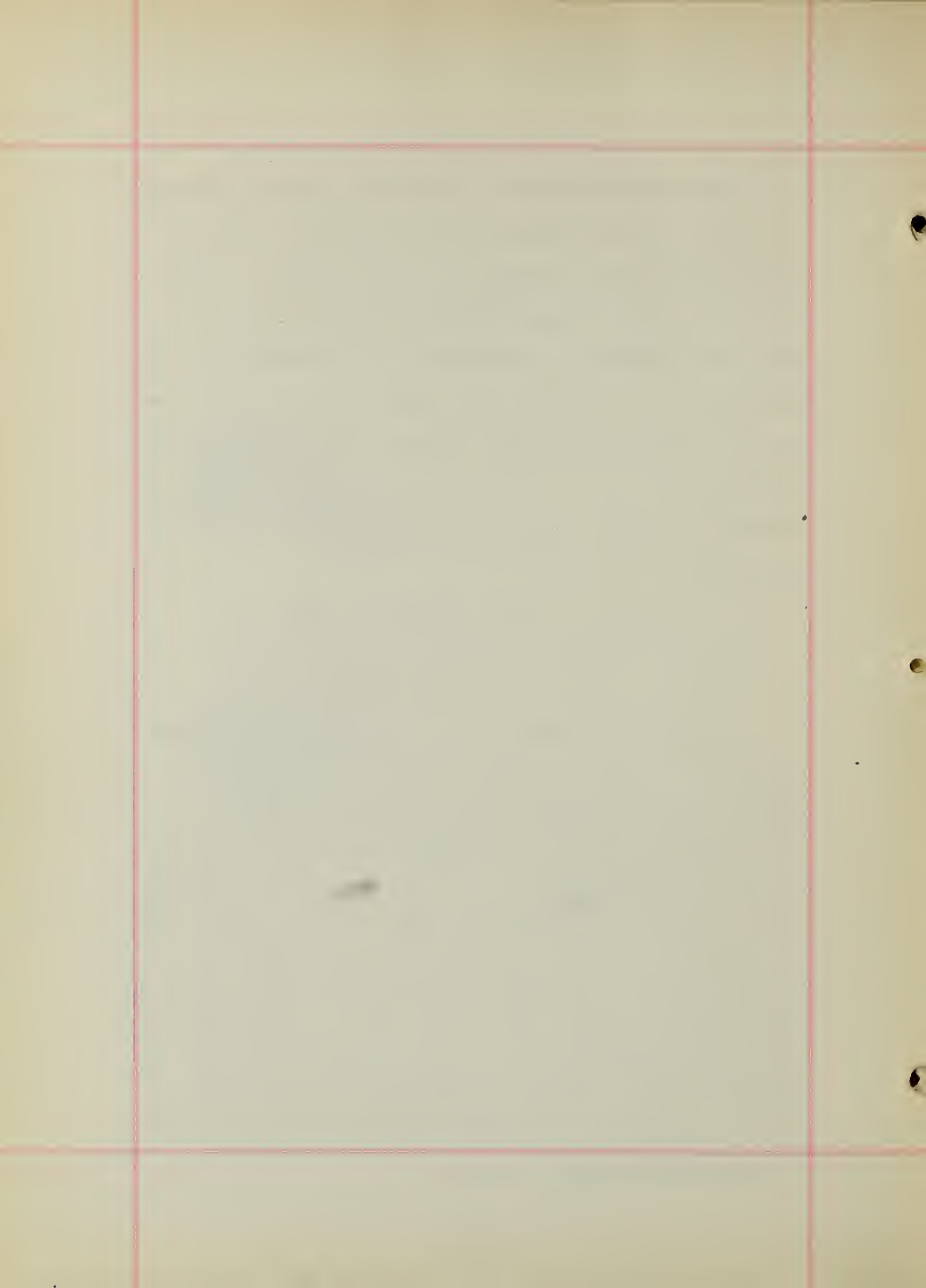


every life that aspires. Dr. Erdoe says Browning's great themes are God, the soul, and the future life; that earth is the school-time, and that Love is the one great lesson to learn. In his themes Browning thoroughly believes. He sees man's life here is incomplete. It is fettered, yet it ever struggles to be free. Only here and there do we find a life that has really risen to be a Shakespeare, a Milton, a Plato, or a Dante. It is in the Divine plan that all men shall thus rise and this is man's crowning privilege; for progress is

*"man's distinctive mark alone,
Not God's, and not the beasts: God is, they are,
Man partly is and wholly hopes to be".**

In his study Browning is not so much concerned about the soul's origin. He does not ask, "Whence came I?" He rather accepts the fact, "I am here", and then asks, "What is my duty?" and "What is my destiny?" His whole life-work is an answer to these two questions. However, his work is the farthest removed from being narrow. He reaches out everywhere as with an omnivorous appetite and draws the materials for his use from almost all fields of knowledge. Voltaire said, "There can be no great poetry without great wisdom". Browning has this needed wisdom. "If we can't under-

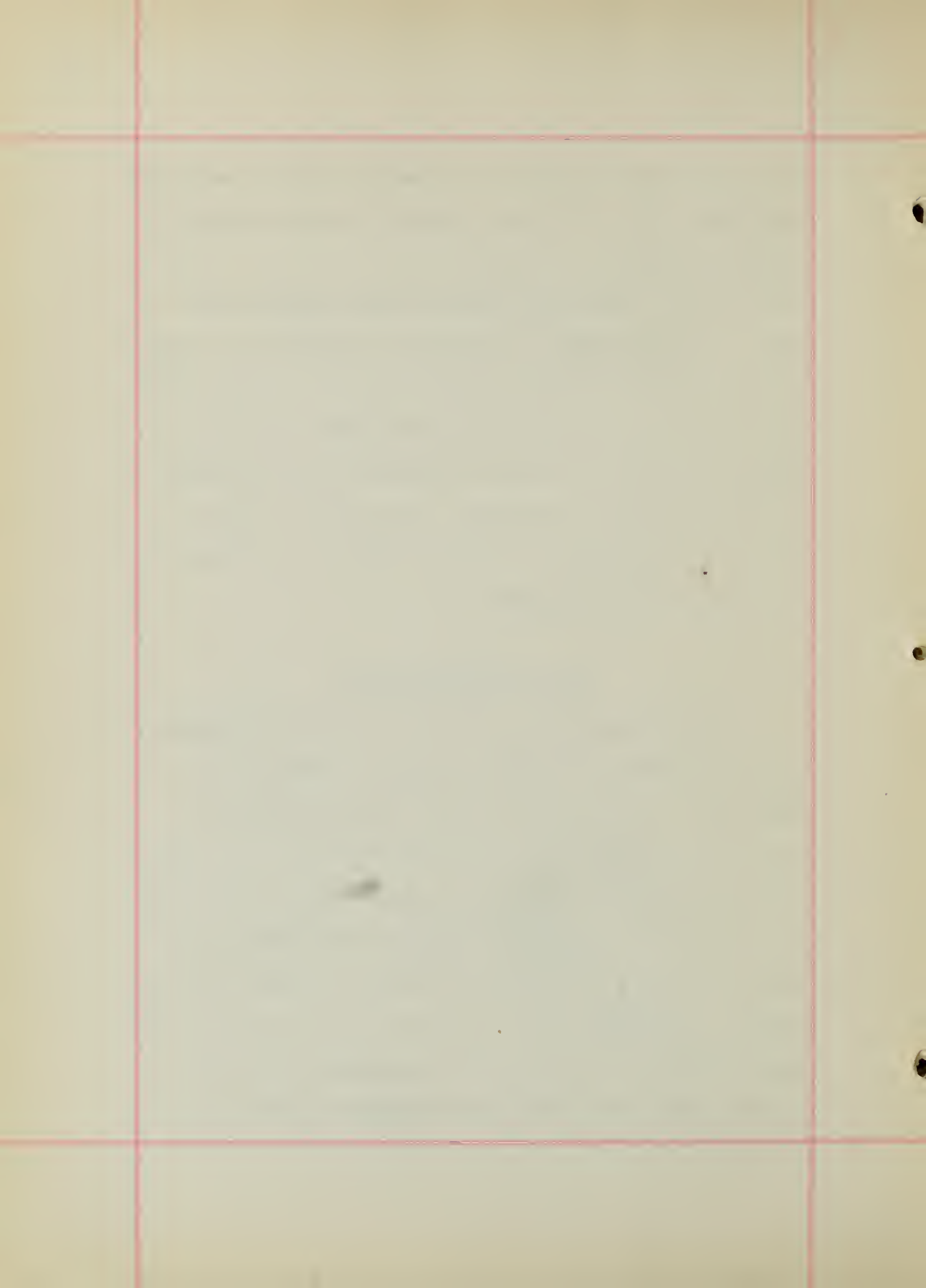
* *A Death in the Desert*, p. 391.



stand him", says Berdoo, "it is because we know so much less than he". All of his wisdom, experience, and observation impressed upon him that great truth of life and of Christian thought - the supreme worth of the individual man. With Browning all other interests are subordinate to this. He sees man as the highest in the scale of all God's creation, and sees him capable of rising higher yet. He has sympathy for all who look up and strive, but his sympathy is never puerile or effeminate. He accepts the motto "*ad astra per aspera*" knowing that the stars can be reached only through the difficulties.

3) His Method Dramatic

The problem of human life with its hopes and struggles being Browning's chief interest has determined in large part the form of his writing. The drama had long been the favorite method of presenting "life in movement". In this, Shakespeare was king. Browning could write dramatic poetry but he was no dramatist. As Shakespeare often used the soliloquy effectively so Browning employed the monologue. Such methods best reveal the inner workings of the mind and heart. We there see men describing their own thoughts and again remember that "as a man thinketh, in his

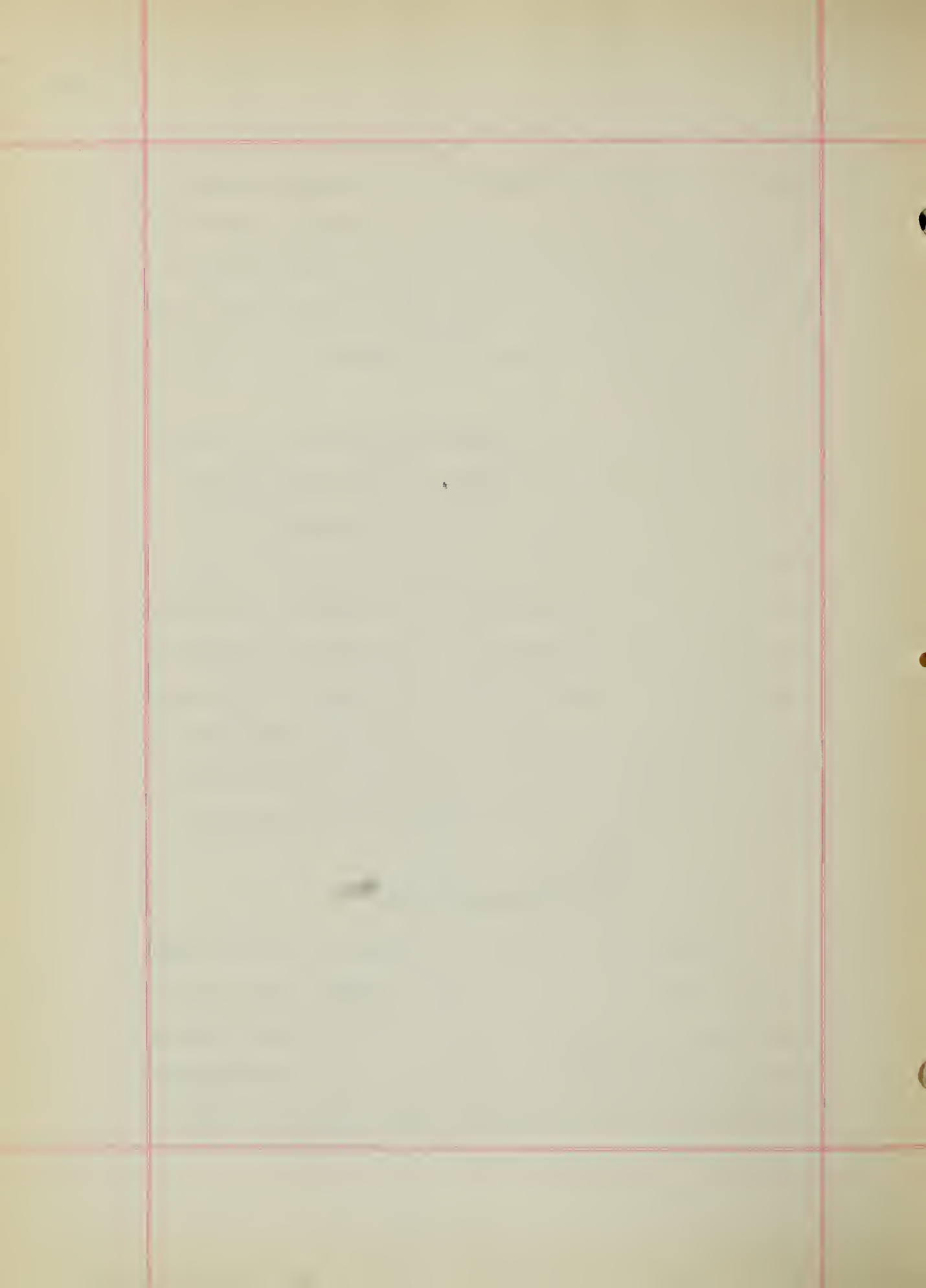


heart so is he". Thus we see the cold, haughty nature of the Duke revealed in the monologue poem, "My Last Duchess" and our hearts recoil from such a villain; on the other hand we draw near in sympathy to the lover of Evelyn Hope as we hear his confession of love and his expectation of its future fulfilment.

In the same way we become acquainted with the inner life and motives of Paracelsus, the rapt emotions of Art Vogler, and the baseness of heart in Franceschini. The Scripture declaration, "By thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned" is by Browning put into active operation as he lays bare the hearts of his characters by means of their own arguments. As we listen we must necessarily sit in judgment over them and in so doing we ourselves are left men and women, different, and better, because of the moral truths we have considered.

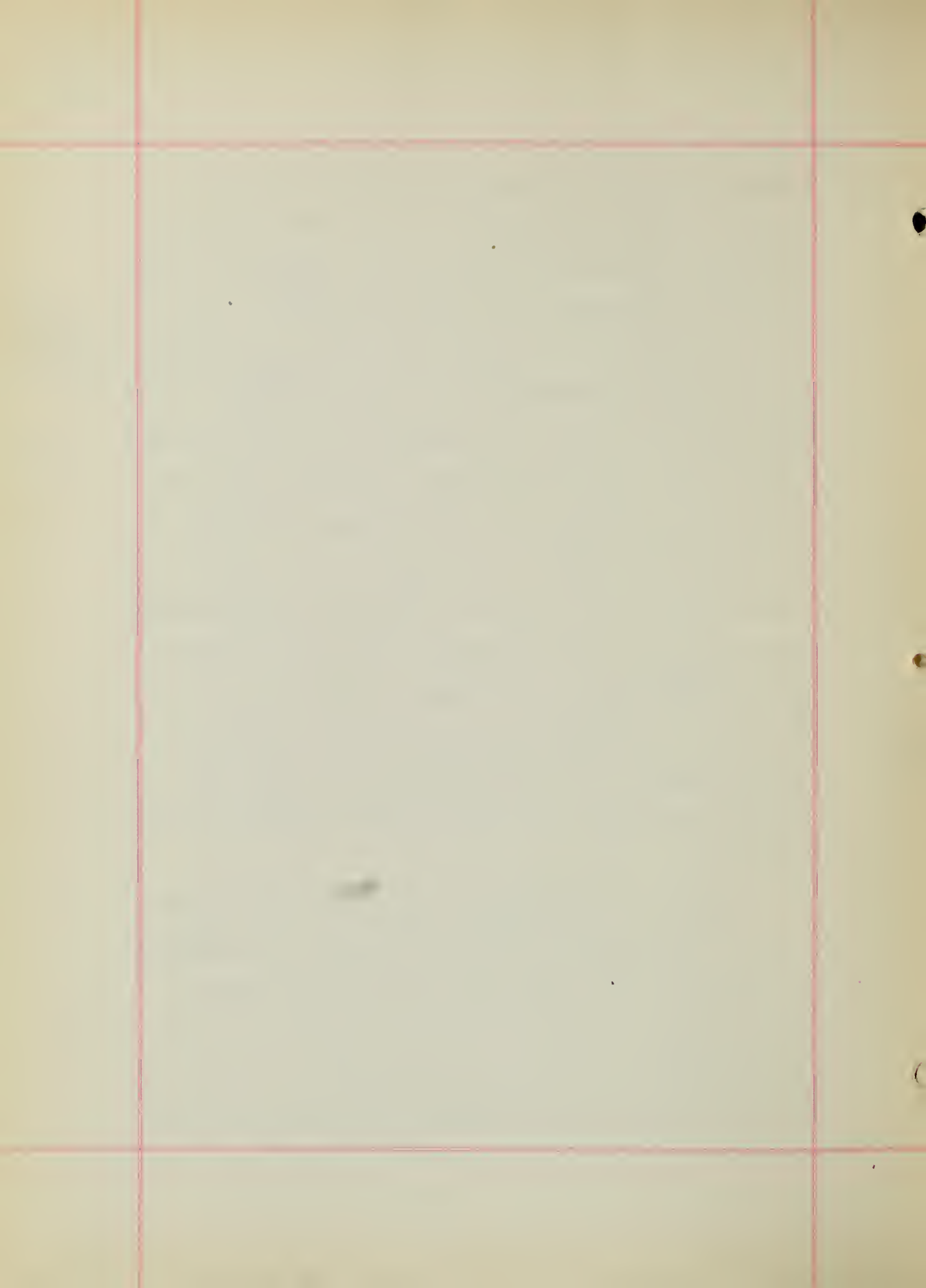
4) Style and Diction

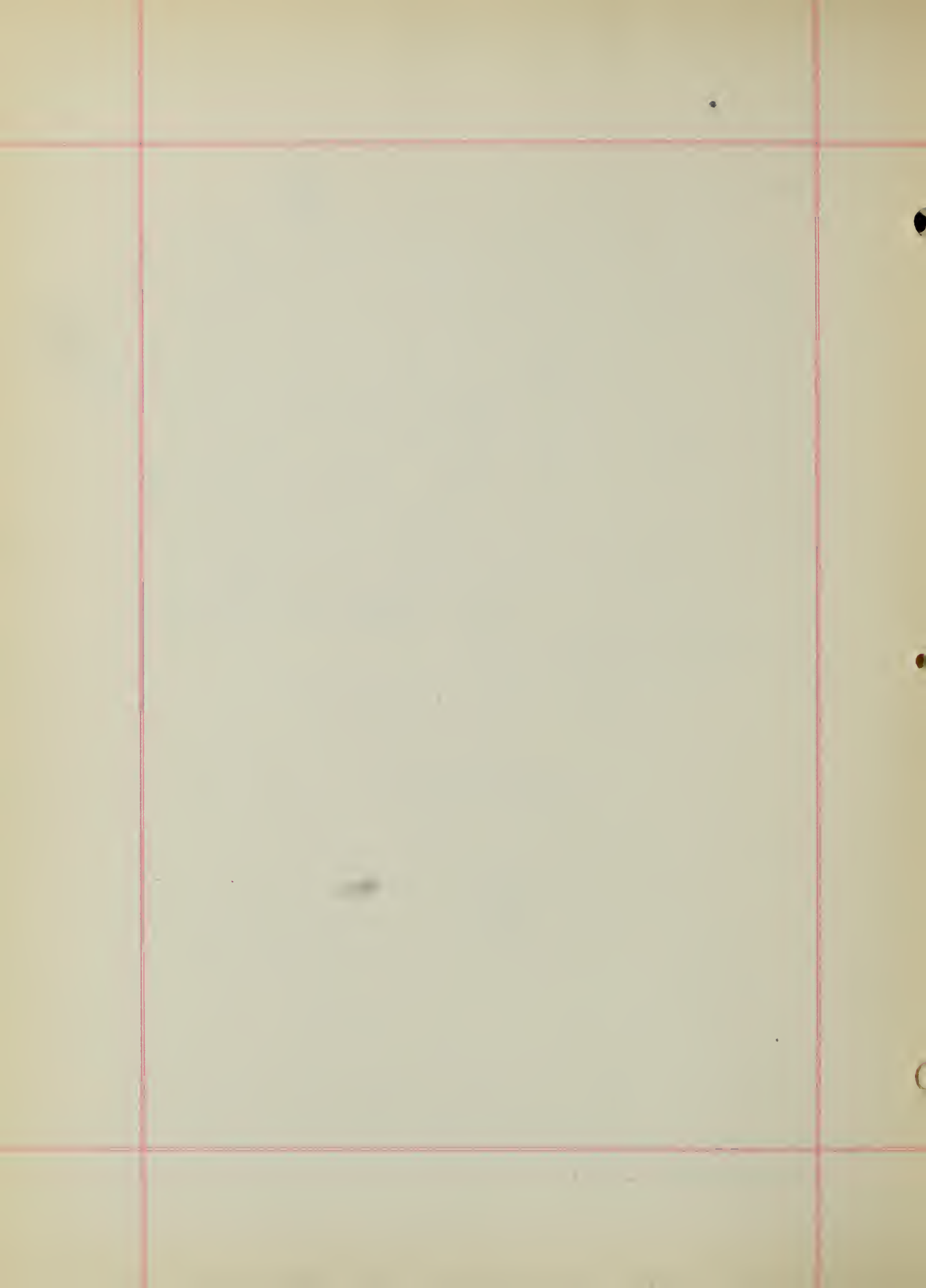
Browning is no imitator. He did not consciously determine, perhaps, to employ a style differing from that of every other writer, never-the-less he did this very thing. He is always himself and his literary style is as unique as his character. He writes with a strong hand and is more



concerned with what he has to say than with how he shall say it. A man who has a message will be heard. Browning truly has a message but he lacks care for the form in which he gives it utterance. He is heard because of the value of what he says, and not because he says it well. He mercilessly abuses the proprieties of finished language. His habitual use, or misuse, of his mother-tongue is not that pardonable riding down of all nicety of expression which may come to the impassioned soul when all else is forgotten in one mighty onward sweep. With Browning it is a habit - his one bad habit, and by many it is considered a glaring fault. The habit is the more inexcusable since he was a master in good form and elegant diction when he chose to be. It is difficult to understand why a poet of such extraordinary powers failed to give to his work that high dignity and beauty of expression that marks the work of Tennyson and of Wordsworth.

Browning has been called obscure until that adjective seems to belong to him in a peculiar sense. He is profoundly philosophic, but he is obscure not so much because of his profundity as because he did not take the pains to express himself so that he could be understood. We smile but we do not wonder that Mrs. Carlyle said she could not tell





4. PARACELSUS xxxxxxxxxxxxx

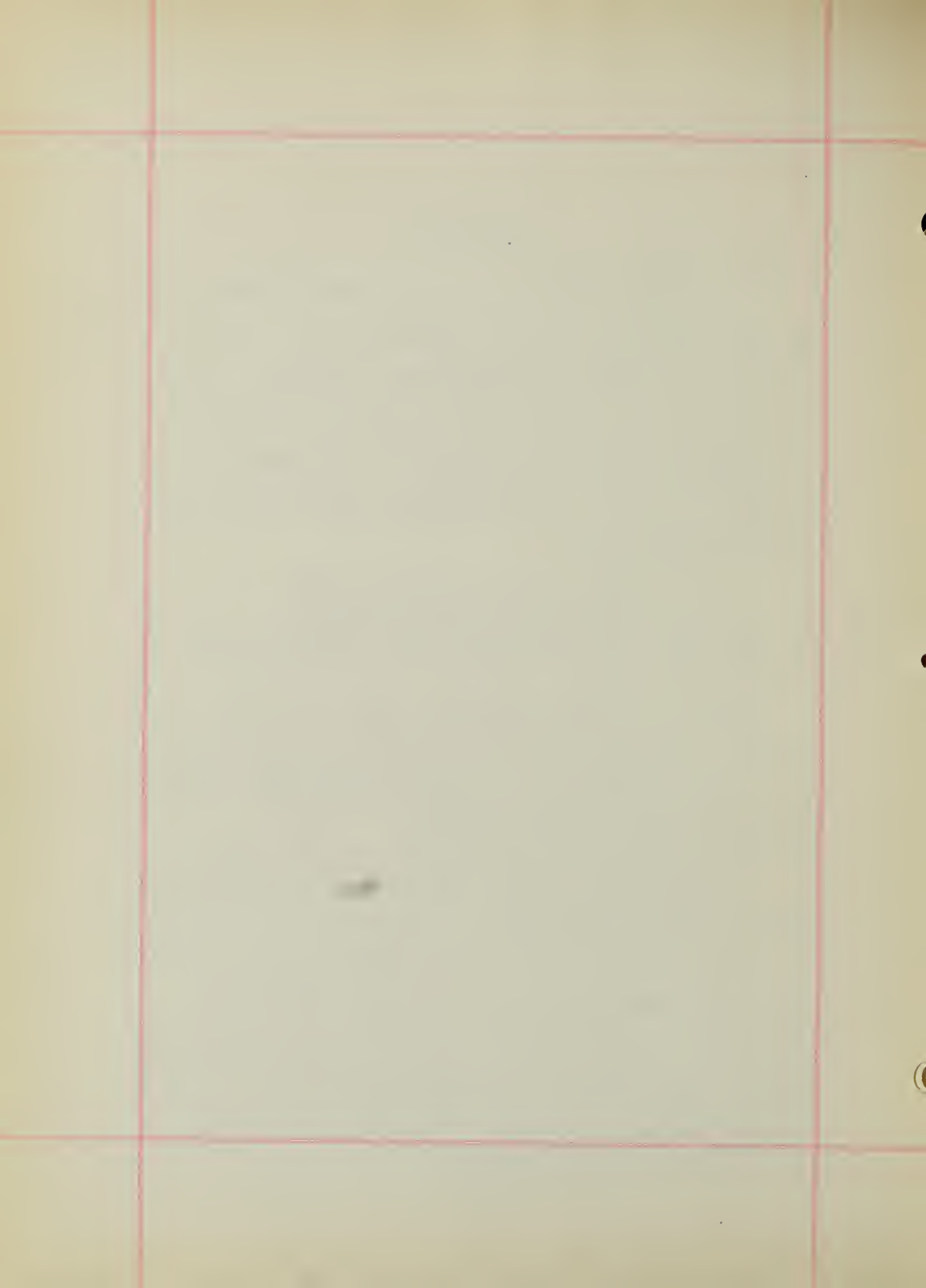
We have said that Browning is the poet of human life. Any real study of his writing reveals the fact that he is interested in human life chiefly as an unfolding. He sees the great meaning of man's life here is that he may nobly strive, and not solely to possess, but that he may go on seeking the highest. With Saint Paul he asks man to press on toward perfection.

*"Man must pass from old to new,
From vain to real, from mistake to fact,
From what once seemed good, to what now proves best".**

Every man aspires. He has an ideal - his ideal - toward which he strives though his method of striving may often be weak and wavering. In the poem, Paracelsus, Browning admirably illustrates this truth.

Paracelsus is the master student. Science and medicine are his chief interests. He does not, however, study by rule nor does he learn by rote. His text-books are Nature and the common people. He thus gains knowledge at first hand. He also develops a great love for humanity. He ministers with such marked success to men's bodily ills, and teaches them out of a heart so full and a mind so ready

* *A Death in the Desert*, p. 390².



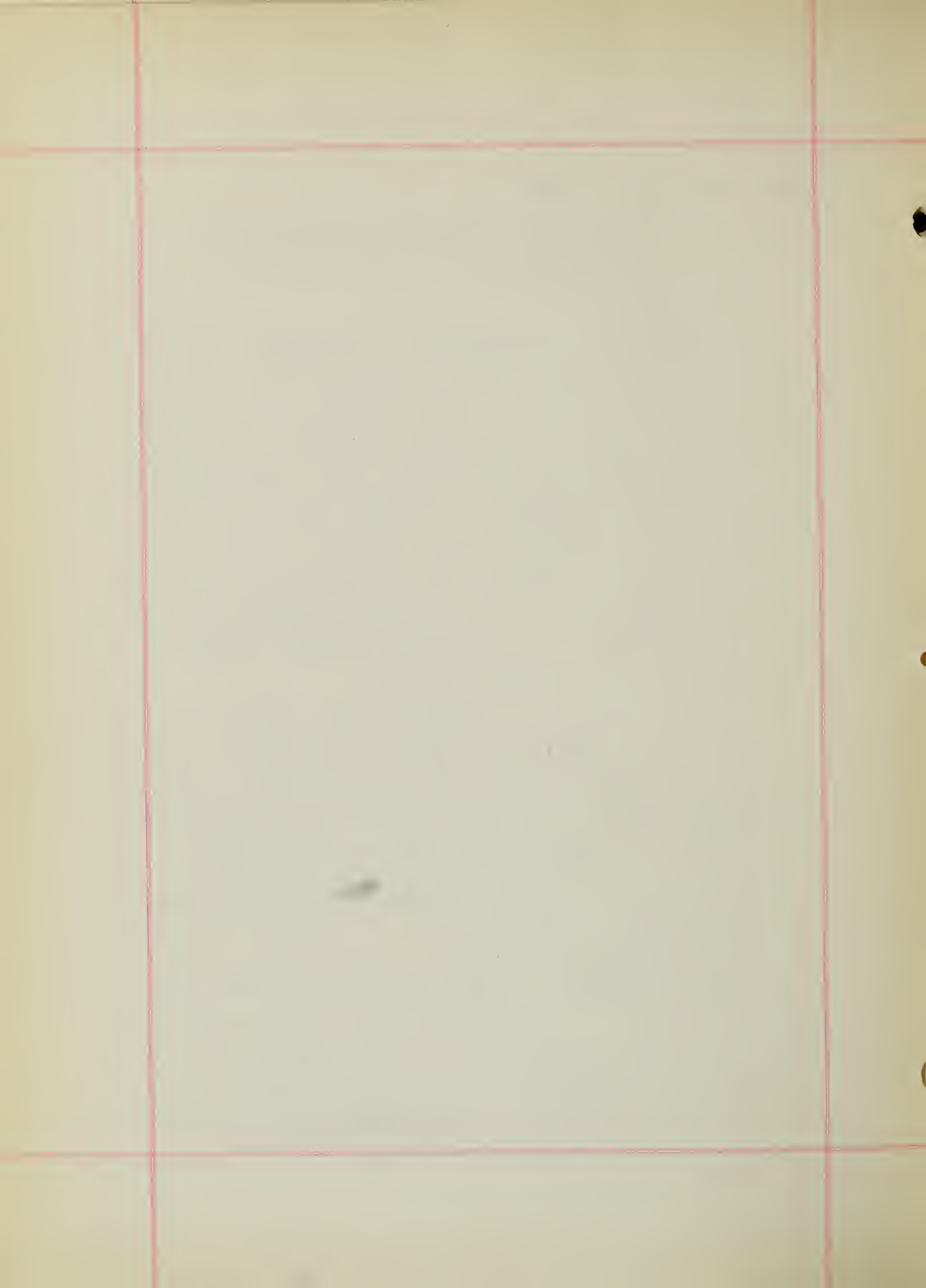
that we see him at Basle,

*"The wondrous Paracelsus, life's dispenser,
Fate's commissary, idol of the schools
And courts".*

In the person of Paracelsus our poet embodies the spirit of the Renaissance which had already opened men's minds and set investigation astir. Paracelsus, a most daring soul, would not remain in the close and unwholesome atmosphere of dead conservatism. He would strike out boldly, seeking knowledge wherever it might be found. He has longings in his heart. He believes they are God-given and that God's answer awaits. He is heedless of counsel. Plunge he will. His friends must await his rise.

He rises exhausted in body and spirit. Much of life is gone. The voice of Aprile, the poet, who has also been disappointed in his life's quest, speaks to him. Each sees the error of the other and each learns his great lesson. Neither knowledge nor love of beauty can alone suffice. Each is complementary to the other.

Some years later at Basle University Festus sees Paracelsus a learned physician and professor. Crowds throng to hear him. He is loved by all. He has degrees and diplomas. The great scholar Erasmus has complimented him. Out-

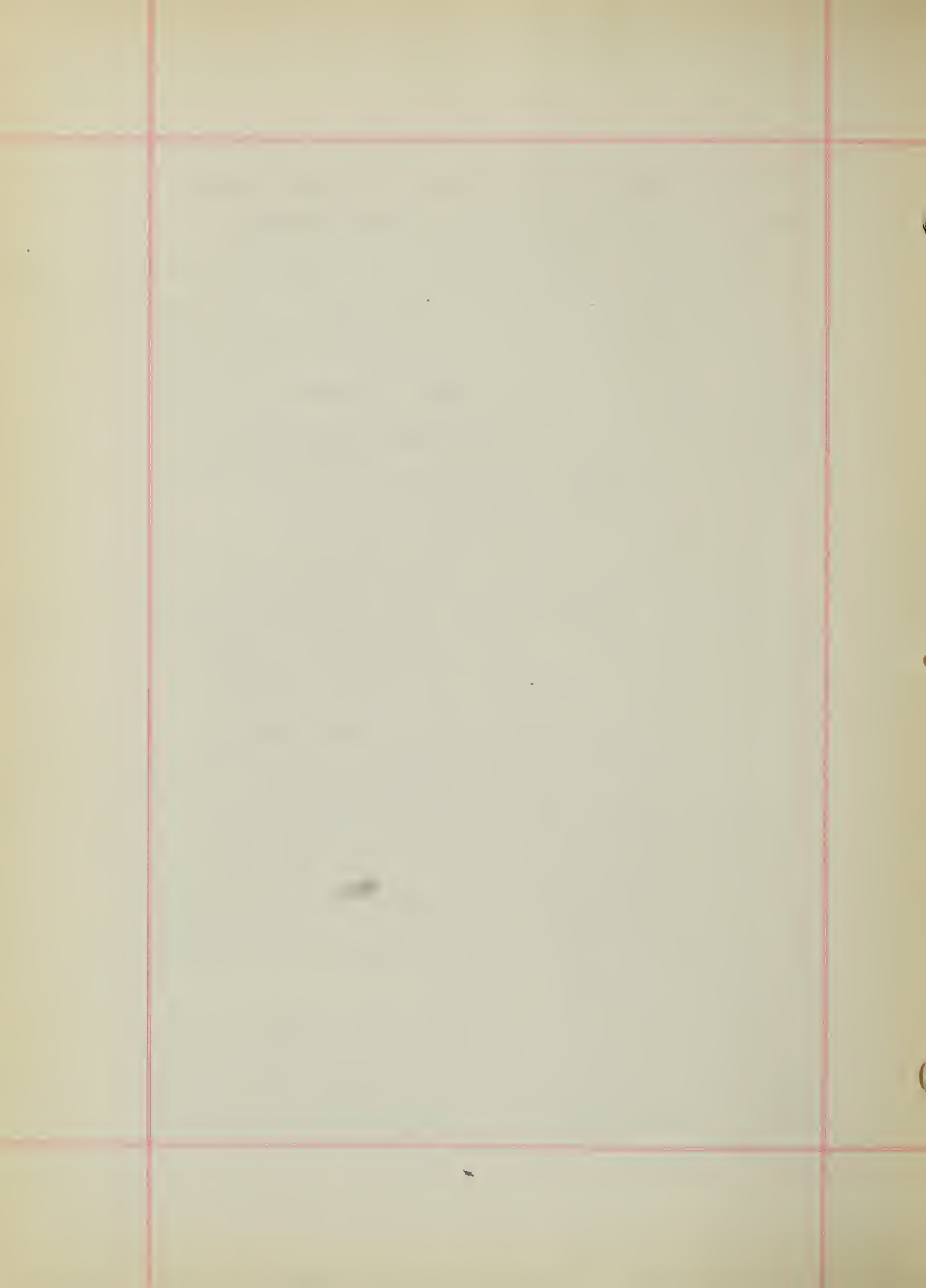


wardly he has attained all that the world calls success; within he is a man disappointed and "sick at heart".

A reaction comes over his admirers. Jealousy is waiting to begin its fatal work. His pupils have been of that kind that would be entertained rather than be edified. The psychology of the crowd is manifest. Led on by a few of the profession whose dim lights have grown dimmer before the luster of the master-mind in their midst, all turn against him and he is driven in scorn from the University.

We now see in Paracelsus that imolacable spirit that has ever been the glory of man. That spirit gave the world Savonarola and Luther. It won the victories of Crecy, of Sebastopol, and of Port Arthur. It sent the penniless business men of San Francisco, already past middle-life, to cleaning bricks in the street. Paracelsus has lost. He will no longer "discount life". He will be wiser. He will enjoy all he can, as well as know all he can. The warning words of Festus are of no avail although he "came to counsel faithfully". Disappointment must again drive its cruel arrows into his heart.

At last we see in a hospital cell in Salzburg the anxious, loving face of Festus tent over a delirious and dying man. It is Paracelsus, the oft-baffled soul. His heart has



never been filled and a life of mad endeavor seems ending in vain. To him, as to the lovers in The Statue and the Bust, life's golden years are fled. All his capacity for life has been slipping away, and now, as Festus calls him back to his senses, thoughts of the life to come perplex his soul. No star of hope now gleams before him. We hear the confession of a noble but a vanquished spirit saying,

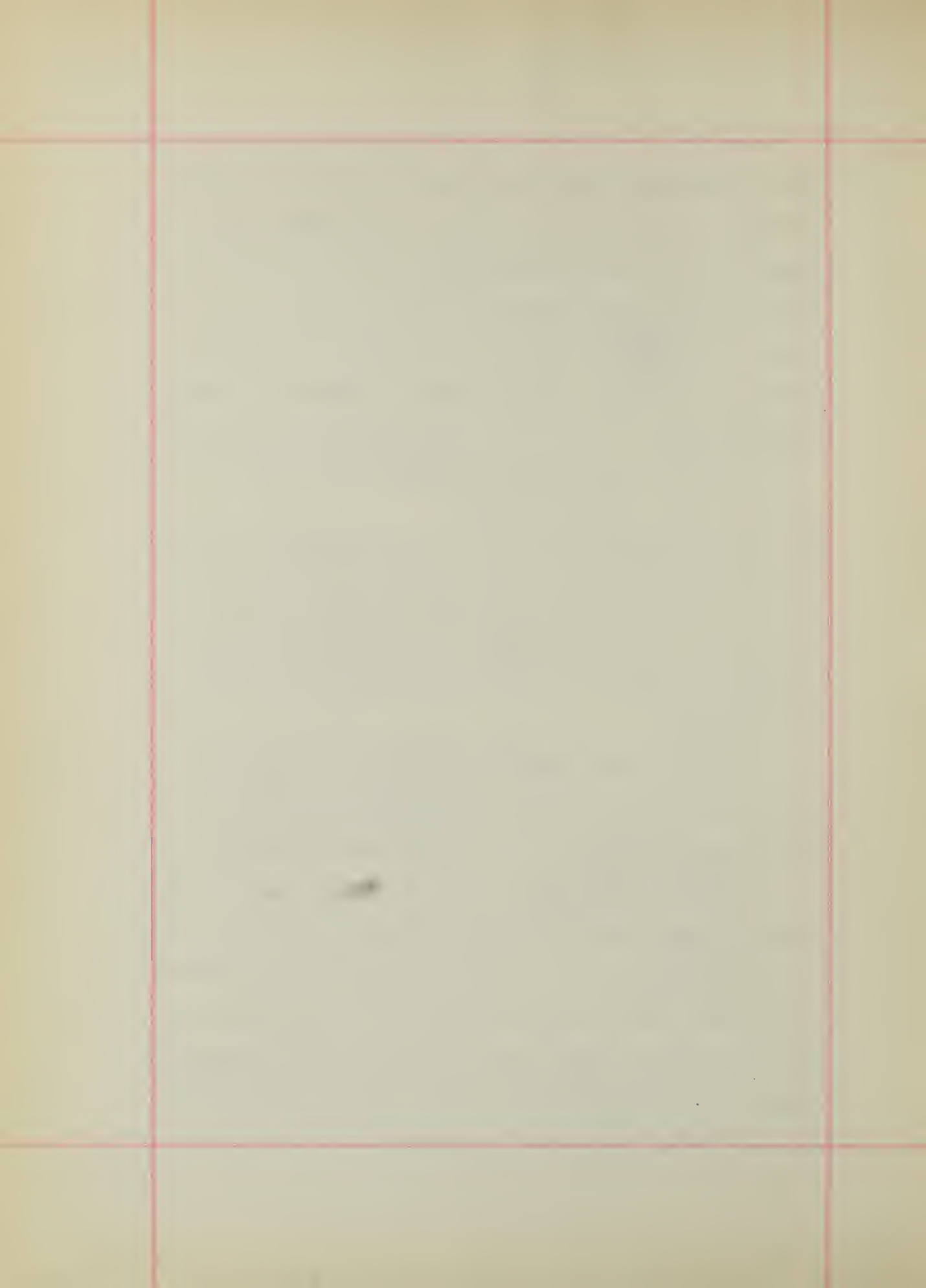
*"As though it mattered how the farce plays out,
So it be quickly played".*

His soul is tossed and tormented with memories of the past, and then - a calm comes over his troubled spirit. At last he has truly attained. He understands what he has never understood before. He now sees and confesses his failure. He has learned

"what proportion love should hold with power".

He now sees God has planned a perfect whole and that all things and all men are working toward its fulfilment.

Paracelsus is a study of the inmost struggle of the soul. It shows what the attitude of the soul should be toward this present world. We must here submit to be bound by limitations, yet must ever struggle on. This sense of being bound against one's will causes the spirit to assert itself, and in the assertion it finds its only condition of



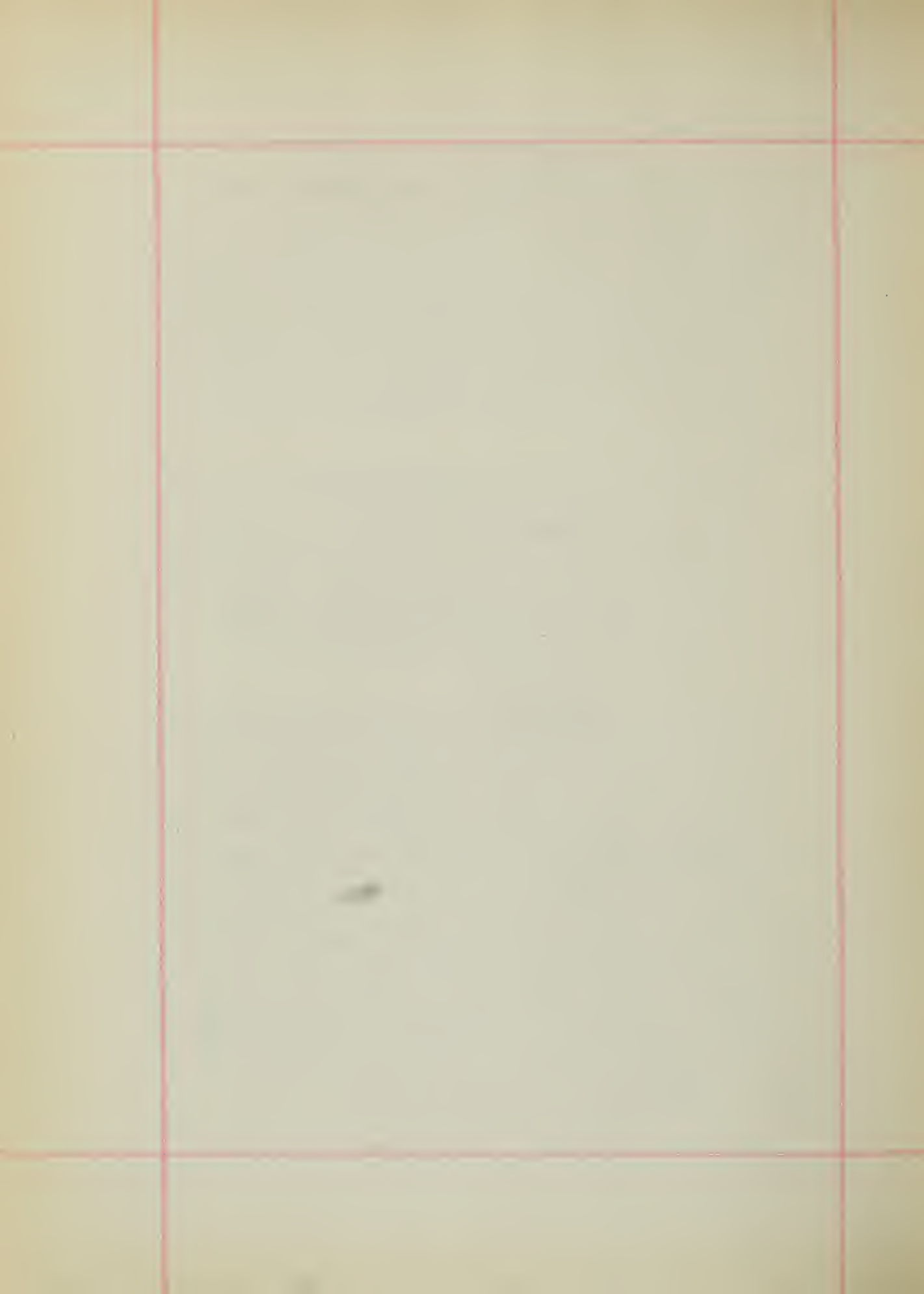
growth. We shall never reach the goal here, but in our "pressing on" lies our only hope of ever attaining it, and it surely exists. Just as surely as that the needle pointing steadily northward proves there is a reality - the magnetic pole - toward which it is drawn, just so surely does the struggle of the soul prove a reality toward which it aspires.

Paracelsus the student, the physician, was a man living far ahead of his time. He was urged on by a restless desire to know and to do for his fellow-men. He was one who

*" - - sought to comprehend the works of God,
And God himself, and all God's intercourse
With the human mind".**

This desire to know is native to man. From the eager questionings of early childhood, through the inexperience of youth, and out into manhood it follows him, but his life is circumscribed. He stands gazing at the starry heavens and sighs, "I want to know", until a Copernicus and a Galileo come and tell him of the motions of distant worlds. He stands beholding in wonder the mighty deep, so dark and forbidding, and strains his eyes across its endless billows saying, "I want to know", until a Columbus comes and declares

* Paracelsus, p. 17¹.



*"I go to prove my soul!
I see my way as birds their trackless way.
I shall arrive!"[^]*

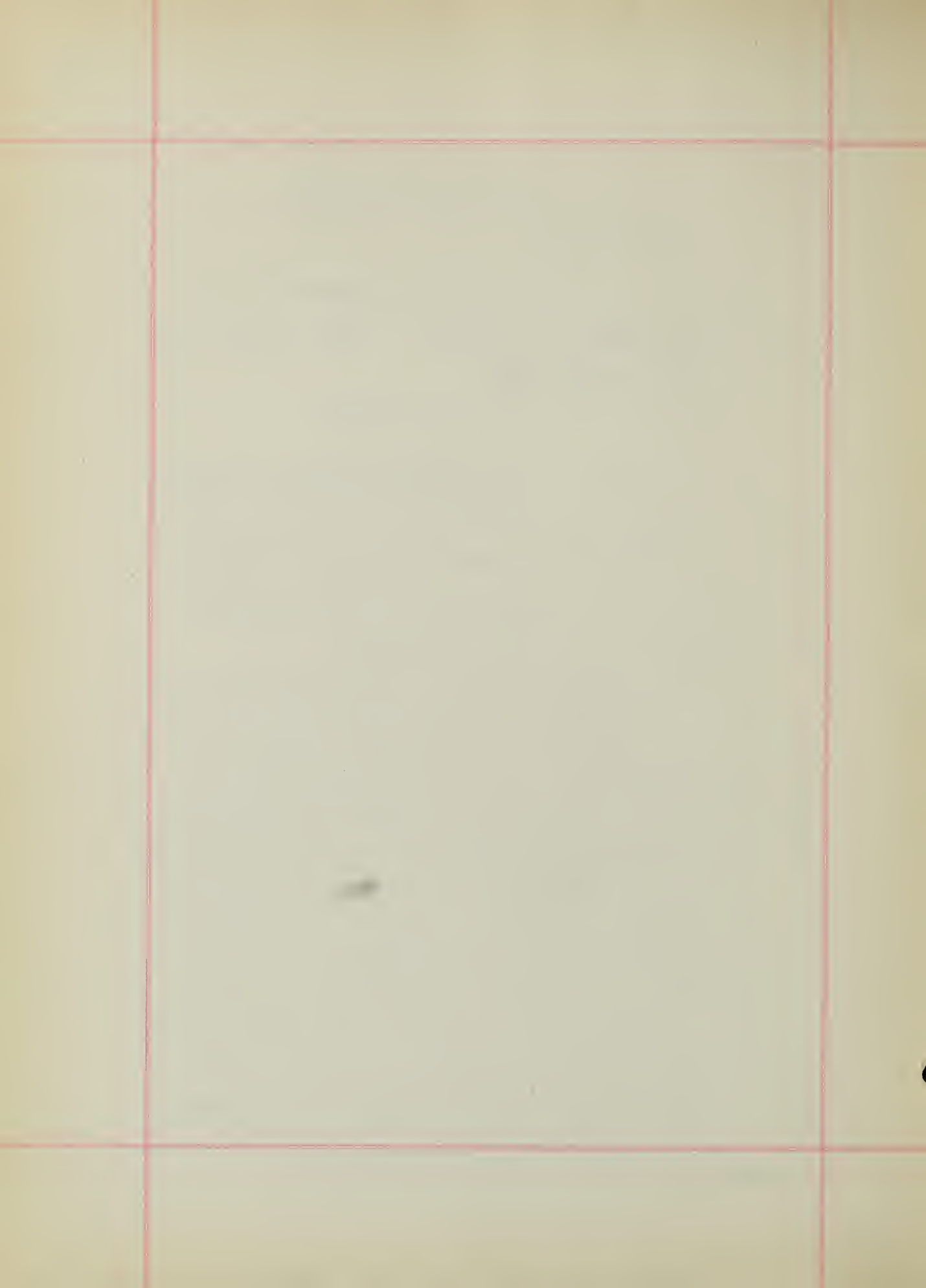
In old age man stands halting and peering into the open grave and tremblingly whispers, "I want to know!" until the spirit's voice answers,

"Trust God; see all nor be afraid!"^o

Such a craving to know possessed the soul of Paracelsus and impelled him, as it has many a one since, to draw upon the last resources of mind and body until, exhausted, he sinks down to rest compelled to realize the wisdom of the old Grecian maxim, "Nothing in excess".

Much of the true philosophy of life may be found in a careful study of this poem. Every normal life aspires, and for life's aspirations there is a true attainment if only wisdom is shown in man's effort to attain. It is the duty of every man to hold to a lofty purpose, yet the worthy motto, "Not failure, but low aim, is crime" may be over-emphasized as it was in the life of Paracelsus. Better be the first man in a little Iberian village, when that is quite possible, than the second man in Rome. The highest success is to find one's place in life, be it high or low, and to fill it nobly. A brave struggle, however, is in itself suc-

* Paracelsus, p. 17¹. ° Rabbi Ben Ezra, p. 383².

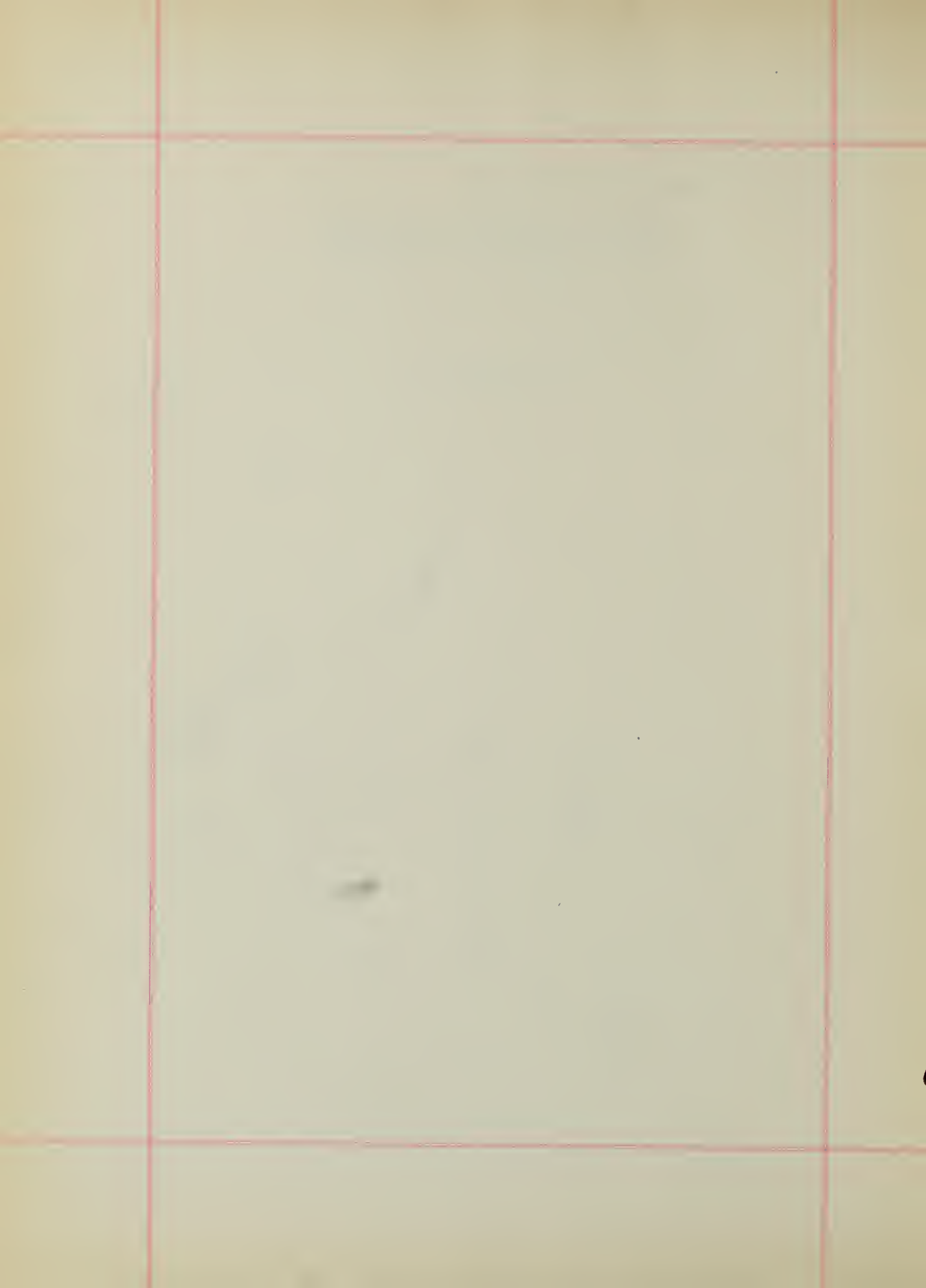


cess for it has its own reward.

*"There's joy alone in duty done,
And rest alone in striving".**

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* Whittier.

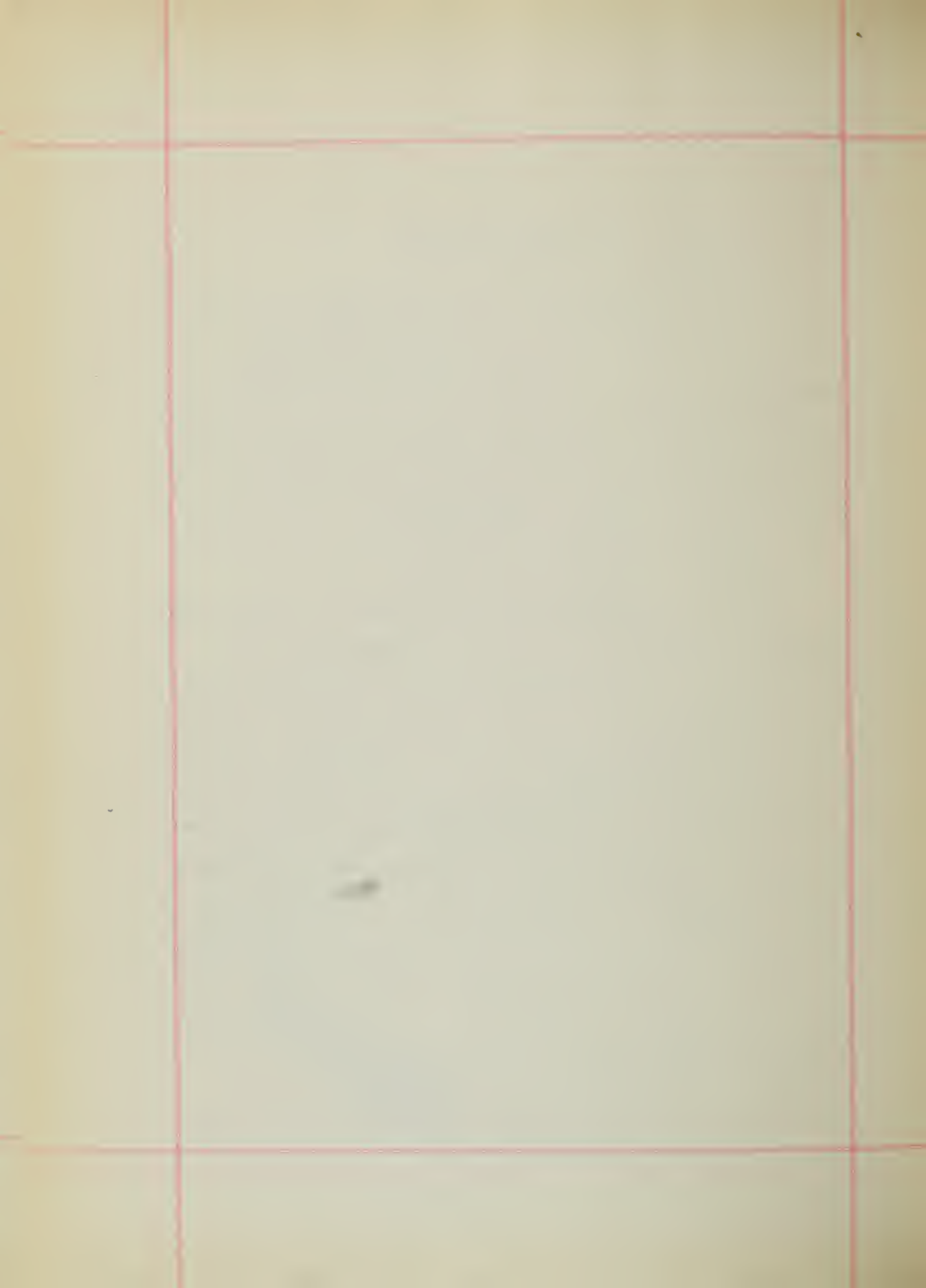


5. RABBI BEN EZRA
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Browning, the scholar, the thinker, deals with scholarly and thoughtful men. In a Grammarian's Funeral and in Paracelsus his own sturdy thoroughness is reflected; in La Saisiaz we hear him undisguisedly speaking his own message; but nowhere, perhaps, shall we come upon our poet as he himself is inwardly and spiritually ^{more fully} than in our study of the life and words of Rabbi Ben Ezra.

Browning is no longer young in years. He is even less young in intellectual and spiritual comprehension. Many soul-developing experiences have enriched the past. There have come the joys of life, its love, the world, the taking away, and the loneliness. Our poet is now becoming a citizen of two worlds rather thinking so largely of one as does Paracelsus. He stands as on some Pisgah's head and, first, recalls reverently the garnered past, then turns and with a steady gaze and a strong confidence views life's unfinished whole. From this view he returns to us with a living message, and he has happily chosen to speak to us through the words of another who also has had the vision.

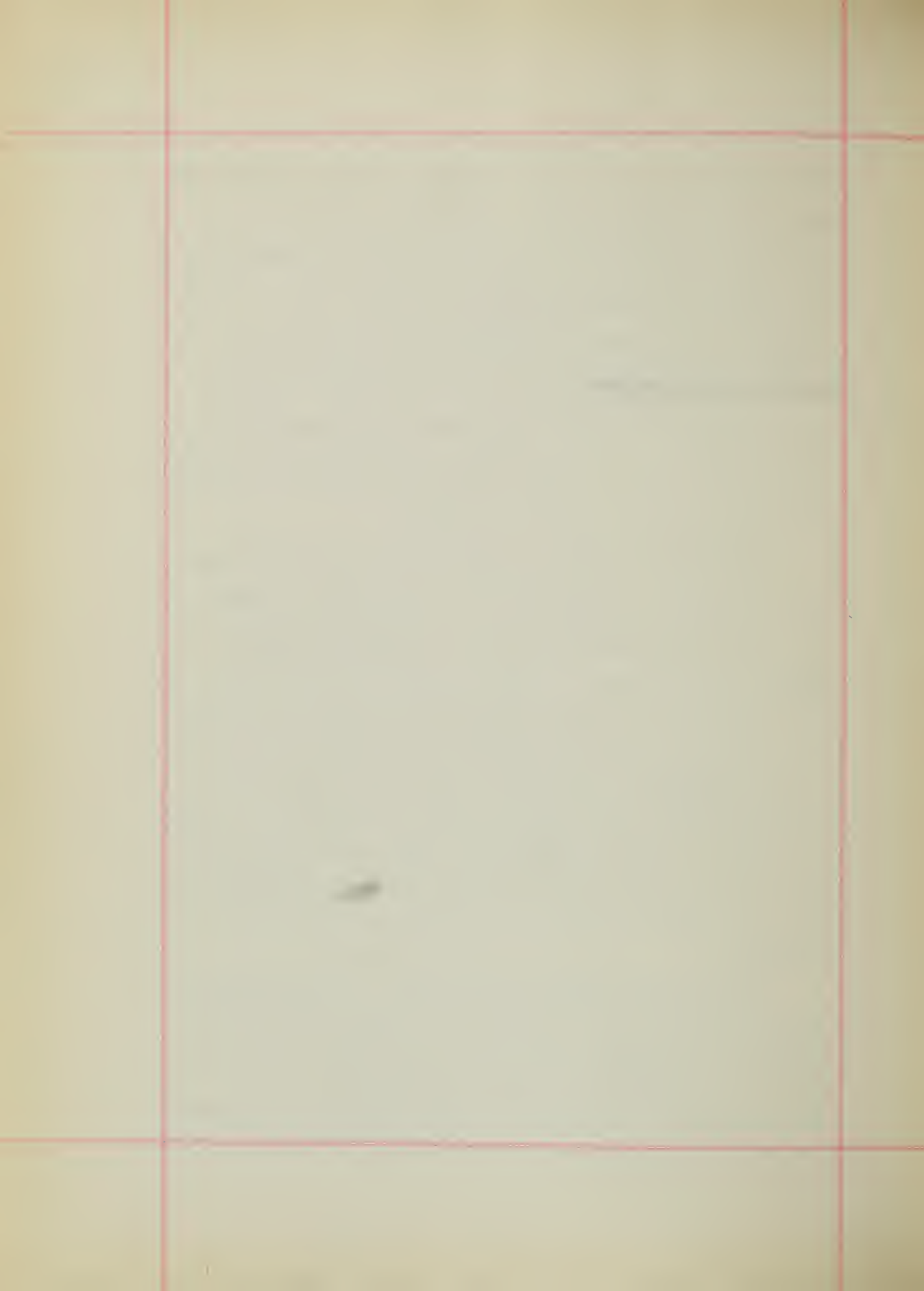
Abraham Ben Meir Ben Ezra was a learned rabbi of To-



ledo, Spain, who lived and wrote in the twelfth century. He was noted as a philosopher, a physician, and a poet, but was even more noted as a learned grammarian and commentator. Like Browning himself he was, as a scholar, rich in mind, versatile, philosophic, penetrating; as a writer he was weighty and condensed. He was a man who dared to think, and, if need be, to stand alone. His writings were doubtlessly drawn upon by Browning and the philosophy of the poet is first of all that of the Rabbi.

This man of profound learning, of deep insight, and of long experience looks back upon life and as he speaks we may well give reverent attention. He begins, where he stands, with old age. He shows us what old age is meant to be. It is the finishing process, the perfecting of God's work in the life. To such an end we come through life's roughness, its doubts, and its stings. Life must be viewed as a whole. Youth, the seed-time, has little meaning except as it looks forward to the time of ripening and the harvest.

Youth proves life's possibilities. Rightly appreciated it is not spent in feeding on pleasures which merely satisfy the appetite as a beast is satisfied. Youth rejoices that man is more than a passive partaker of whatever



a divine providence provides. Such a portion may satisfy dumb brutes. Man helps to effect and becomes the more effectual as he daily conquers. The body must be fed, but to man, soul and body are complementary. Man might choose to become a mere brute but refuses to "sink i' the scale". Despite the flesh he strives "toward making". In the very striving is the greatest success and the greatest comfort.

*"What I aspired to be,
And was not, comforts me".**

It is better to fail in a high aim than to succeed without effort in a low one. Failure may be despised by one's fellow-men but our poet believes in a higher appreciation.

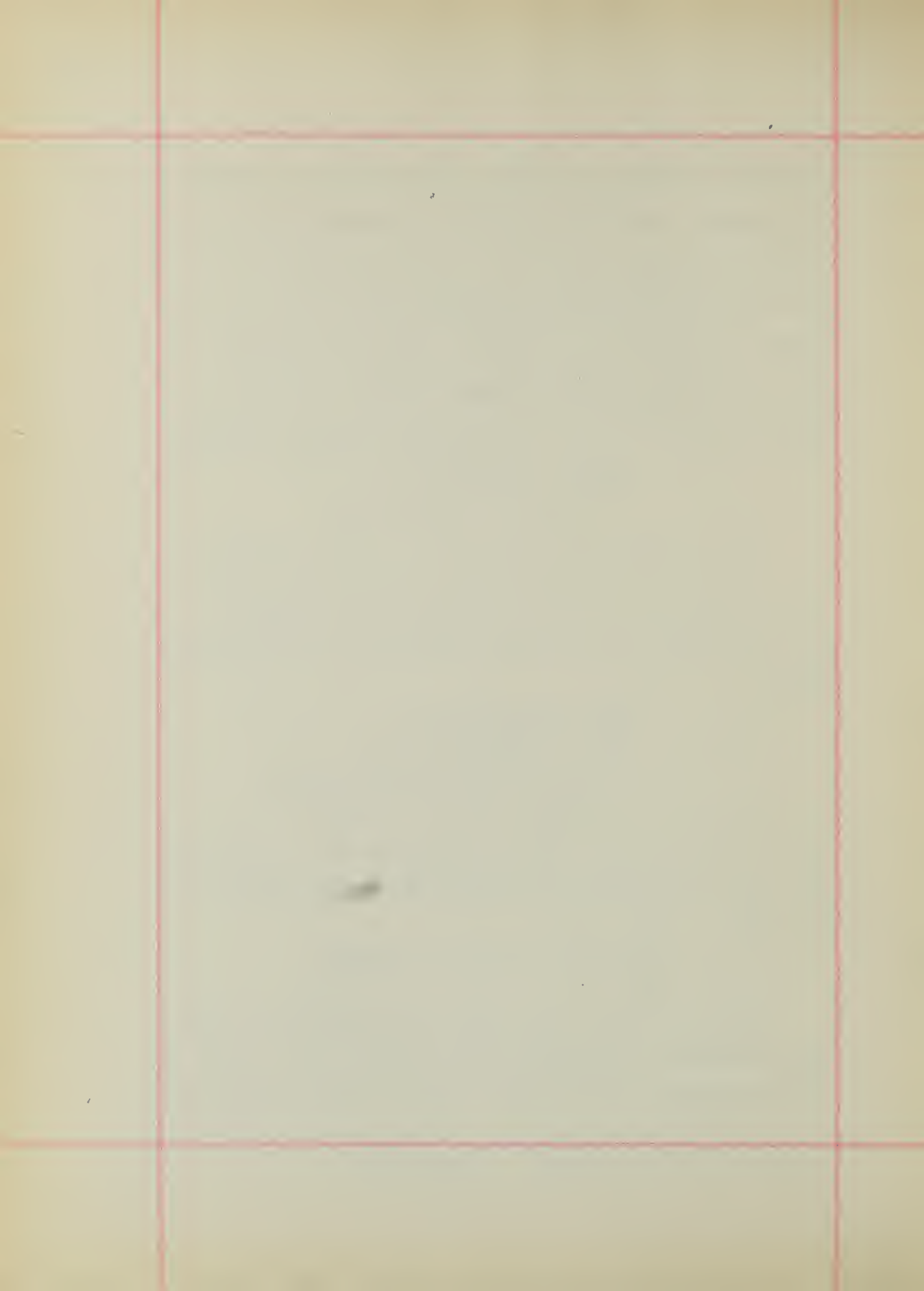
*"All I could never be,
All men ignored in me,
This, I was worth to God, whose
wheel the pitcher shaped".^o*

The man who "sees all" looks not down, but up. To him flesh ever helos soul. He has implicit faith in the divine Potter who shall

"Perfect the cup as planned!"

Throughout this entire poem we see the robust, wholesome Browning. He takes no morbid view of life. He is ever at full-tide. He would not hold too fondly to the things

* Rabbi Ben Ezra, p. 334¹. ^o Ibid, p. 385¹.



of earth where "all changes" but rathed with a majestic
faith rests in the confidence he would impart to every man,
"thy soul and God stand sure".

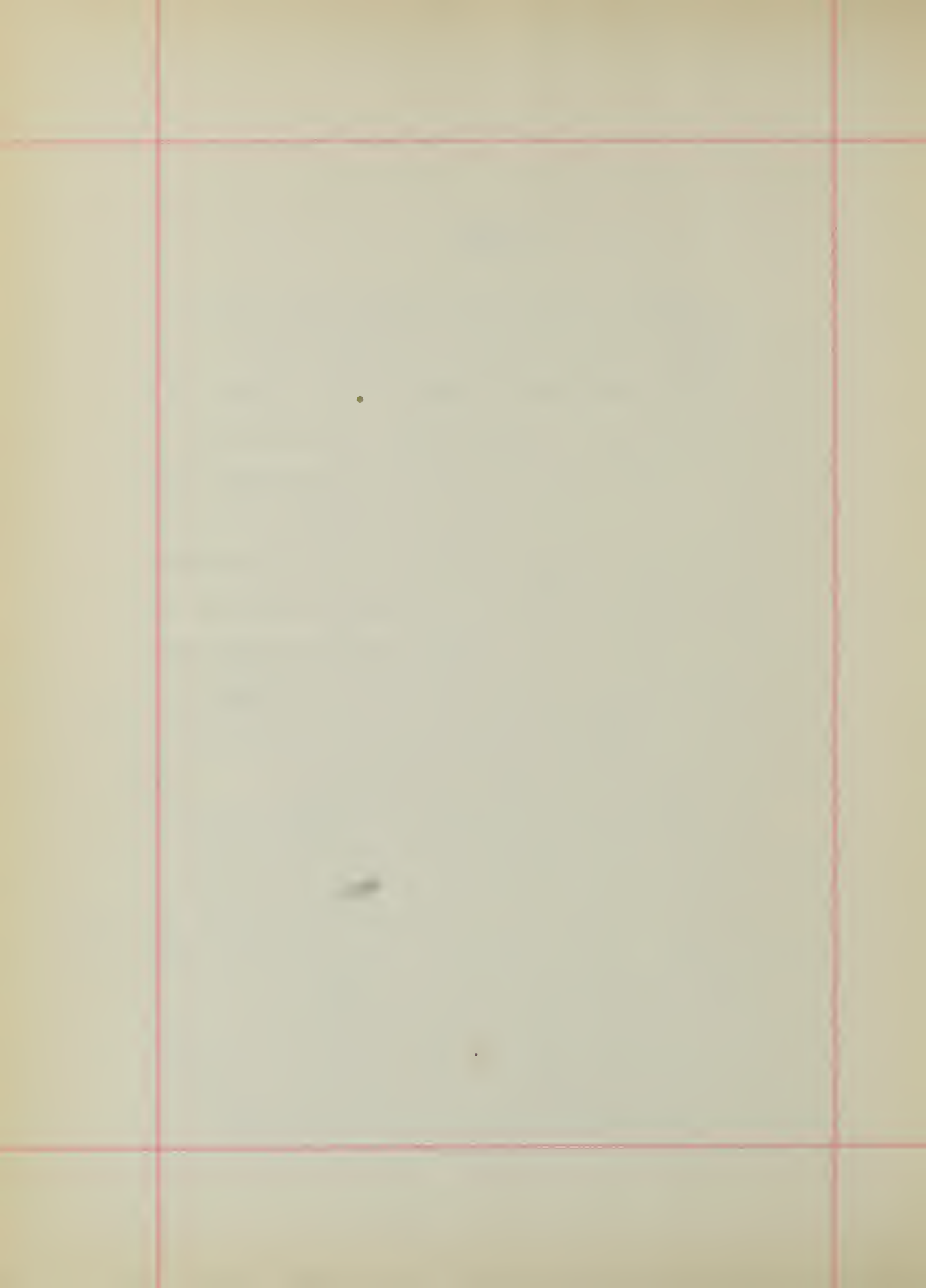
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6. SAUL xxxxxx

The ancients believed that melancholia and insanity were induced by the influence of evil spirits and that these could be charmed away by means of music. David, the shepherd harpist, has accordingly been summoned that his musical skill may be employed to quicken the depressed spirit of King Saul and call him back to his former self. There was wisdom in this act. Well-known today are the beneficial effects of music upon all who are burdened either in body or spirit. Under its spell the vital processes become normal, the weary nerves grow calm. Cheered by its sweet influence many a fireside has grown bright and the embittering toils of the day have been forgotten.

The picture that Browning has drawn of the shepherd youth and of his simple strength is impressive. We seem both to see and hear him as, but half-realizing the task imposed, he begins with the tunes which the king himself must have loved as a lad when he too knew the "joys of living" while caring for his father's flocks. These tunes, our psychologists today would tell us, were well fitted to arouse memories of home and the sweet past, and were just the



tunes most likely to soothe the king's heavy ear and gently warm his heart. Then come the songs celebrating ceremony and worship, the songs also of "manhood's prime vigor" and finally, those praising Saul's own life and his heroism as a warrior; yet, with all these the king is only half-aroused. He stands as one dazed or dreaming.

A strong sympathy touches David's heart and in a moment of introspection he realizes that in his own soul is a deep love for his king. The shepherd-youth is one who would not withhold his compassion even were it from a brother of low degree. How much more then would the infinite love of God not be withheld from the servant in need - even His own Anointed! With this thought the singer seems almost to reproach himself as he cries out;

*"Would I fain in my infinite yearning do all for this man,
And dare doubt he alone shall not help him,
who yet alone can?"*

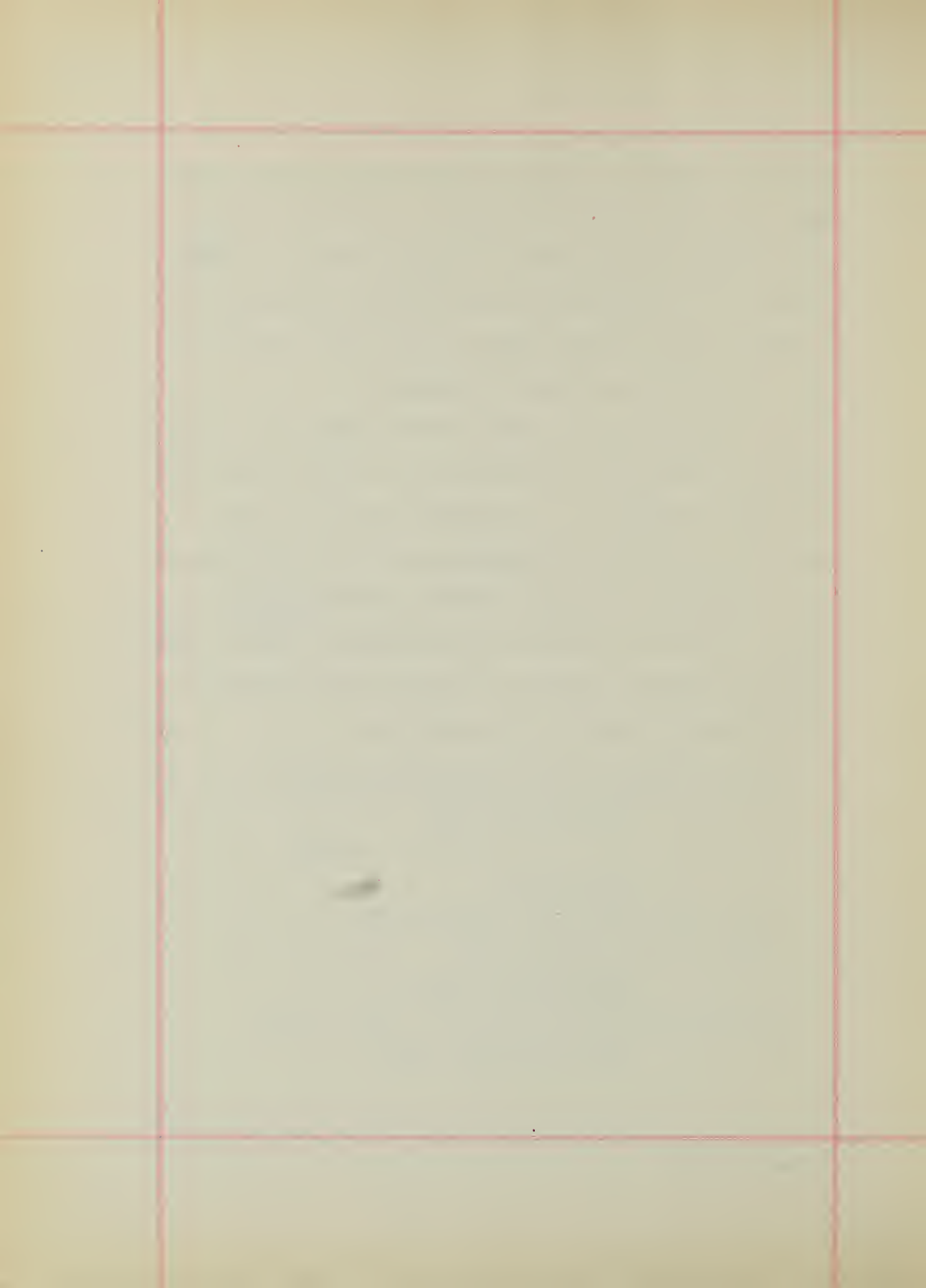
- - - - - O Saul,
it shall be

*A Face like my face that receives thee; A
Man like to me,*

*Thou shalt love and be loved by, forever: A
Hand like this hand*

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

* Saul, p. 184¹.



Such an out-burst of pent-up love and emotion marks the supreme moment in the intense effort of the shepherd youth to arouse the king and to call him back to the "joys of living". Into this final effort his all has been thrown and upon it all must depend.

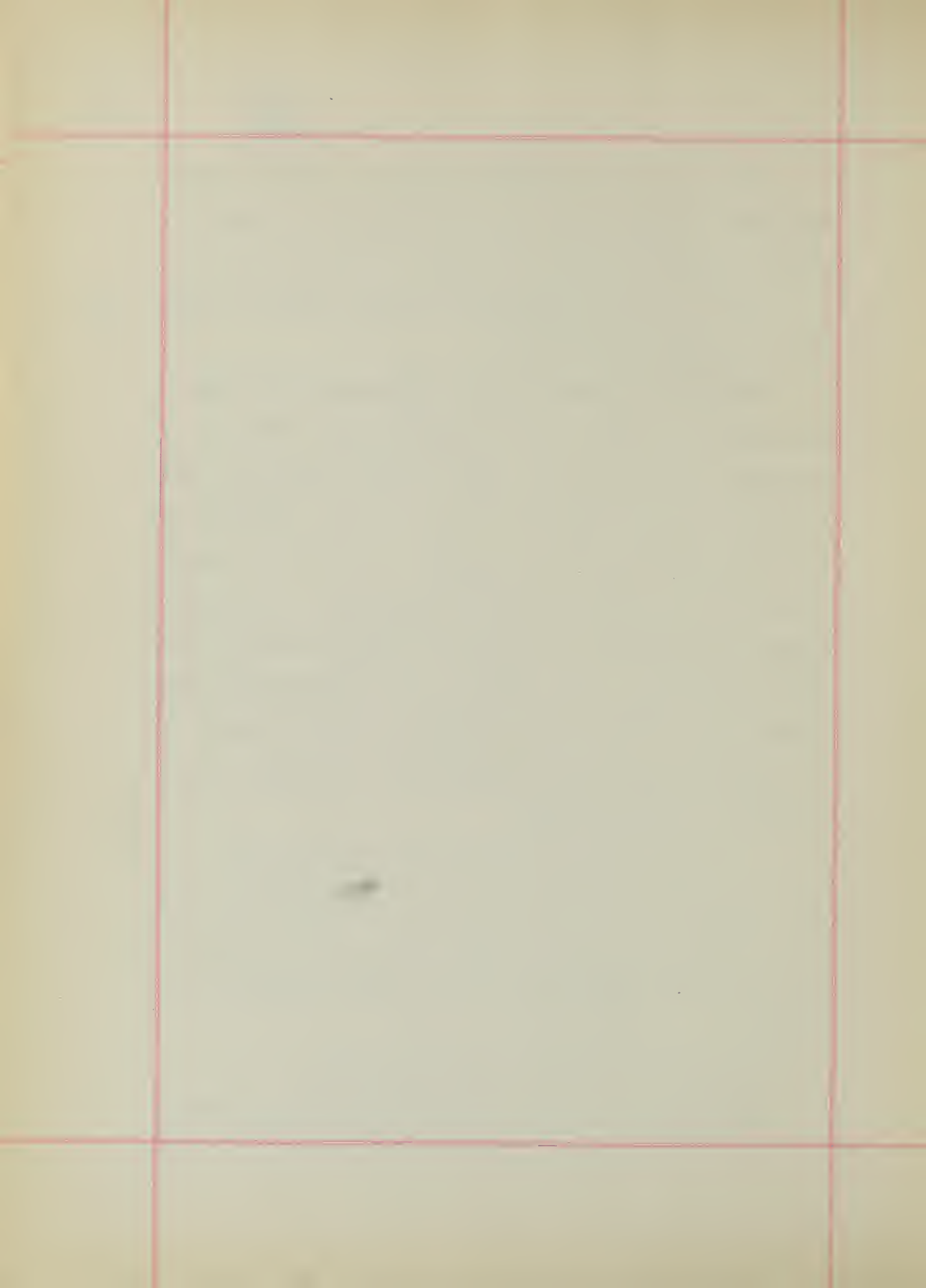
Skilful and devoted as the young musician has been, his skill and devotion have been insufficient. His task is gigantic. He must not fail, and, faithful Jew that he is, he well knows where strength may yet be found. He cries to the God of his fathers and his prayer is heard. Why heard? Because "Man's extremity is God's opportunity". Man never reaches his extremity until his own resources have been completely exhausted. Then, and then only, may he implore the Divine aid. To this moment of extremity David had come. He has "gone the whole round of creation". One appeal is yet possible. It shall be from

"Man's nothing-perfect to God's all-complete"

and he raises his soulful petition to Omnipotence. "Saul the mistake, Saul the failure" is now touched by the power of Him who is King indeed, and, becoming fully conscious, is restored

"Clear and safe in new light and new life".

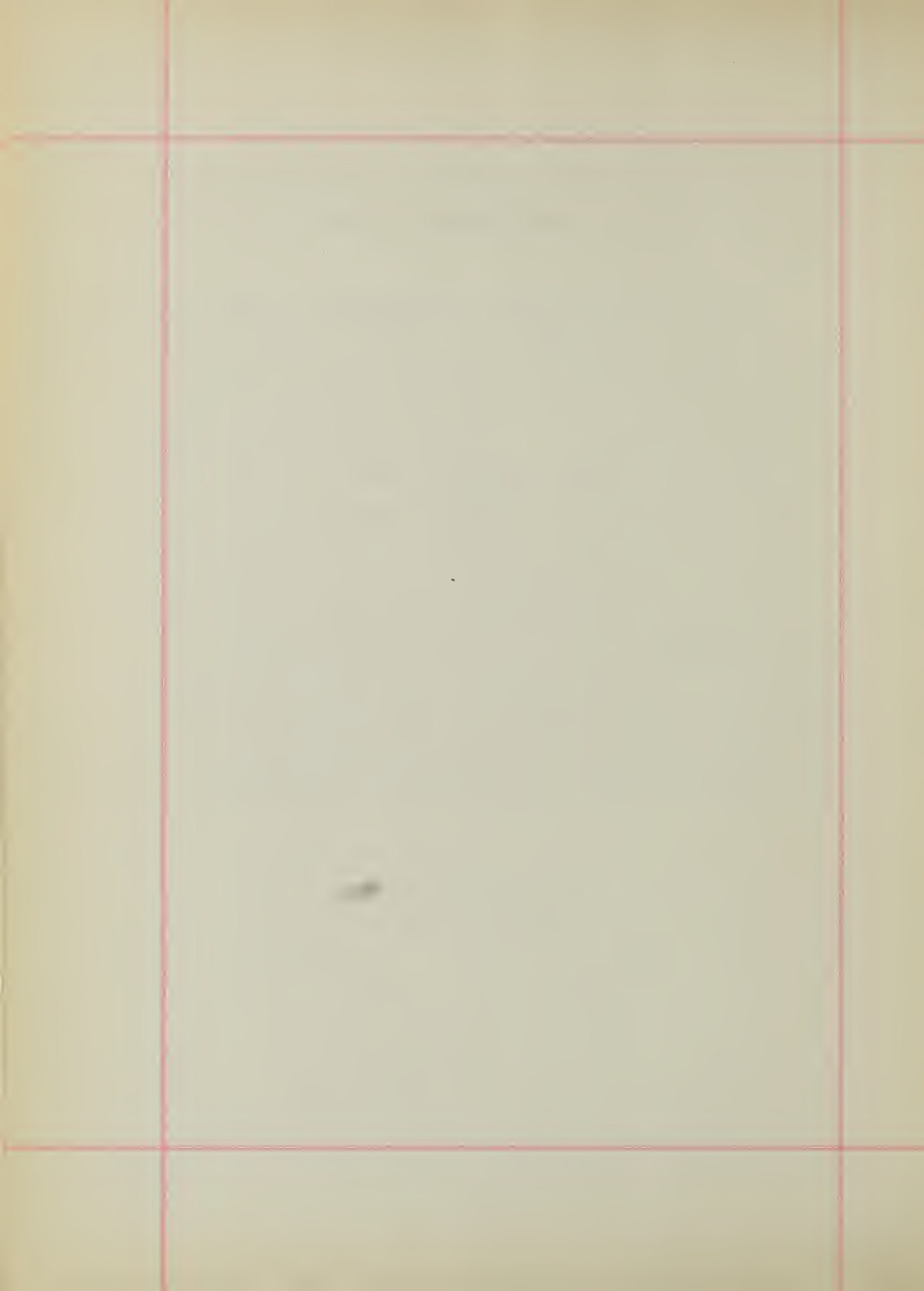
David's work is done. He turns again homeward amidst



an awed stillness for all heaven and earth and every creeping thing attest their reverence for the Creator and Ruler of all.

Seldom are details given in the Scriptural account of historic events. We always know, however, that there were details, and that, were they known, they would be most interesting and instructive. In this poem of highly imaginative description Browning employs the same method that lends a charm to the writings of Elizabeth Stuart Phelps. He has imagined what the details might well have been when David's talent and ingenuity were out to the test before king Saul. He has strongly portrayed the scene yet it is plausible throughout. No one who studies the poem can fail to have a more vivid conception of these two great characters who were honored in being made rulers over the chosen people.

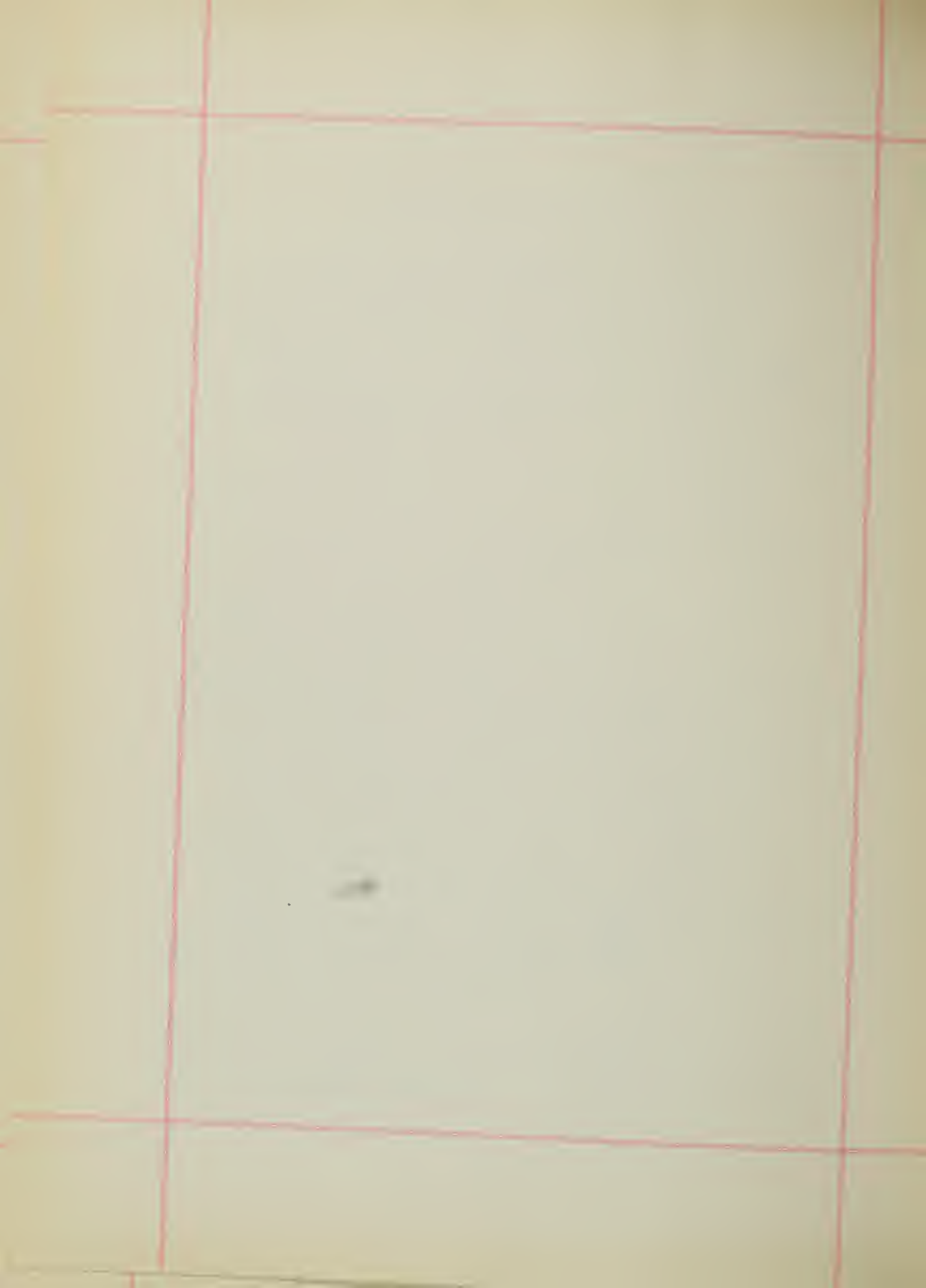
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7. AN EPISTLE OF KARSHISH
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The account of this "strange medical experience of Karshish" has a peculiar interest. It awakens a reverence not unlike that with which one ponders the Resurrection morn itself. Who else but Browning could have produced such a poem?

Karshish, the Arab physician, has come to Palestine for a definite purpose. Scholar and keen observer that he is he would now write to his learned master, Abit, and, as a dutiful pupil, tell him of new and interesting discoveries he has made and which promise to be of value in their profession. His recent strange experience at Bethany, however, precludes any protracted thought upon professional interests. The influence of the resurrected Lazarus and his strange ways cannot be shaken off. This one subject persistently intrudes itself and becomes the preponderating interest of the letter which was intended to deal with a far different theme. The writer at first apologizes for referring to the strange cure at all, but immediately loses himself in its consuming interest and writes on fluently describing and conjecturing on the sudden restoration of the



Jew, and on his present perplexing attitude toward the common interests of men. Only here and there may a few brief lines be found referring to medical discoveries. The writer of a professional epistle becomes the author of an epic poem of which Lazarus, the loved brother of Bethany, is the hero.

The description of details gives a necessary finish to the poem and are in themselves full of interest. The hardness of the journey, the attacks from robbers, the rumors of Vespasian's army, the snarling lynx, the ridge of sharp broken hills, the ambiguous Syrian, all stand out in life-like relief. Thus a naturalistic effect is given to a theme which would otherwise weary because of its tensivity.

In closing the epistle the writer asks pardon for his having

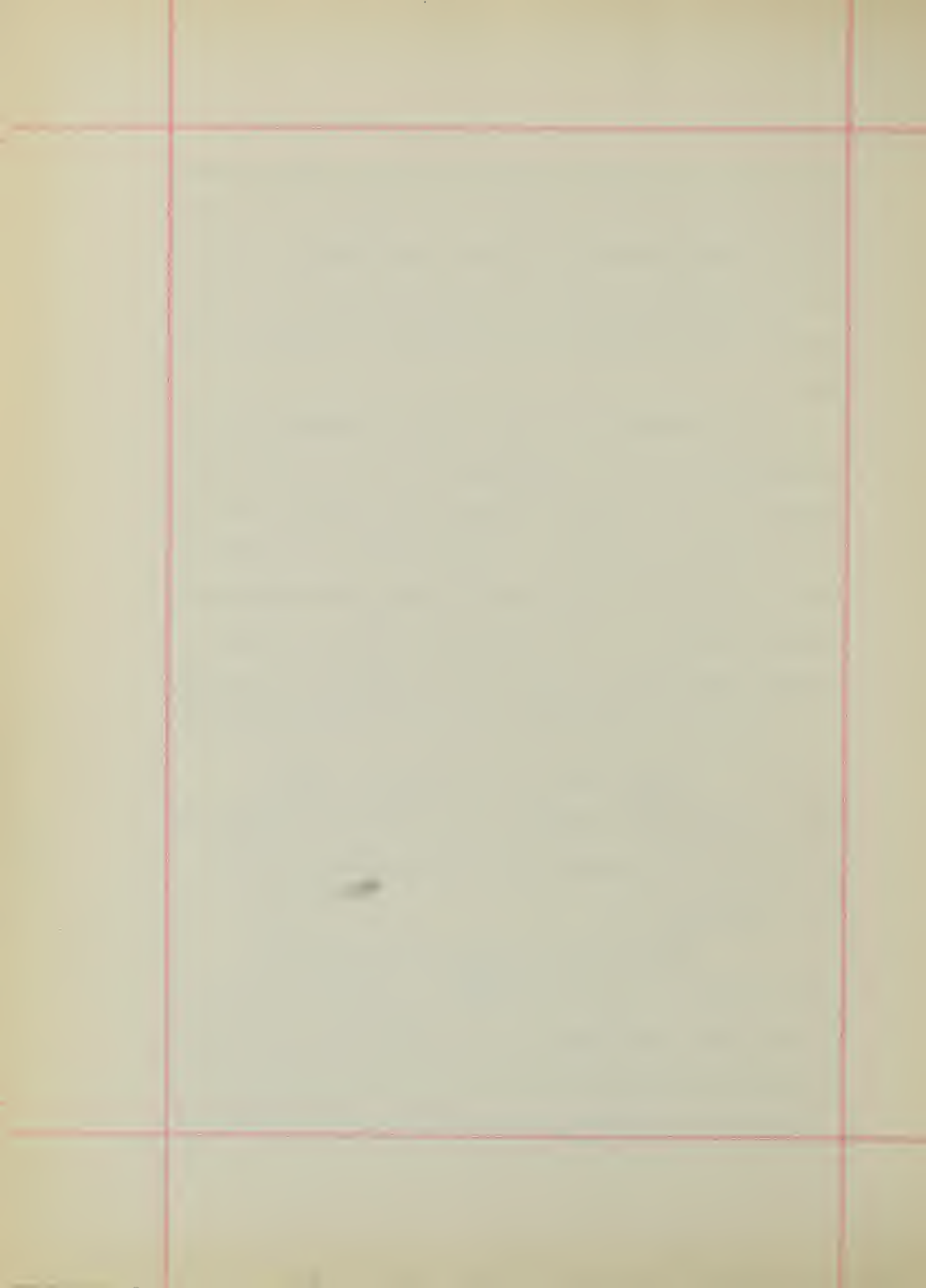
"Unduly dwelt on, prolixly set forth"

this tedious case. We then catch a glimpse of Browning the psychologist when Karshish with introspective mind gives some explanation and

"Good cause for the peculiar interest"

that has held him. The weariness of a journey's end, the twilight hour and rising moon, the up-springing night-wind, the melancholy mood of a stranger in an "old sleepy town"

- these are influences we have all felt, but which can be



but poorly expressed even by him who has lately experienced them. That such an evening hour would make more impressive the physician's conversation with Lazarus we cannot doubt.

The closing verses are climactic and are strikingly similar to the climactic effort in Saul where David seeks to arouse the king. This climax breaks off without apology the pardon-begging that has once more intruded and expresses out of a full heart, - Browning's heart - a supreme confidence which would again declare, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God".

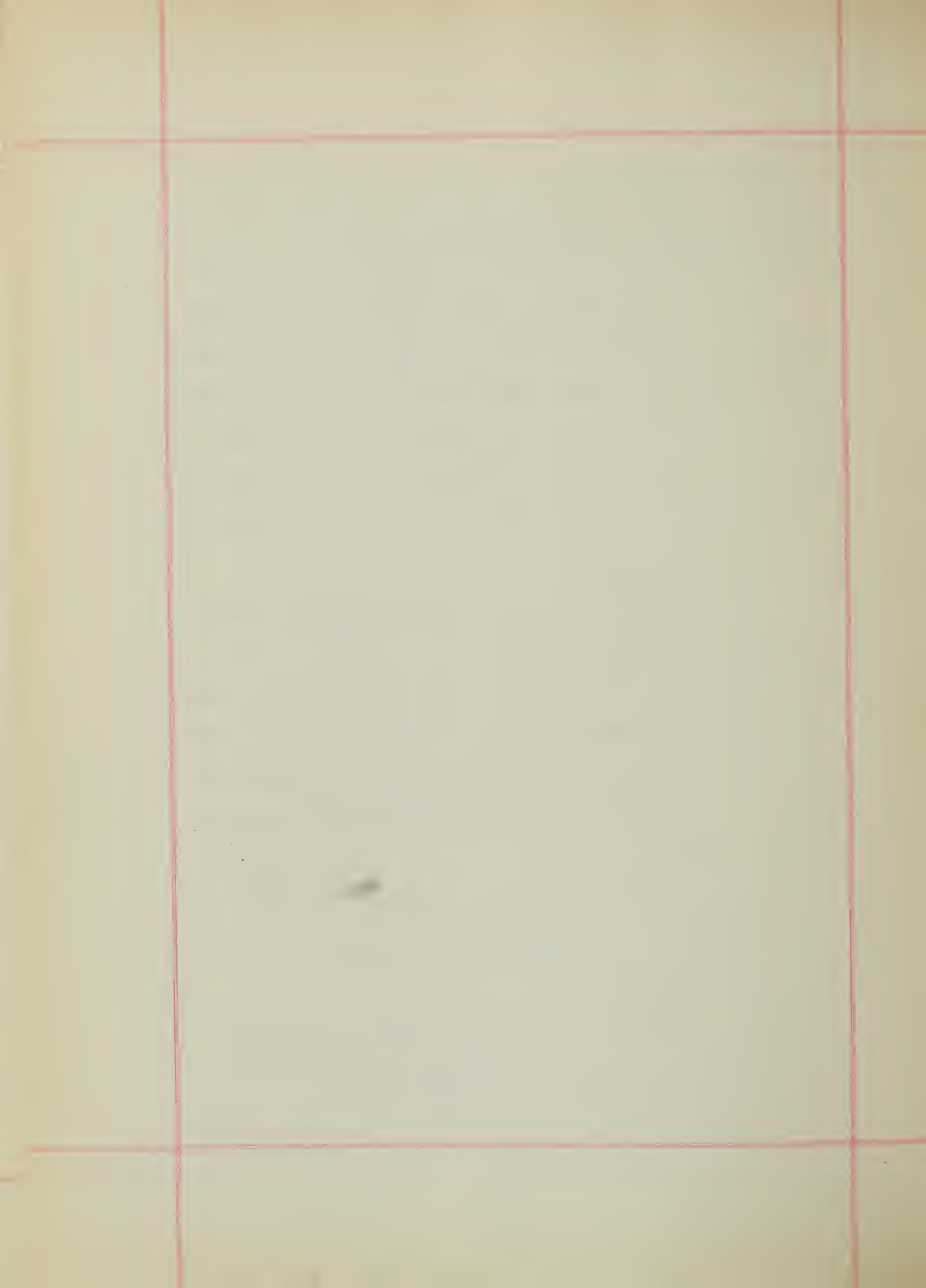
This poem will live among Browning's best. It will give meditations that will uplift many a heart. He who would understand life here aright must have a proper appreciation of the things which are "but for a moment" and of their relation to the things that endure. Love is divine and "Love is ever Lord of death"; therefore, we shall all be changed for

"the All-Great were the All-Loving too - "

and to every man is given "God's secret" that he may hold "the thread of life" and

*"- - wait patient to the last
For that same death which must restore his being
To equilibrium, body loosening soul".**

* An Epistle of Karshish, p. 340¹.



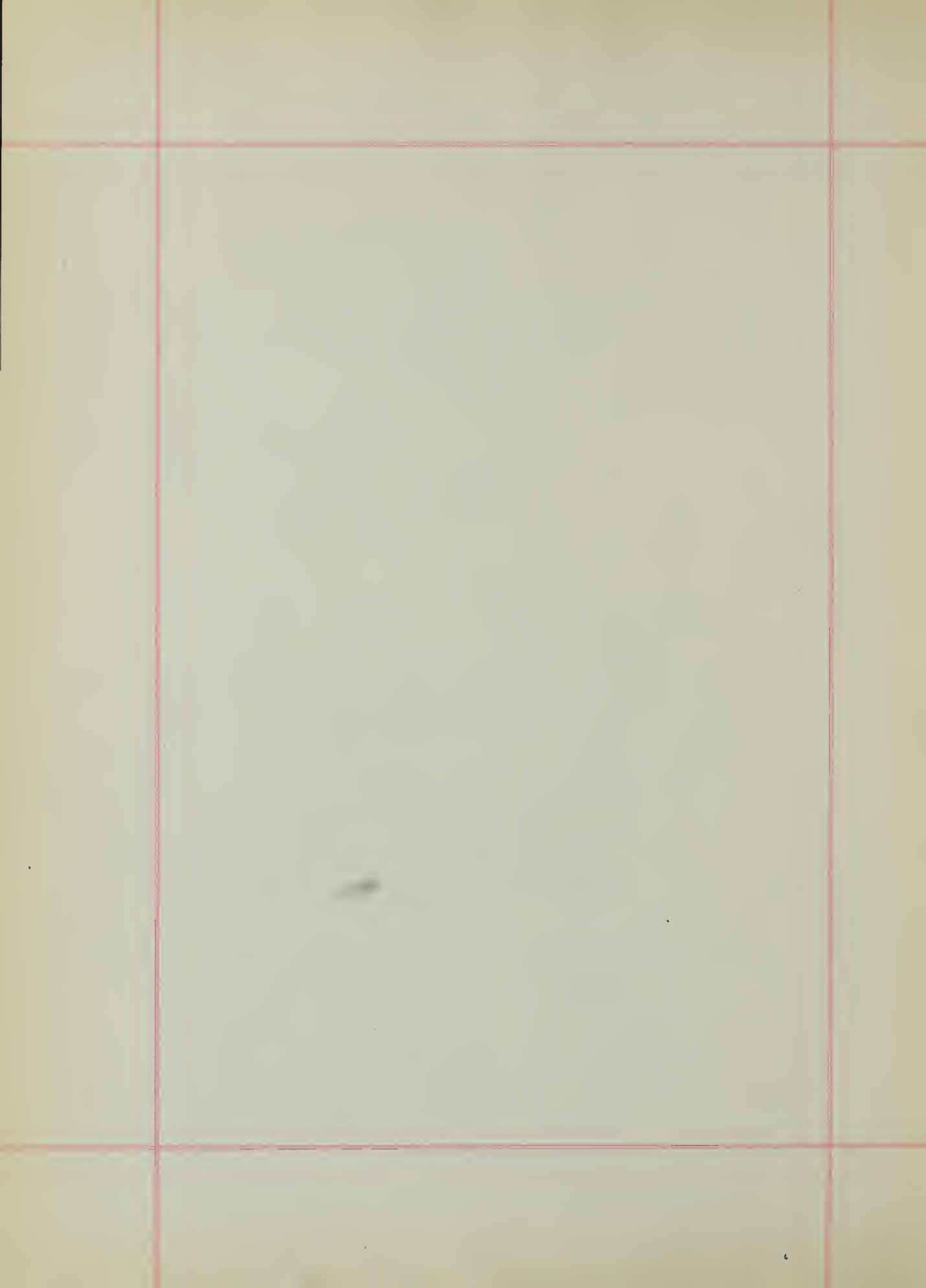
3. A PLOT IN THE 'SCUTCHEON

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As a dramatist Browning has not attained great success. A Plot in the 'Scutcheon has its merit, not in being a finished play for stage production, - perhaps it was written too hastily for that, - but rather in the fact that it presents a great life problem with wholesome effect. We shall pass over, then, any criticism that might easily be made concerning its structure, its unnatural situations, or the lack of balance in its chief characters and shall enquire for its ethical worth.

The world's great literature, indeed all that we may call great in the world itself, has ever owed a large part of its greatness to love - love that is high and noble, love that never knows defeat or limitation. God's best gift to the world of men is a gift of love. That which is highest, noblest, and most illimitable when entrusted to man's keeping, however, is most subject to a tragic overthrow. If the danger of overthrow shall in any wise be diminished by this not finished work of Browning he has written to great purpose.

Mildred Tresham is the very essence of girlish inno-



cence and purity. She gives herself, her all, to the one she loves with a trust that makes powerful the pathos of her words when too late she declares,

*"I was so young -
I had no mother, and I loved him so!"*

In such words she confesses, at once, her guilt and her sense of innocence. The human soul is so indelibly stamped with the divine image that even when unguardedly it is led astray the recoil from that which is now seen as sin is swift and terrible.

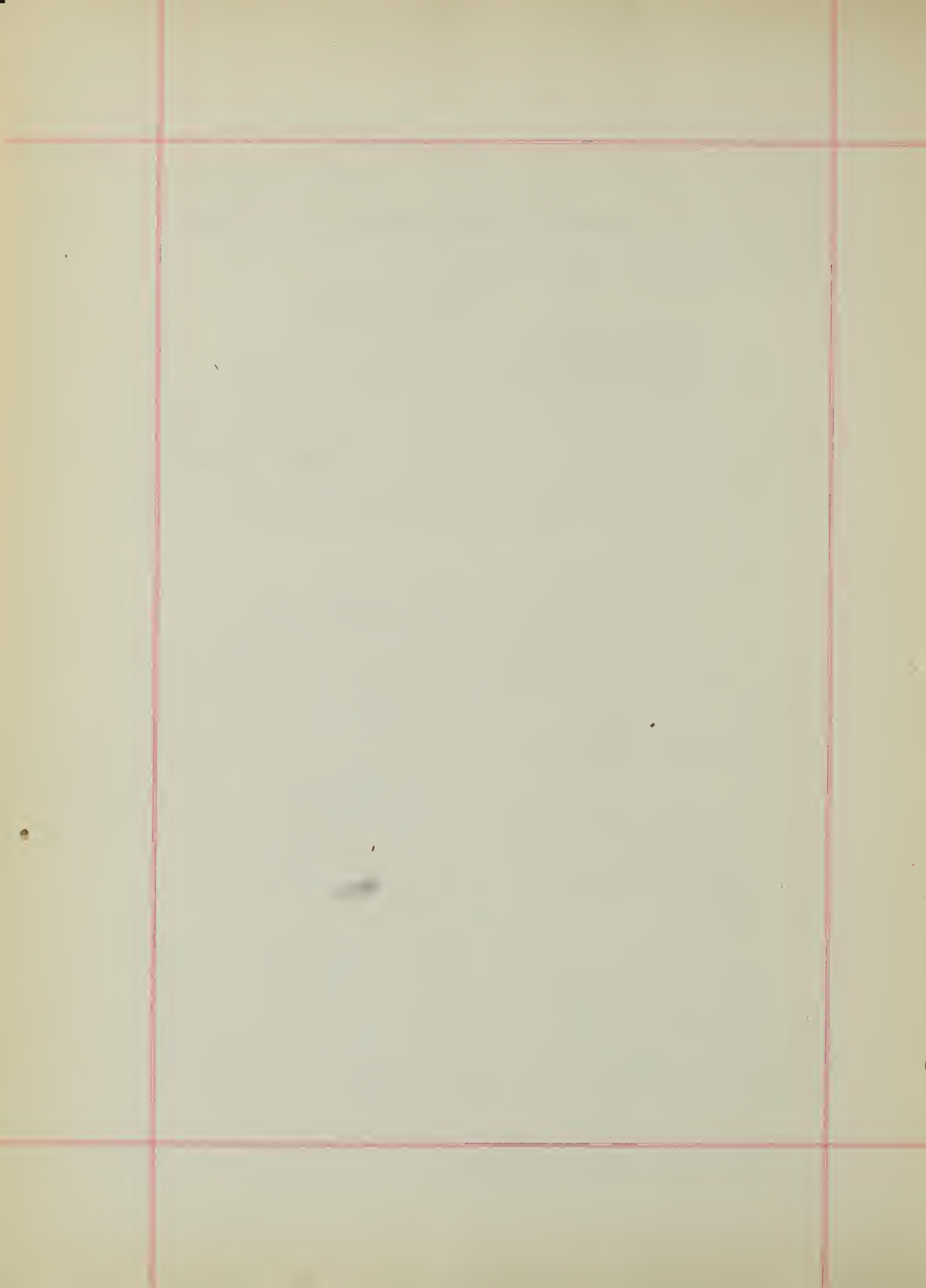
*"Oh, why, why glided sin the snake
Into the Paradise Heaven meant us both?"*

cries Mildred in anguish. What is done is past recall. Virtue lost is the one greatest loss of all, but the loss does not end here. There can be

*"Then no sweet courtship-days
No dawning consciousness of love for us,
No strange and palpitating births of sense
From words and looks, no innocent fears and hopes,
Reserves and confidences: morning's over!"**

Morning is over but not because its hours have flown. Its sweetness has been embittered by youthful folly and no "perfected noontide" can ever follow. Even though she has sinned in innocence remorse fills the soul of the once

* A Blot in the 'Scutcheon, p. 221².



sweet girl. It is not the remorse, however, that thrusts down to the depths of perdition and cruelly forbids all hope, for her contrition is complete. Even in this hour of extremity her heart will not consent to deceive.

*"I shall murmur no smooth speeches got by heart,
But, frenzied, pour forth all our woful story,
The love, the shame, and the despair - - -
I'll not affect a grace
That's gone from me - gone once, and gone forever!"*

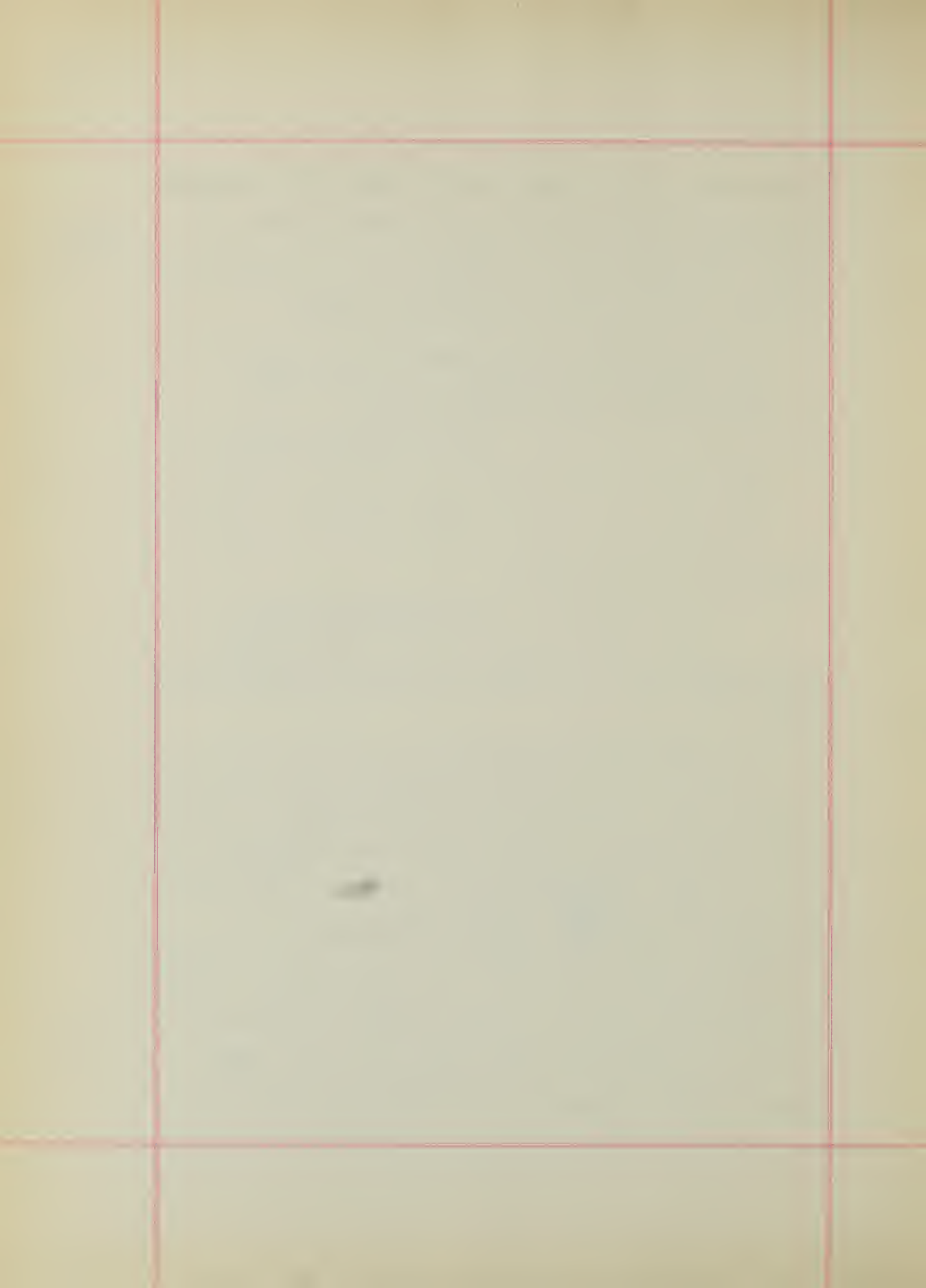
For such as she there is pardon awaiting. This her heart tells her and she dares

*"- - - approach that Heaven
Which has not bade a living thing despair,"*

Pardon there may be, but never a regaining of that which is lost.

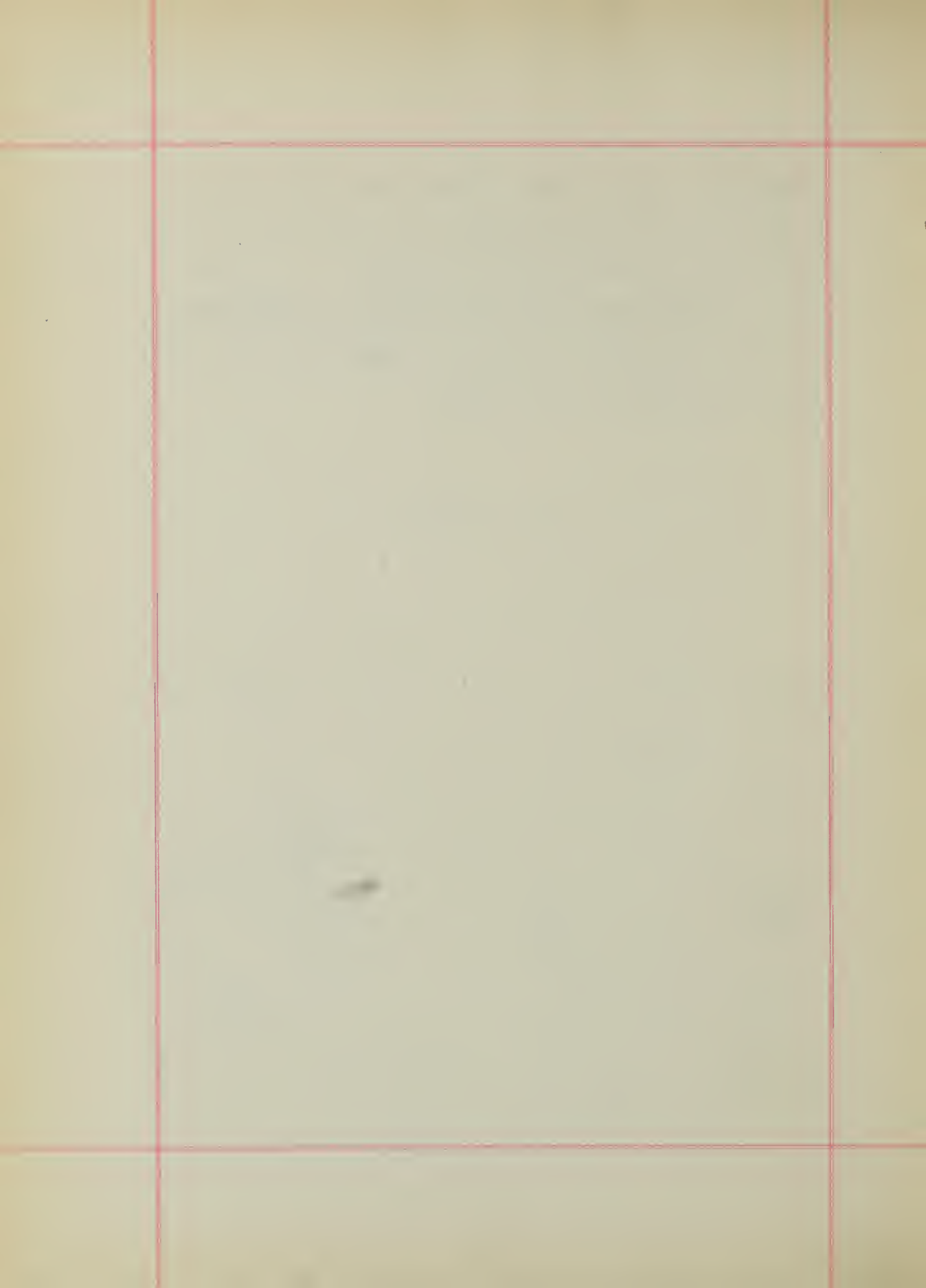
Young Earl Mertoun, the real transgressor, feels the shame far less than does she whom he has wronged - this, indeed, seems always to be true - yet, he is conscious of his guilt and, with conscience making a coward of him, keeps on in headlong folly until he meets his rash end.

In this poem, nor in any other, does Browning palliate the sin or the sinners. He sets forth the circumstances leading up to the sin in such a way that the sin itself seems to those indulging in it as pardonable, indeed, as



justifiable. He then turns against their feebly plausible pretext the unrelenting consequences of their transgression and the swift retribution that must follow. In fearless but in wholesome dealing the moral lessons are made clear, and for these truths, despite its defects, this tragic product of Browning's pen will endure.

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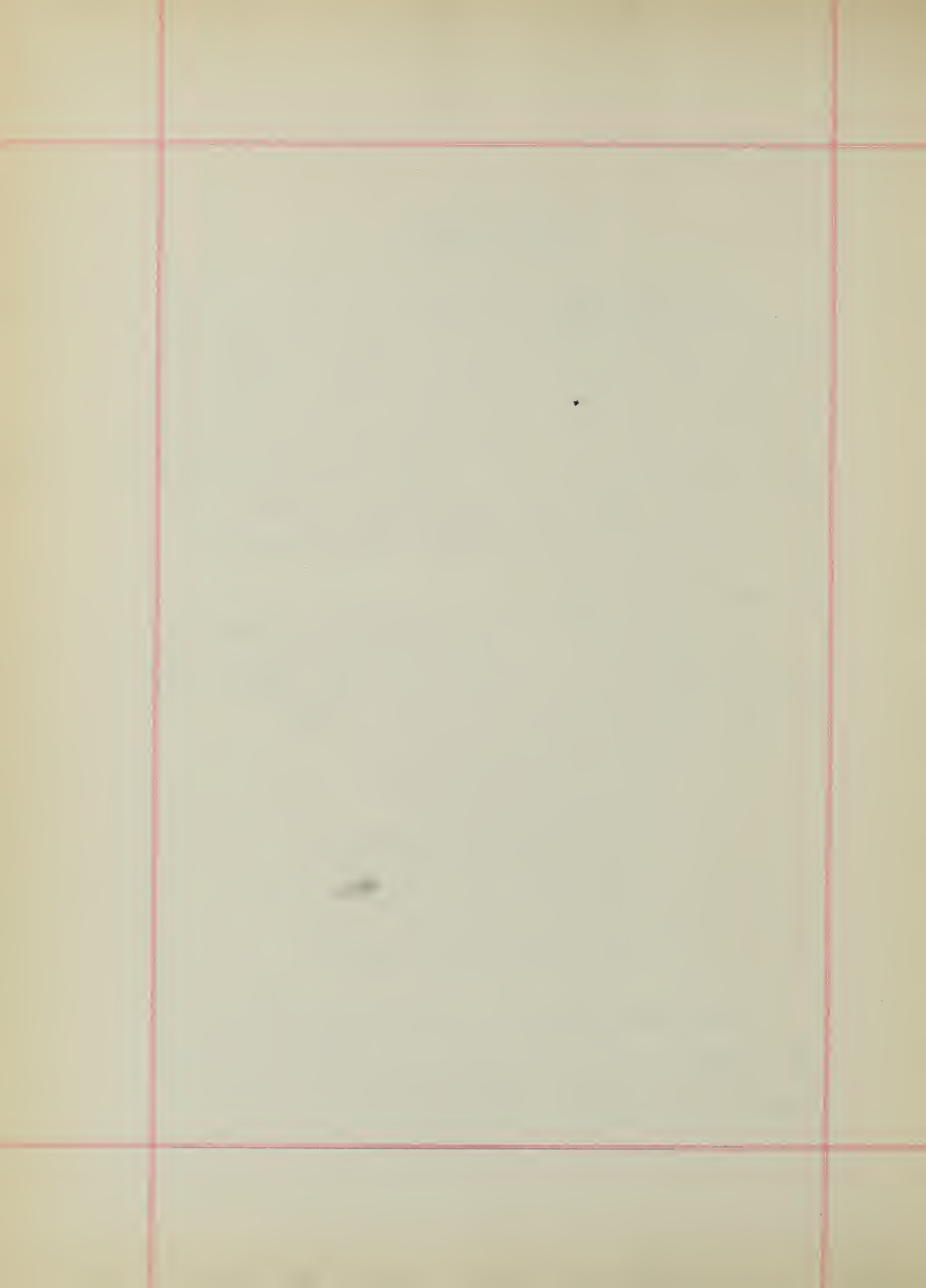
9. PIPPA PASSES
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In Pippa Passes we see an example of Browning's power to glorify the common things of life. Like Wordsworth, he, too, loved childhood and its sweet simplicity. Pippa, the poor peasant child whose life is one of unceasing toil, becomes for a single day the type of happy and natural childhood. In a not very skilful combination of stories of various settings she is the connecting interest which binds the many parts into one.

All unconscious of her influence Pippa goes forth on this glad morning to be as happy as the "Four Happiest Ones" in Asolo. Her happy heart bursts forth in song:

*"The year's at the spring
 And day's at the morn;
 Morning's at seven;
 The hillside's dew-pearled;
 The lark's on the wing;
 The snail's on the thorn:
 God's in his heaven -
 All's right with the world!"*

Little does she realize that her simple song of joy shall become a Heaven-sent message to a world that knows so much of sin. To Pippa, so unconscious of her strength, as



truly as to Sir Galahad, so fully conscious of his, the words apply:

*"My strength is as the strength of ten
Because my heart is pure".*

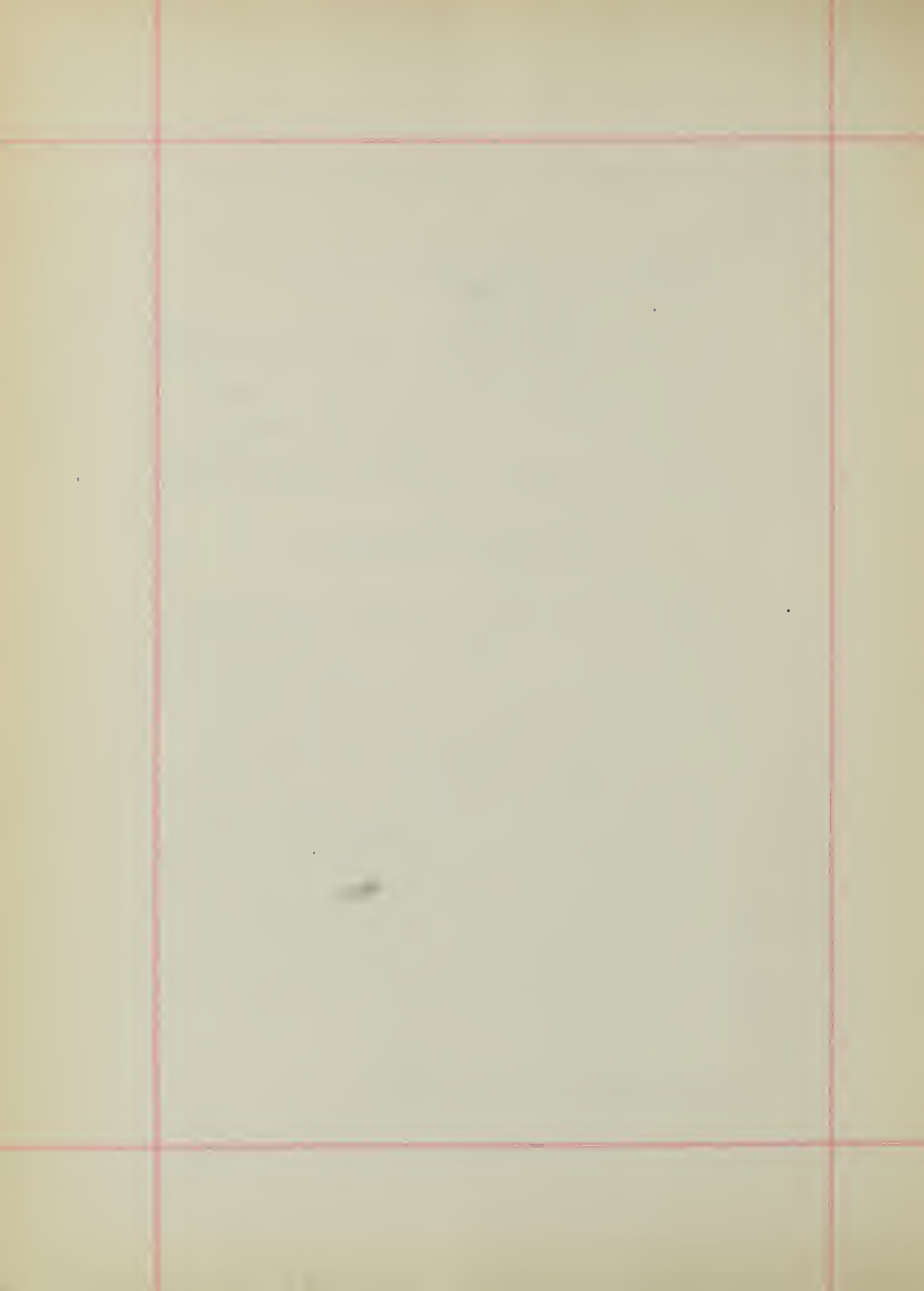
Browning is a great preacher. He is all the more effective because he never preaches at people. He takes a simple song torn out of the sweet innocence of childhood drive the arrows of conviction through the hearts of guilty men. Thus the confession of Scheld,

*"That little peasant's voice
Has righted all again"*

has become that of many a man whose spirit unquickenened by such a God-sent voice had yielded to the power of the flesh.

Browning boldly portrays the worst in men to call them back to their best. He believes in the good in all men and by the good would he judge them. He does not leave them under a shadow of guilt. In A Flot in the 'Scutcheon Mildred, Earl Mertoun, and Lord Tresham all disown the past, all repent, and all are forgiven. In Pippa Passes Sebald and Ottima are filled with horror at their crime; they are evidently repentant and thus there seems to be hope even for them.

We must believe, then, that since



*"God's in his heaven
All's right with the world".*

The world is still in the making and men are "workers together with God who alone beholds that

*"- - one far-off divine event,
To which the whole creation moves". **

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* Tennyson.



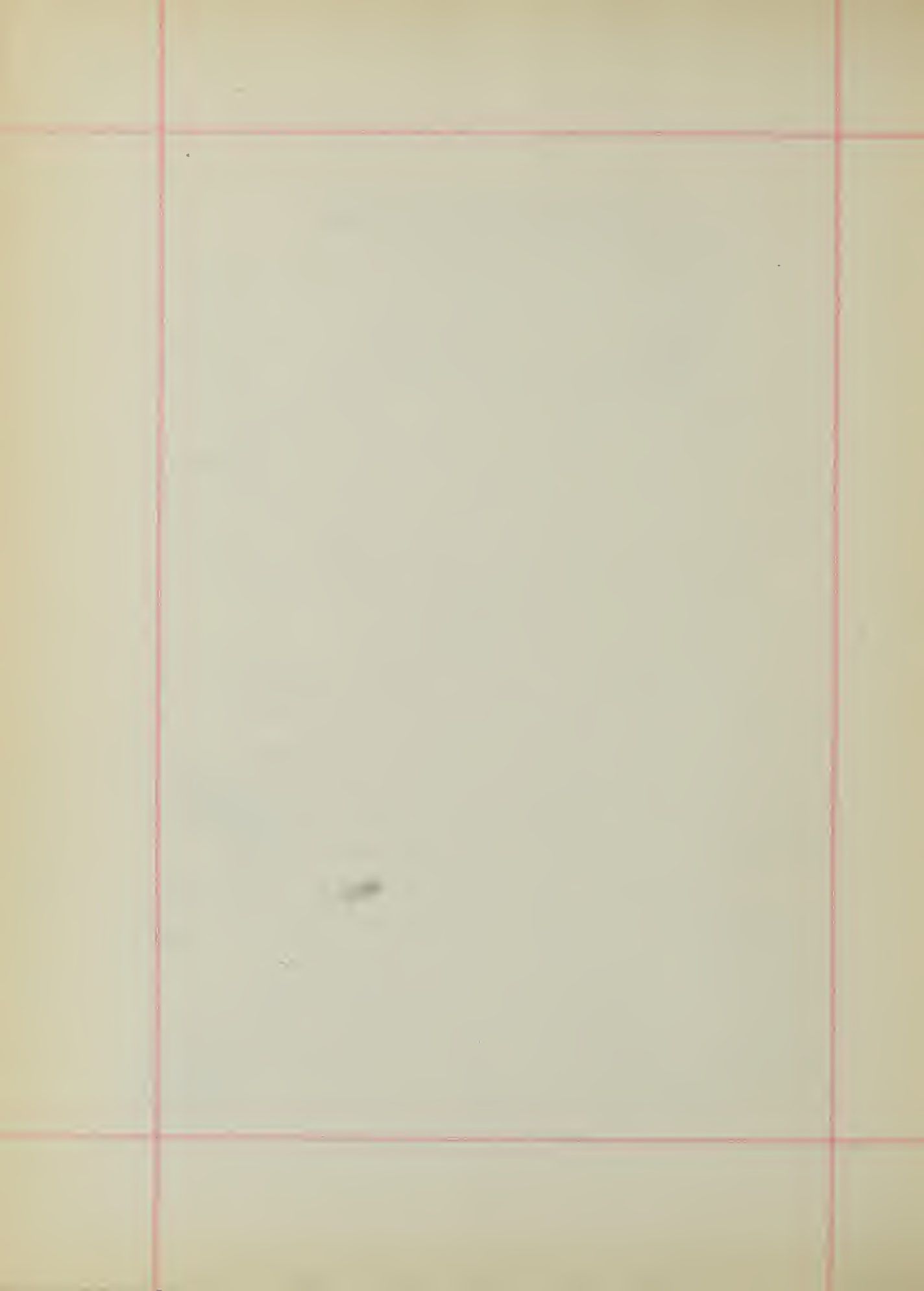
10. CHRISTMAS EVE AND EASTER DAY

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The skilful physician treating todily ills is cautious yet fearless. He must sometimes probe the wound thoroughly that its healing may be the more certain. Browning is the skilful physician of the soul. He is reverent always yet he deals fearlessly and faithfully. In Christmas Eve he enters into the inner room of the spiritual life and describes in vivid detail three telling scenes. He writes at a time when the dissenting Puritan faith stands out in strong contrast to orthodox Catholicism.

It is Christmas Eve and the Sabbath. The picture of the uncouth huxble folk as they come through the rain and gathering darkness and enter the mean little chapel is one of the most powerful bits of description in Browning. Perhaps there is none stronger in all his work.

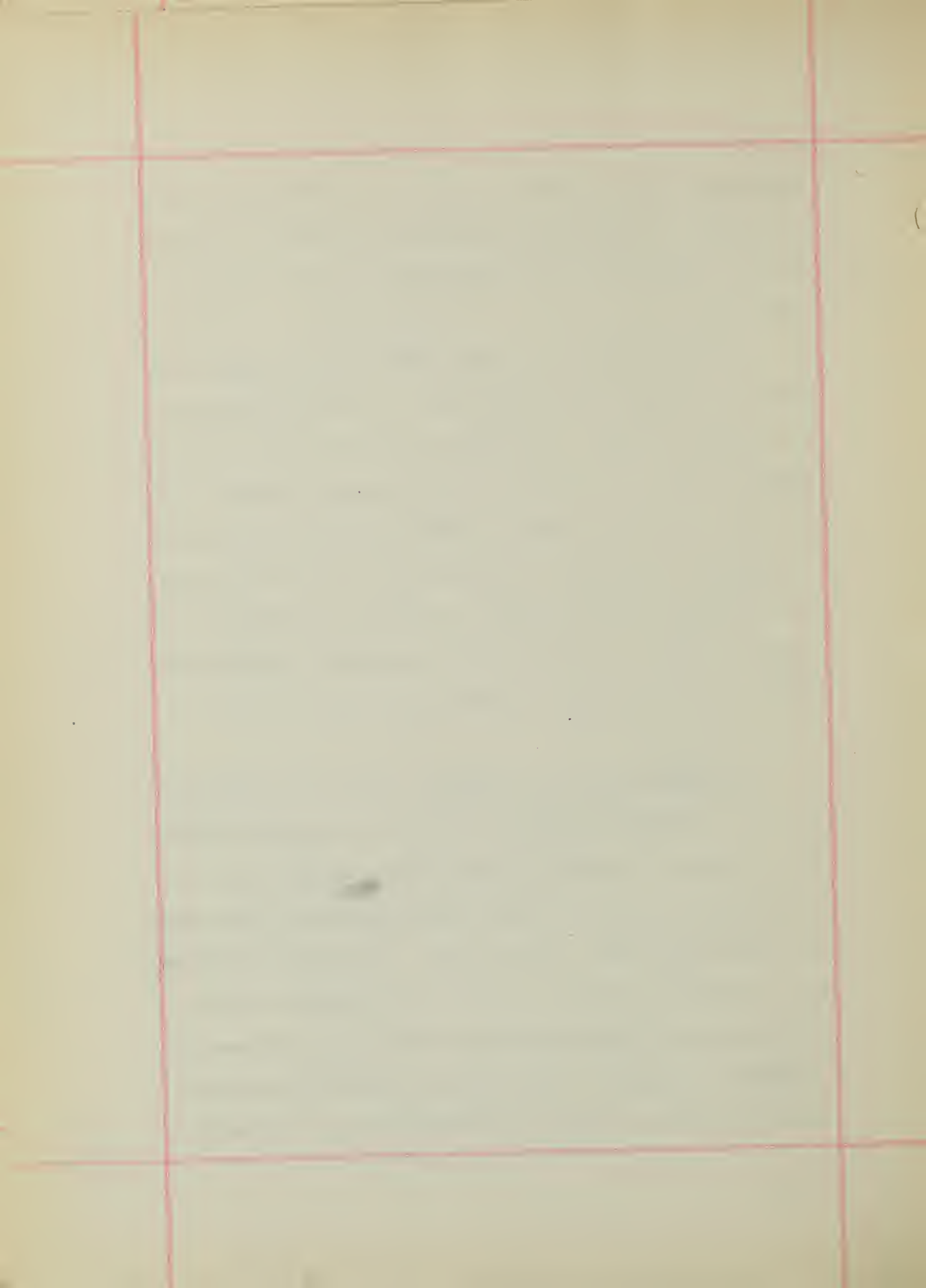
The appearance of each newcomer tells of a hard life and of privations endured. The compelling motive that draws them, despite the storm, to so dreary a place and to listen in content to so wretched a sermon is one that challenges admiration. For them there is not one such compelling motive - that of love. We confess it is love that is crude,



love that fails to drive out egotism and Pharisaical pride, as is shown by their attitude toward the stranger, yet it is love unfeigned for it is inspired by a simple faith in God's Son.

Far different is the next scene when he who left the chapel in disgust is whirled away to the grand cathedral of St. Peter's at Rome. He beholds a wondrous sight as the midnight mass of the Feast of the Nativity is offered. Here he finds much of that beauty of worship he has felt is alone fitting to be offered to him who is the King of Glory; but the "errors and perversities" of worship, the "silver bell's shrill tinkling", the "same old baby-prattle", these forms which seem so lacking in content, are wholly revolting to him.

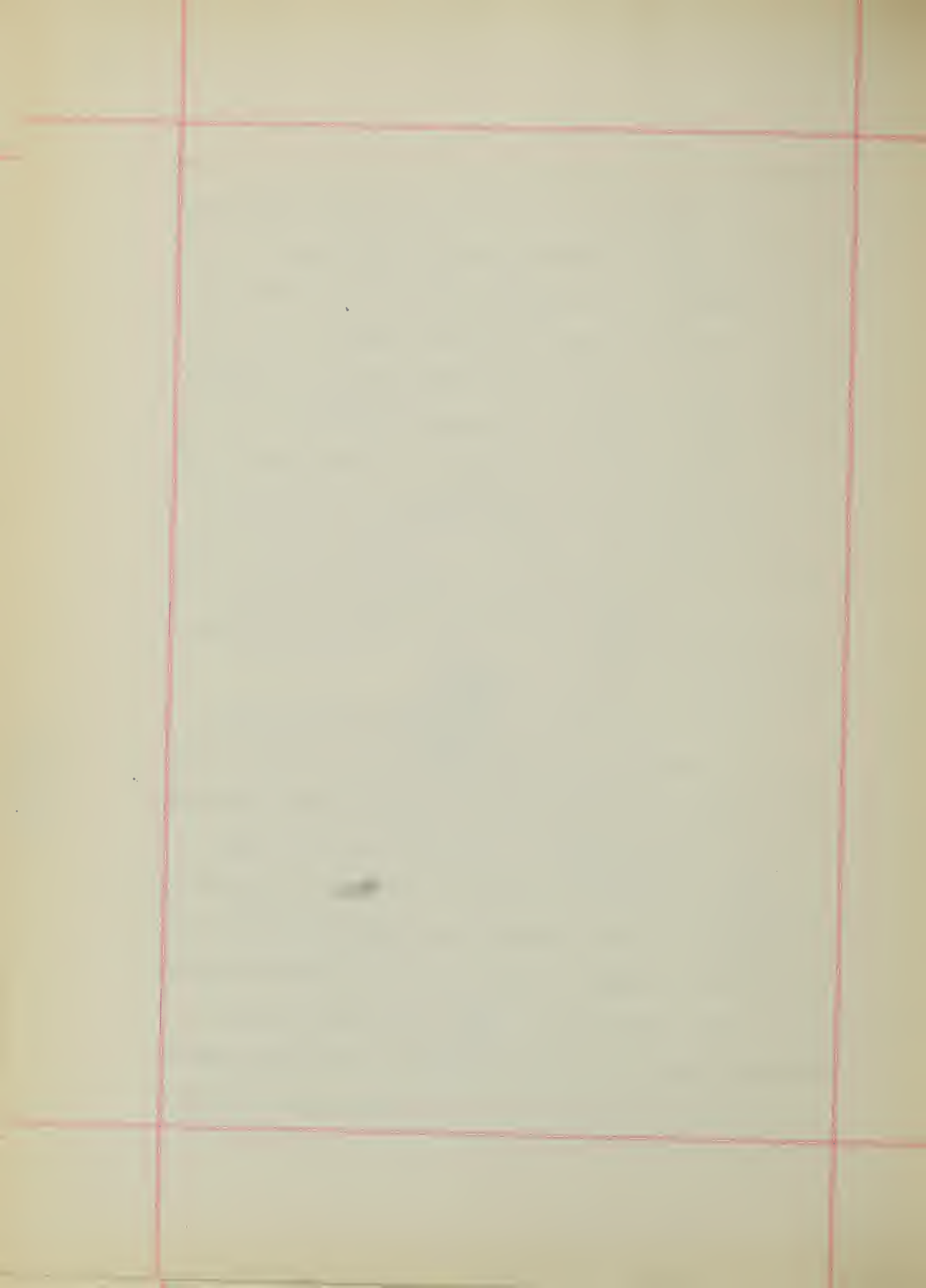
The last scene is, if possible, even more disappointing. The Göttingen professor, with an air of great learning, finds that the Pearl of price when separated from all accretions and foreign matter leaves for residuum only dust and ashes; yet these, strange to say, have a peculiar value, and, therefore, may well be prized and venerated. After such cold and lifeless reasoning it is a relief to re-enter the homely Mount Zion chapel where, whatever else may be wanting, there is a spirit of reverence and of heart-felt



gratitude.

Were it not for the saving sense of humour that Browning always possessed, this poem would become a study of too great intensity. This danger he avoids both by a recurring humour and by writing with a seemingly careless hand. Thus while he is telling us of a fat panting woman, of children riding a cock-horse, and of "a horrible wen", he is also telling his tale in much bad verse and in such sorry rhyme as "substantial" and "man shall"; "Pascal" and "task call". Aside from such defects, however, we realize there is need of the sensuous in such a poem, and Browning's method of introducing this element has in no wise destroyed the effect which the poem was meant to produce.

Great freedom has truly been given to man as caretaker of the divine spark that glows within. He may stifle it in a narrow and unwholesome atmosphere; he may well-nigh lose it amidst the forms and ceremonies that were meant to preserve it; he may with lenses and test-tubes so scrutinize and analyze it that it seems ready to vanish from sight; yet, if, with all his lack of wisdom and with his erring vision, love remains, to him will be given the divine approval. Wherever love is, there Christ dwells. This is the lesson the Catholic-souled Browning brings to us. Love, though it



be that of the way-faring man, is above the price of riches; though it be the love of ignorance it is better than the highest learning, for learning may be so overtowering in itself that love is scarcely recognized. "If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge - - but have not love, I am nothing". Man, beholding only the outward appearance, may fail to discover love, but since

*"the loving worm within its clod
Were diviner than a loveless god
Amid his worlds"**

man may wisely refrain from

"- - further tracking, and trying, and testing"

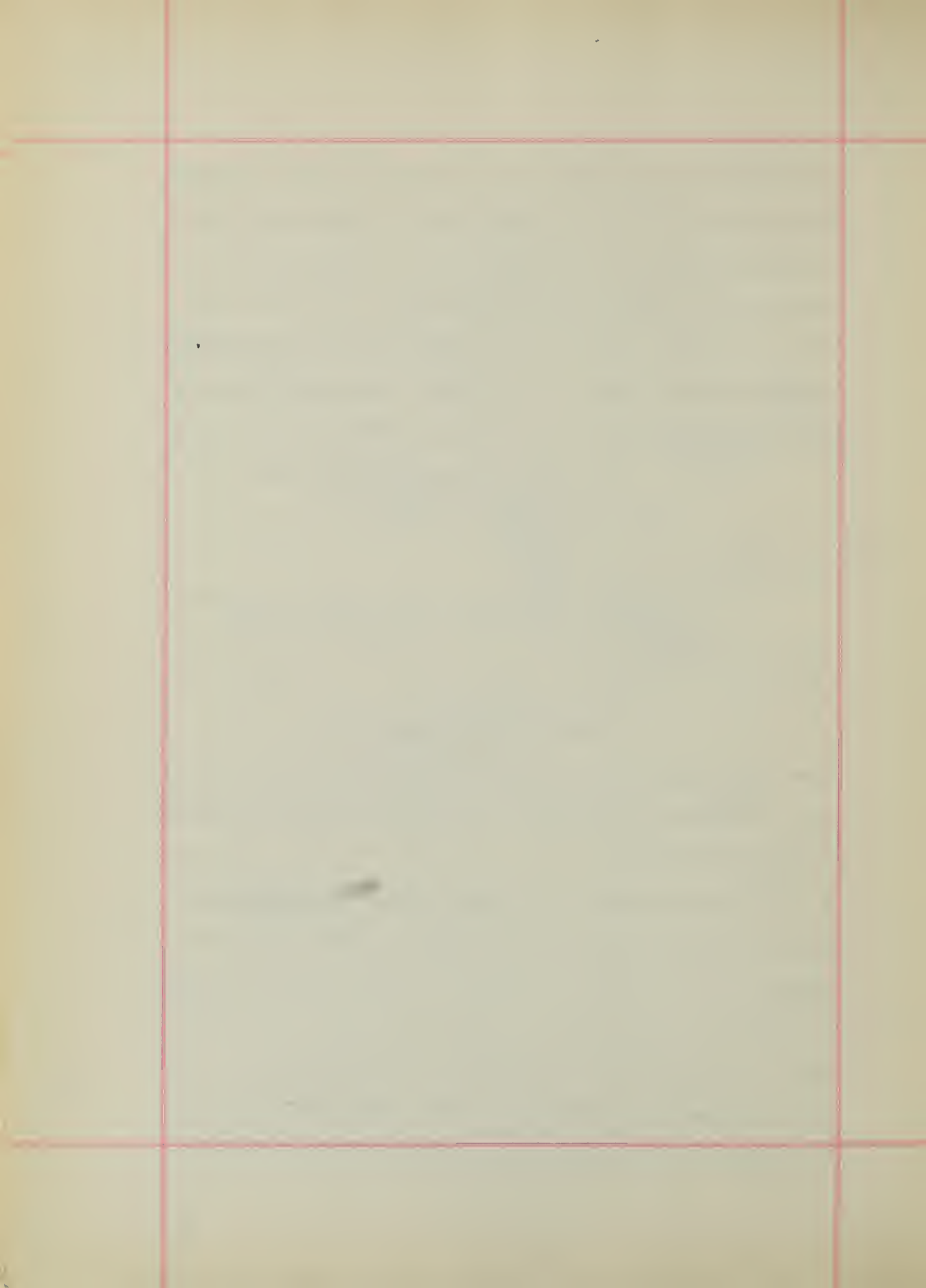
and, with Browning, say:

*"God! Thou art Love!
I build my faith on that!"^o*

That love of God draws all men, both the wise and the foolish, and no man dare exclude any from the field of its all-embracing affection.

The second part of the poem, called Easter Day, is a dialogue in which doubt reasons against faith. The two speakers may be taken to represent the conflict which sooner or later must take place in every man's life. On the one hand how hard it is to be a Christian, and even when the utmost endeavor is made how little do we seem to succeed! The

* *Christmas Eve and Easter Day*, p. 318². ^o*Paracelsus*, p. 41¹.



struggle must be renewed daily, daily the cross be borne. How easy, how natural for man to choose the earth, the seen, so pleasant to behold, so good to possess. Can he be condemned if he choose to live for those things which Providence has placed here for his using? Does God ask that man shall renounce the world in which he must live and for whose blessings he must seek if he is to live at all?

On the other hand the upholder of faith speaks his defence and finally describes a vision he has had of the Judgment Day. He tells how he stood condemned by the Great Judge because he had chosen to love earth instead of heaven. Perceiving his error he repents and is led from choice to choice by his faithful Counsellor. Earth, Art, Mind, each in turn being found unworthy of the soul's devotion with "tardy conscience" he at last chooses Love. In this choice alone he is justified. It is Love that gives meaning to all lesser gifts. Through them Love has been striving to find a way to man's heart and to arouse in him an appreciation of the highest, - to point him "through nature to nature's God".

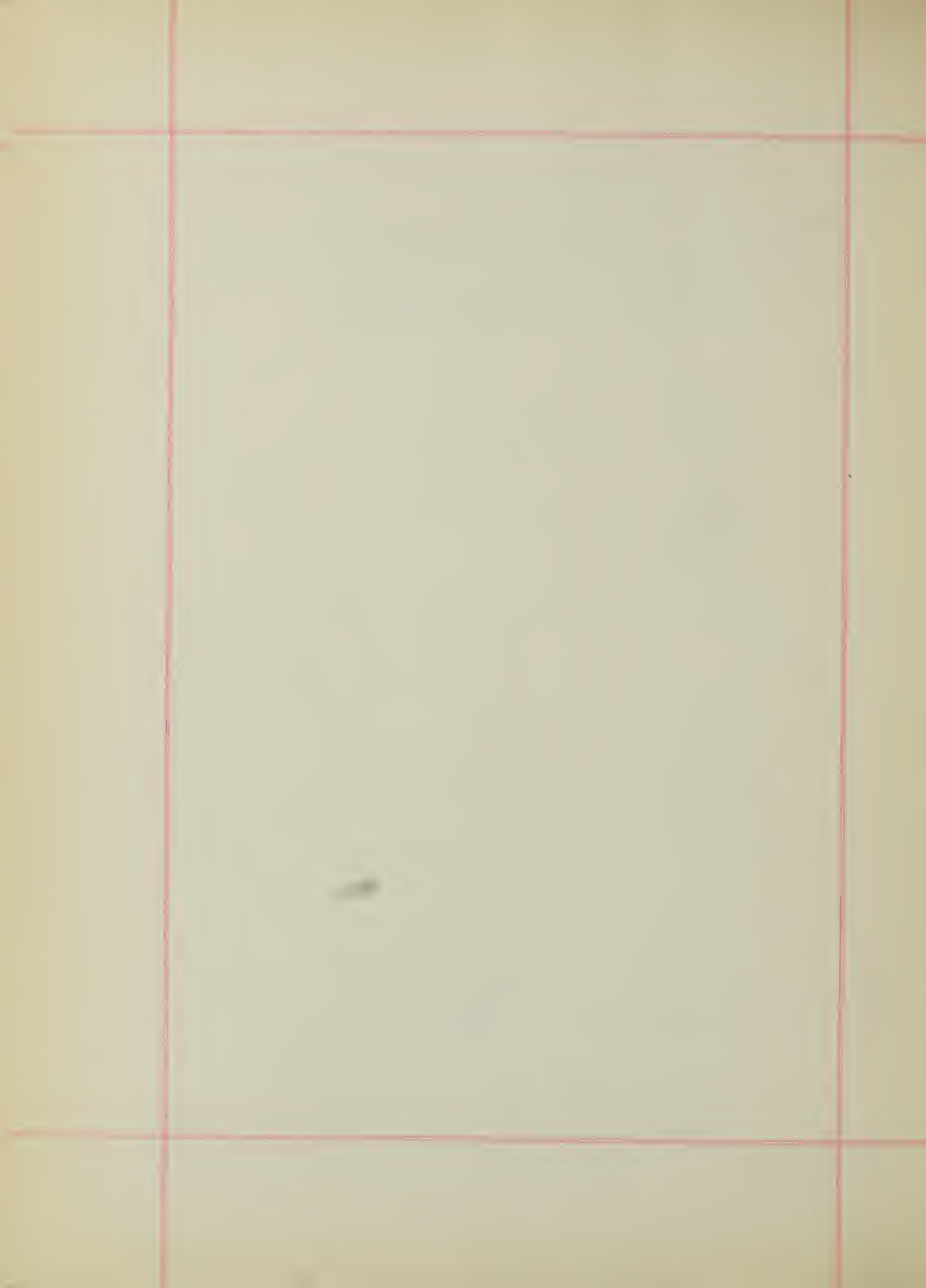
*"Love lay within it and without,
To clasp thee, - but in vain! Thy soul
Still shrunk from him who made thee whole,
Still set deliberate aside - His Love!"**

* *Christmas Eve and Easter Day, p. 334².*



The two parts of this double poem in reality teach the same lesson, though each does so in its own way. Not creeds nor ceremonies, not logic nor intellectual acumen, but Love shall be the final test of every life.

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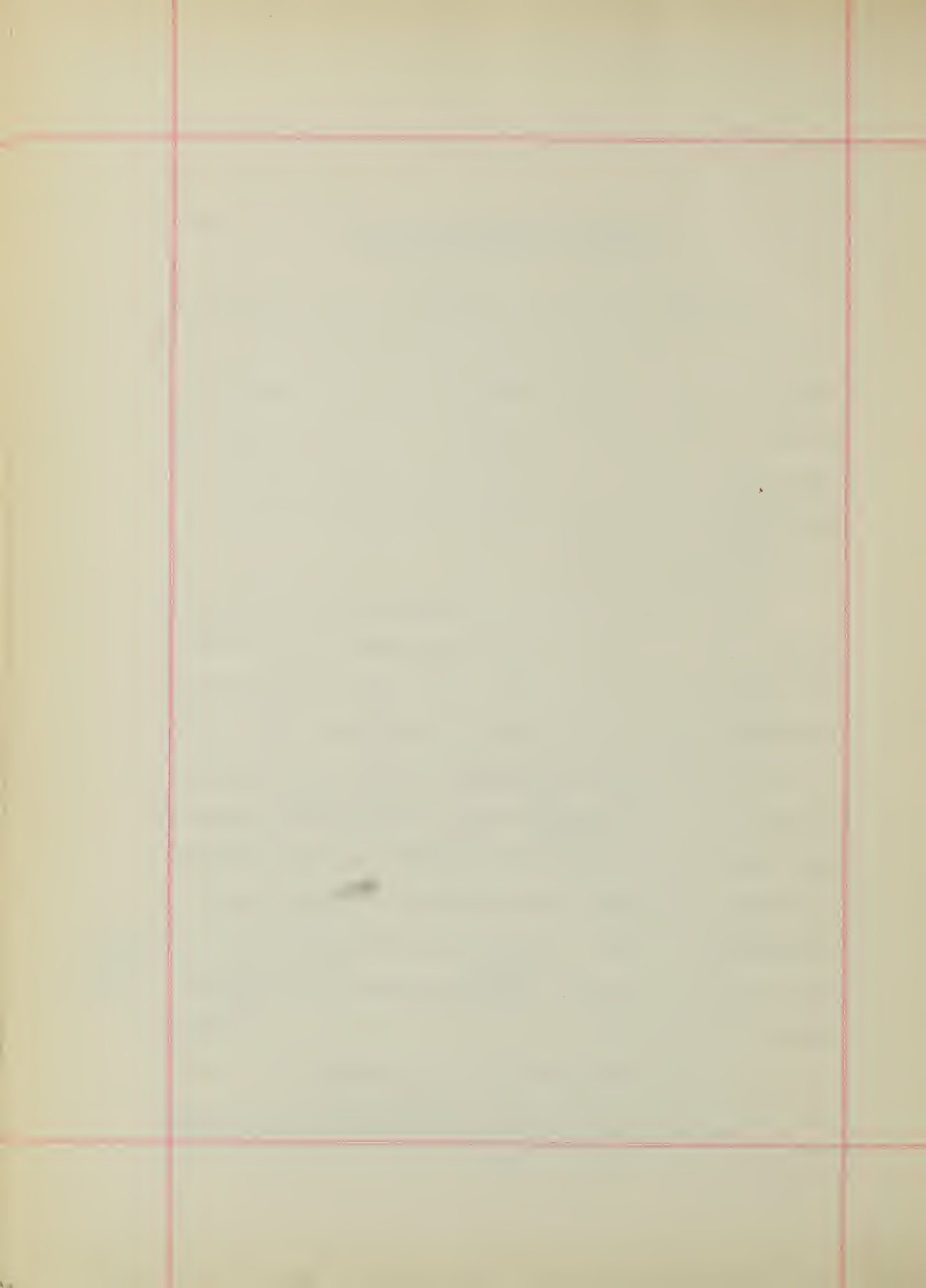
BROWNING'S PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE
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"We do well" says Henry Jones, "to seek philosophy in the poets for they teach only by hints and parables; - - they reflect the concrete truth of life as it is half-revealed and half-concealed in facts". The man, however, always determines the poet, and it is Browning as the man first of all that speaks, though his message, perchance, takes the form of poetry.

Robert Browning was the cosmopolitan citizen. In England, in Italy, in Paris, everywhere, he met men as a man. He studied the problems of men - their toils, their sins, their aspirations, their defeats. All these he took and, for man's profit, represented them in verse. He became a preacher of righteousness ^{for} he saw the need of calling men to repentance. His words, if read aright, bear the tidings of salvation. Repentance and contrition are the promise of better things to come. The fact that man disavows much of the past in his life only declares that he is wiser today than he was yesterday.

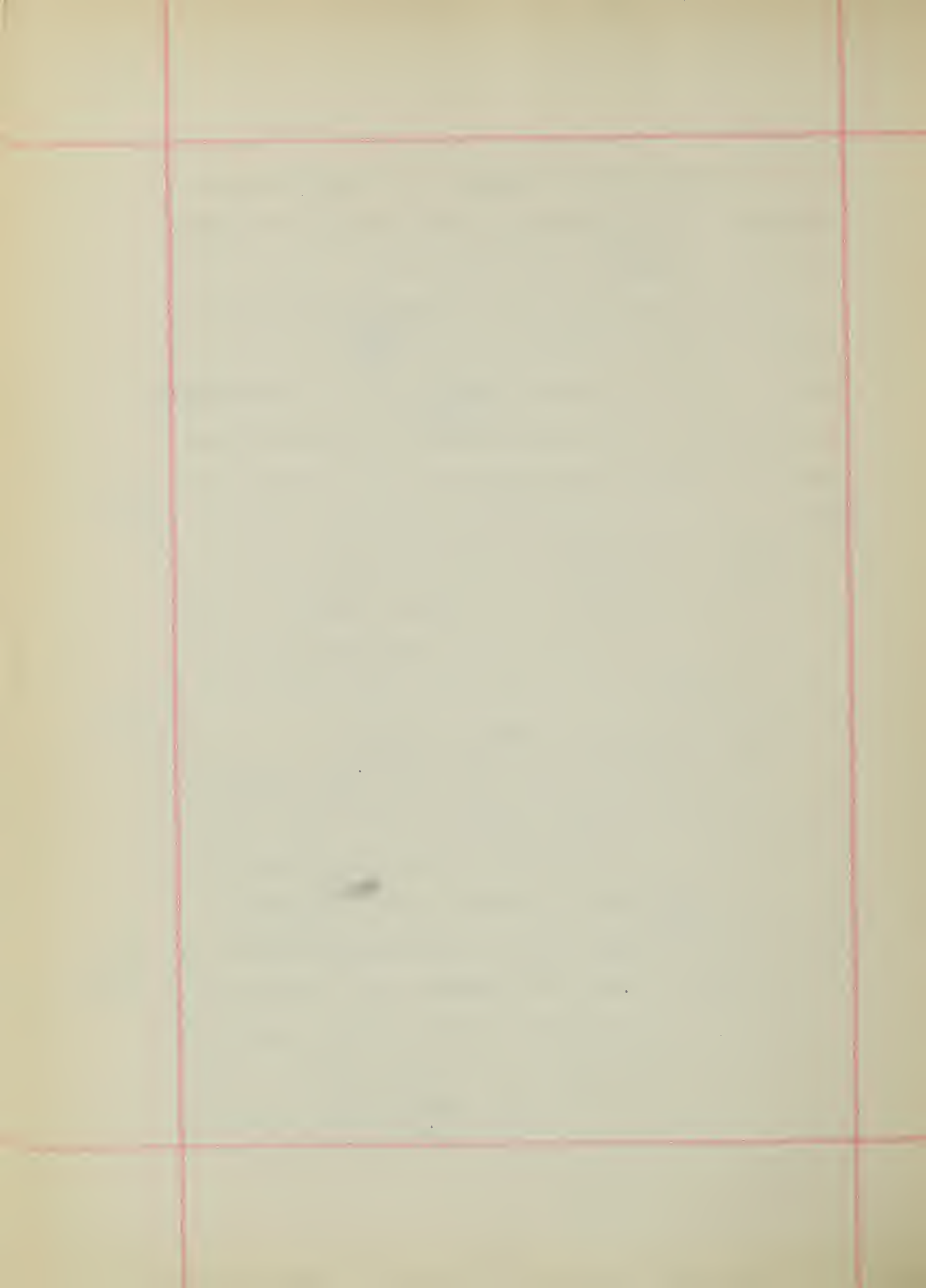
*"Man must pass from old to new,
 From vain to real, from mistake to fact,
 From what once seemed good, to what now proves best."**

* *A Death in the Desert*, p. 390².



The moral life is a progress. Evil exists only to be overcome. In this sense evil is unreal and may be annihilated. To this view Carlyle would object. To him evil is so inherent in man that it is incurable. On the other hand Browning believes absolutely in the triumph of the good. He declares we cannot know that anything is evil. Our knowledge is too limited. To know that evil is evil only and forever incurable would be a fatal knowledge to man, for with such knowledge all endeavor to overcome would cease. The fact that man, if it were possible, would destroy all evil is proof of the lofty destiny he is meant to fulfill. It tells of the Godhood within urging him on toward the unattained good, for, despite the evil, the good exists, and since this is God's world the good is ever the stronger.

In this life where each one is busy bent on carrying into effect his own little devices of weal or woe, Browning believes with St. Paul that there is a Power decreeing that all things shall "work together for good". Thus, while evil is working in the heart of the faithless Ottimo, and the murderous Sebald, the plotting Luigi, and the traitorous Bishop, God is neither idle nor sleeping - God is also working. Through means of his own choosing he is speaking to the consciences of men, and hands raised to smite in



darkest deeds of sin fall palsied and helpless. The weak things of the world are still chosen to confound the things that are mighty.

Whatever experiences came into his own life, and his trials were not few, Browning is ever the optimistic man of faith. Evil, pain, disease, death, - these are not so many forces uncontrolled and wantonly preying upon defenceless men. They must have a purpose.

*"In the eye of God
Pain may have purpose and be justified
Man's sense avails to only see, in pain
A hateful chance no man but would avert
Or, failing, needs must pity. Thanks to God
And love to man, - from man take these away
And what is man worth?"**

Happy days may be forever past yet our strong-souled poet will not weakly yearn for them with vain, unhealthy regret:

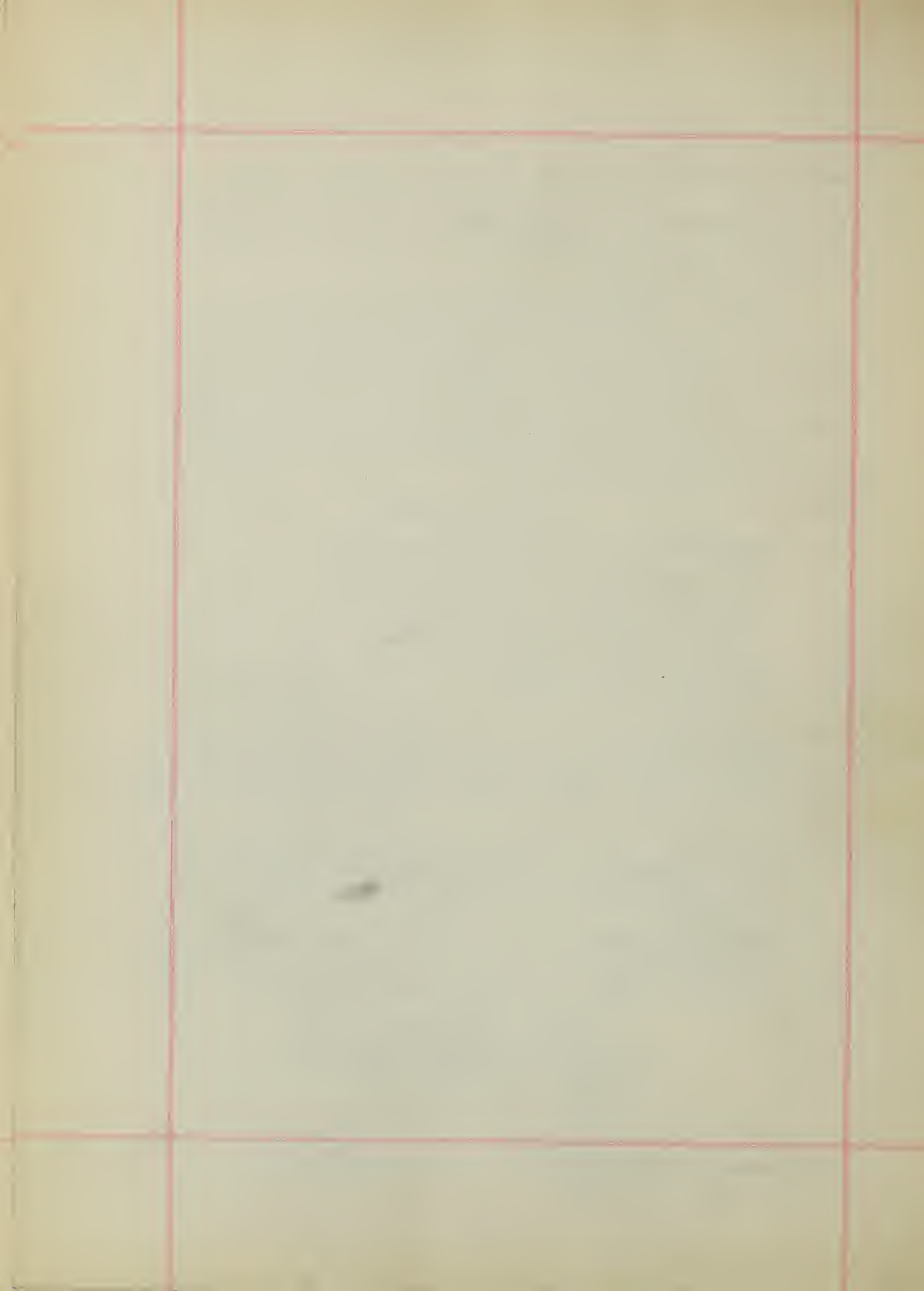
*"May's warm, slow, yellow, moon-lit summer nights; -
Gone are they, but I have them in my soul".^o*

Even though he cannot tell what pain and sorrow may come to him he faces the future with a steadfast faith. He would

*"Rejoice that man is hurled
From change to change unceasingly
His soul's wings never furled".^x*

* *Ferishtah's Fancies*, p. 936¹. ° *Pippa Passes*, p. 139².

x *James Lee's Wife*, p. 375¹.



With Bryant he can say

*"Keep not that the world changes - did it keep
A stable, changeless state, 'twere cause indeed to
weep".*

The words of Browning nerve his followers for life's conflicts like the clarion commands of some Nelson who believes in victory ere it is won. He is an inspiring leader. He always knows where he is going - always sees the goal. The testimony of Dr. Berdoe that Browning led him into the Christian faith will doubtless become the testimony of many.

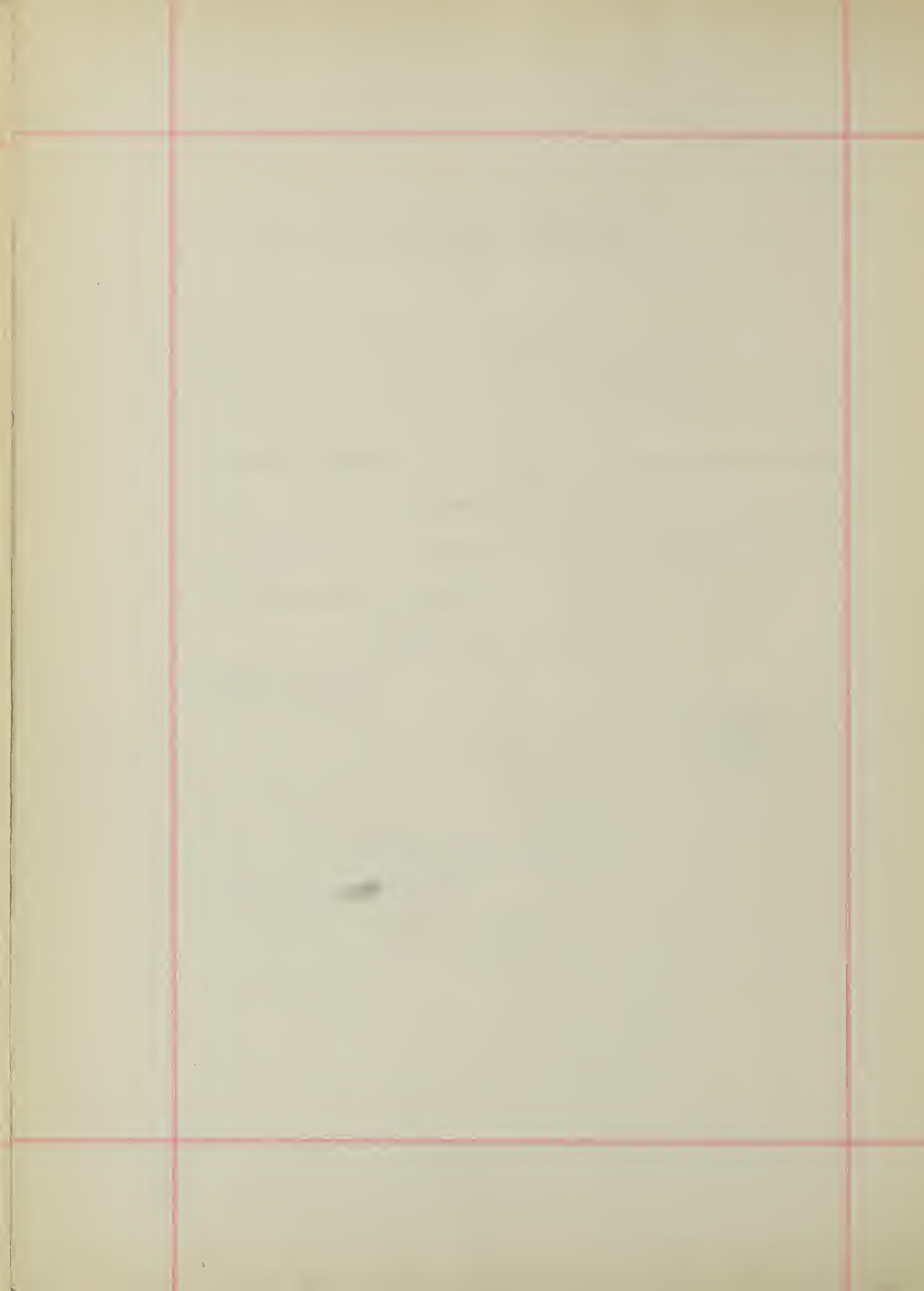
*"He at least believed in Soul, was very sure of God".**

Delohus L. Jeffers.

Boston, April, 1911.

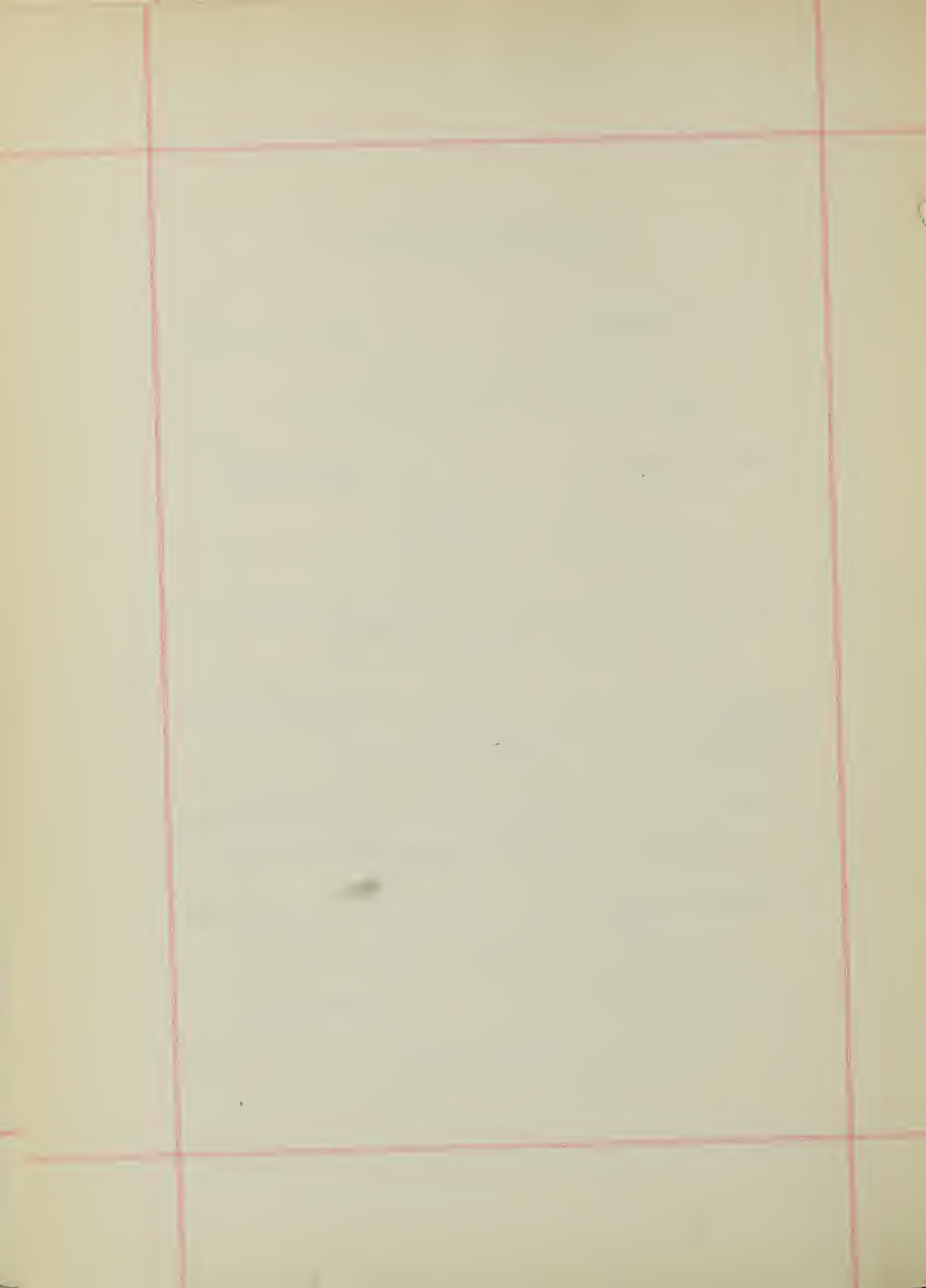
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* *La Saisiaz, p. 858².*

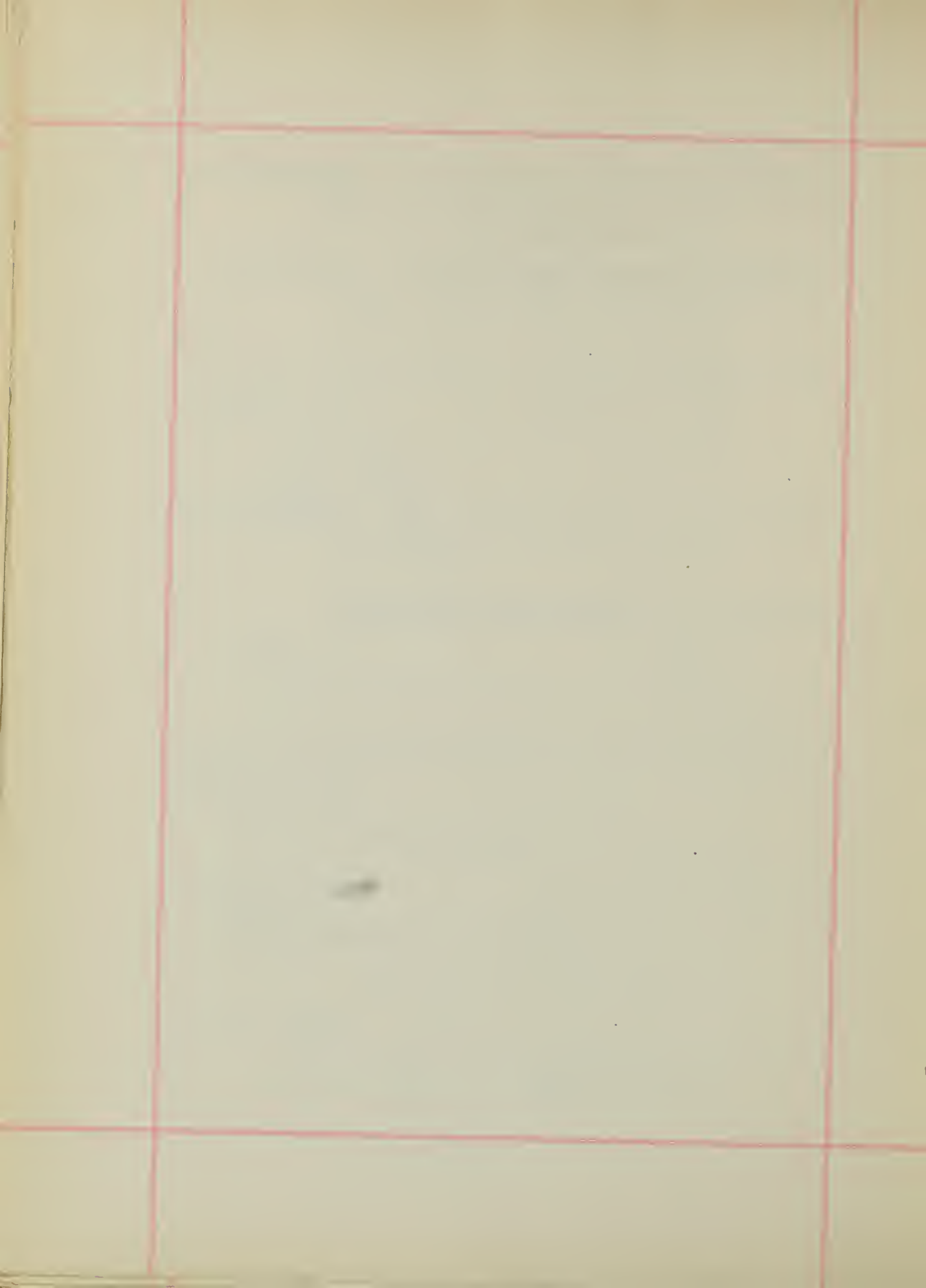


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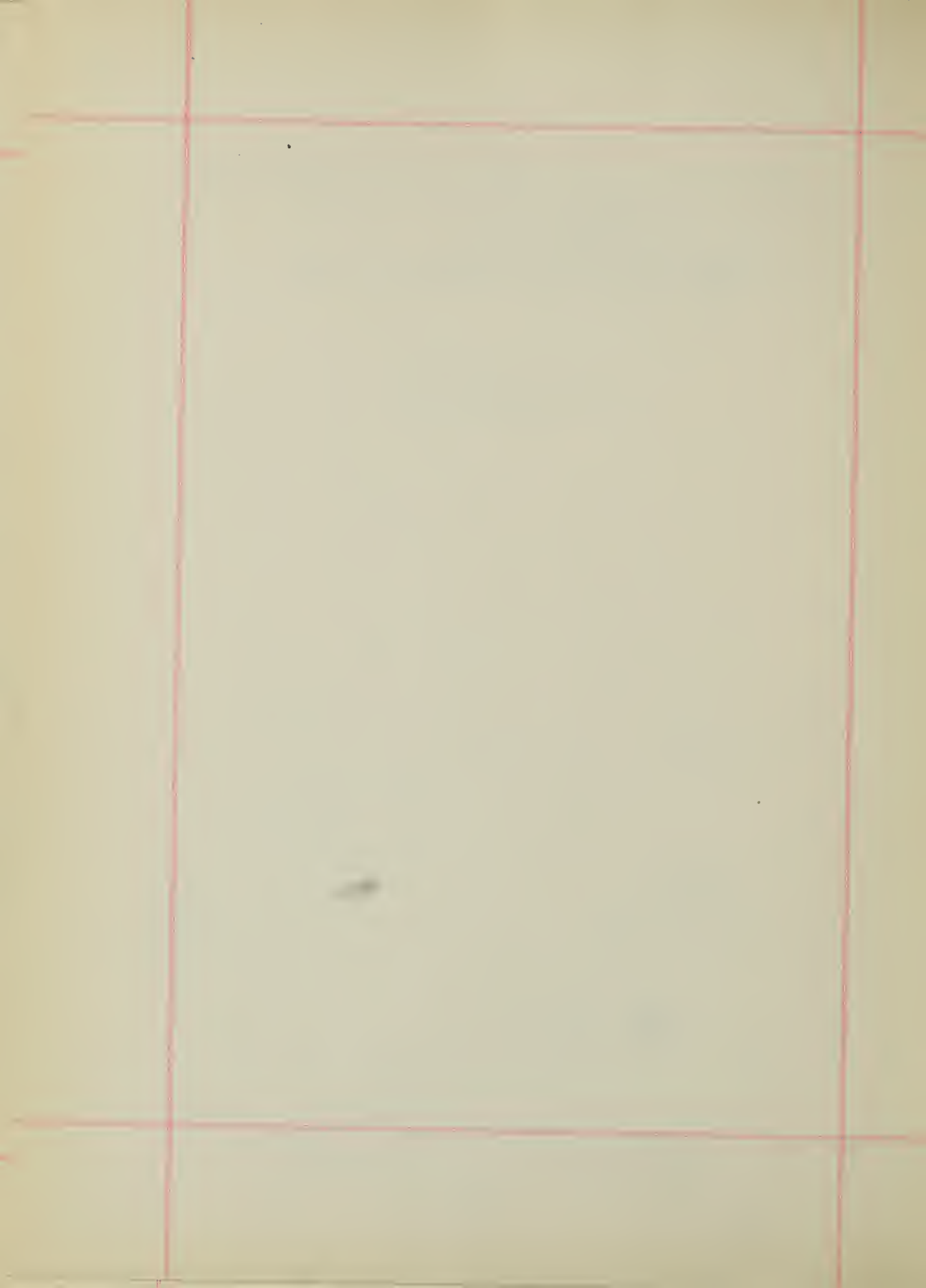
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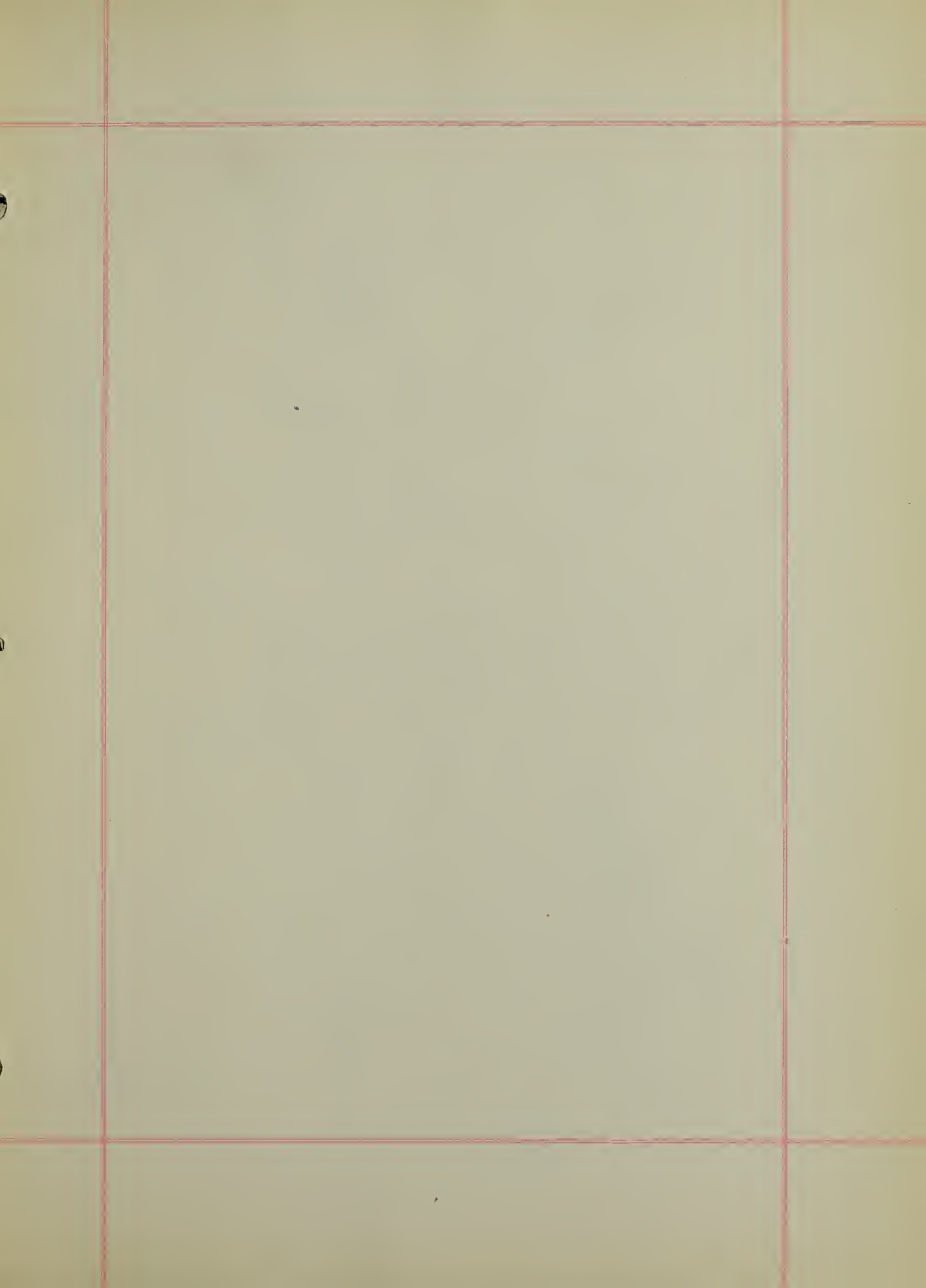


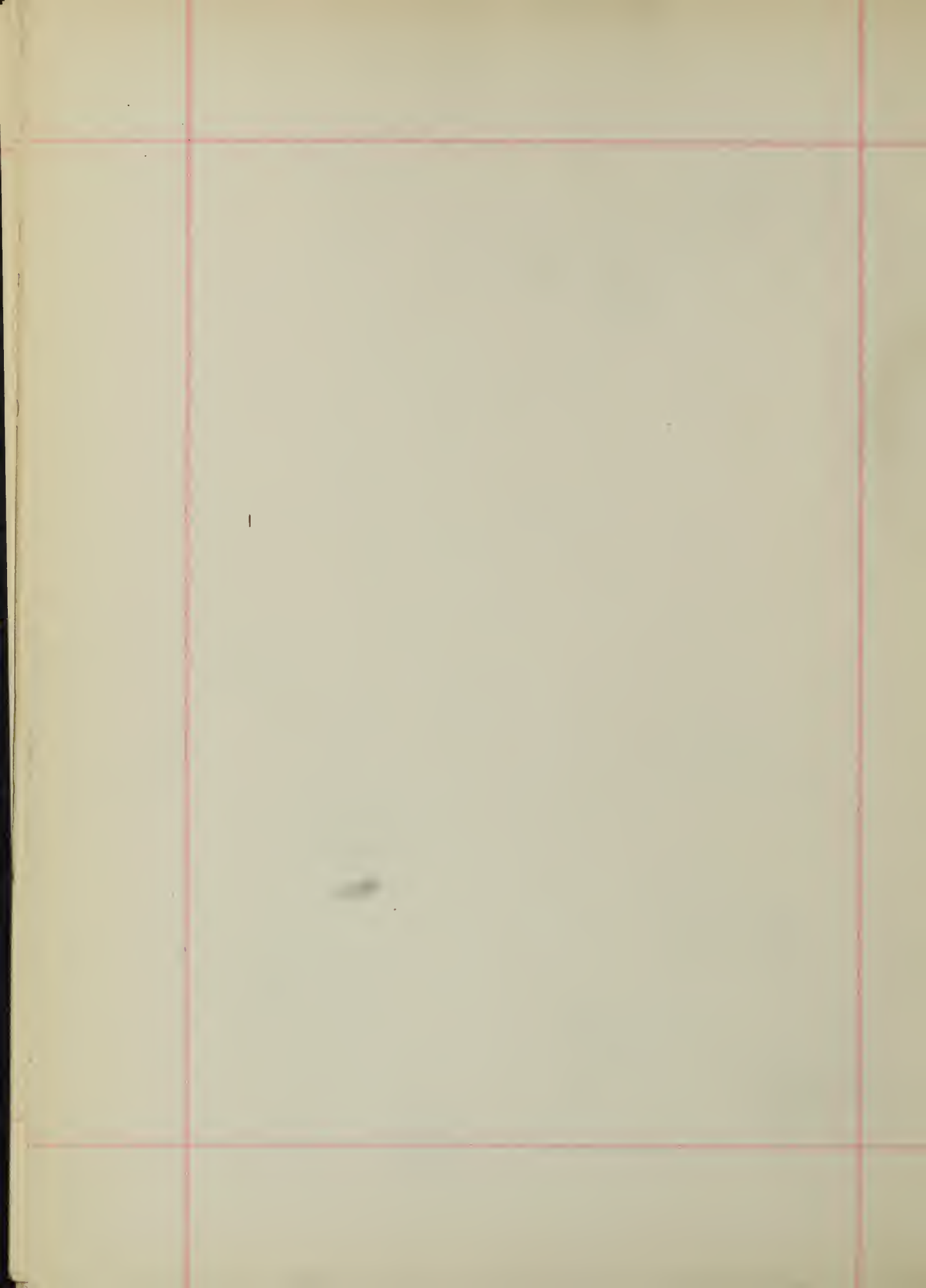
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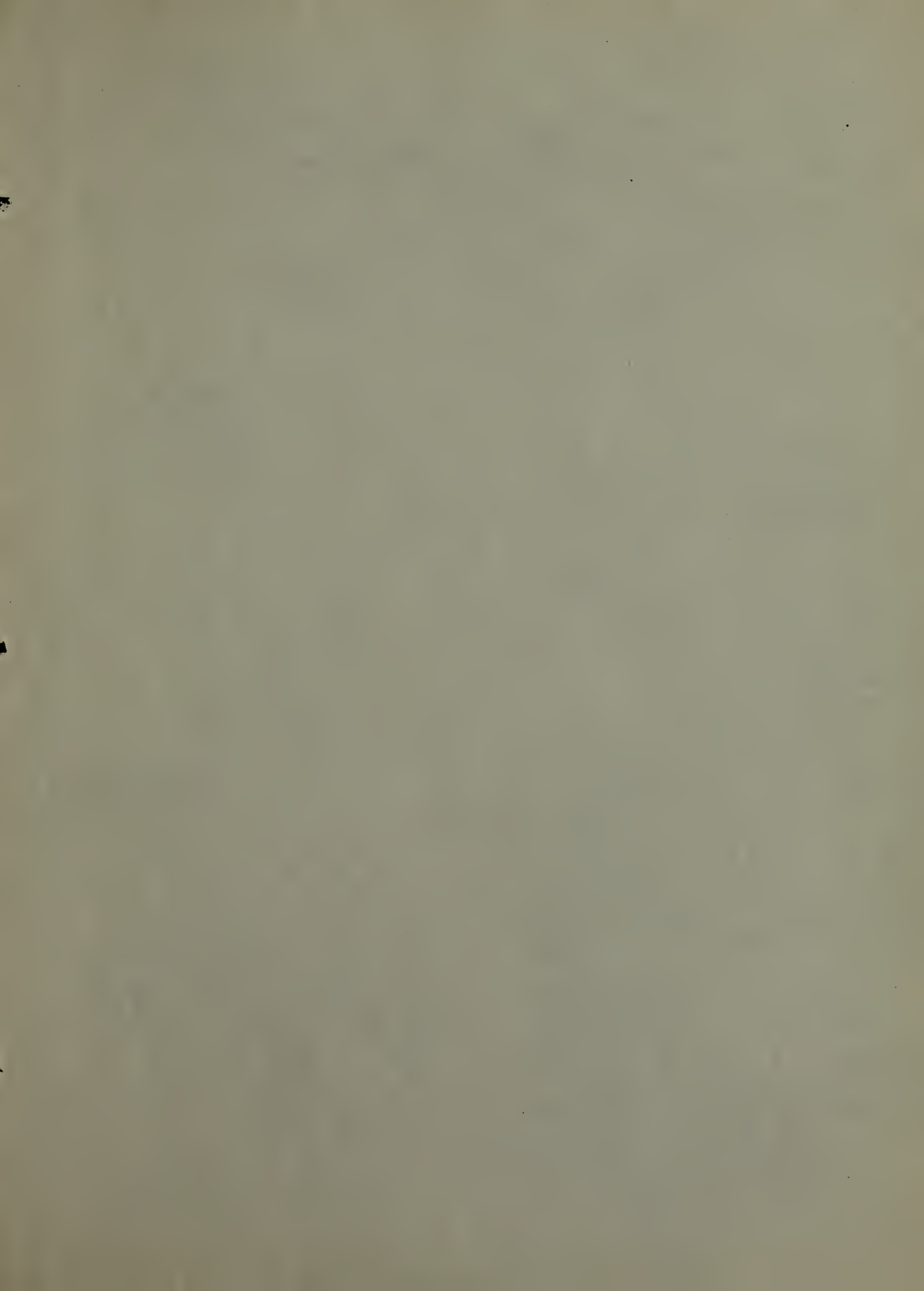
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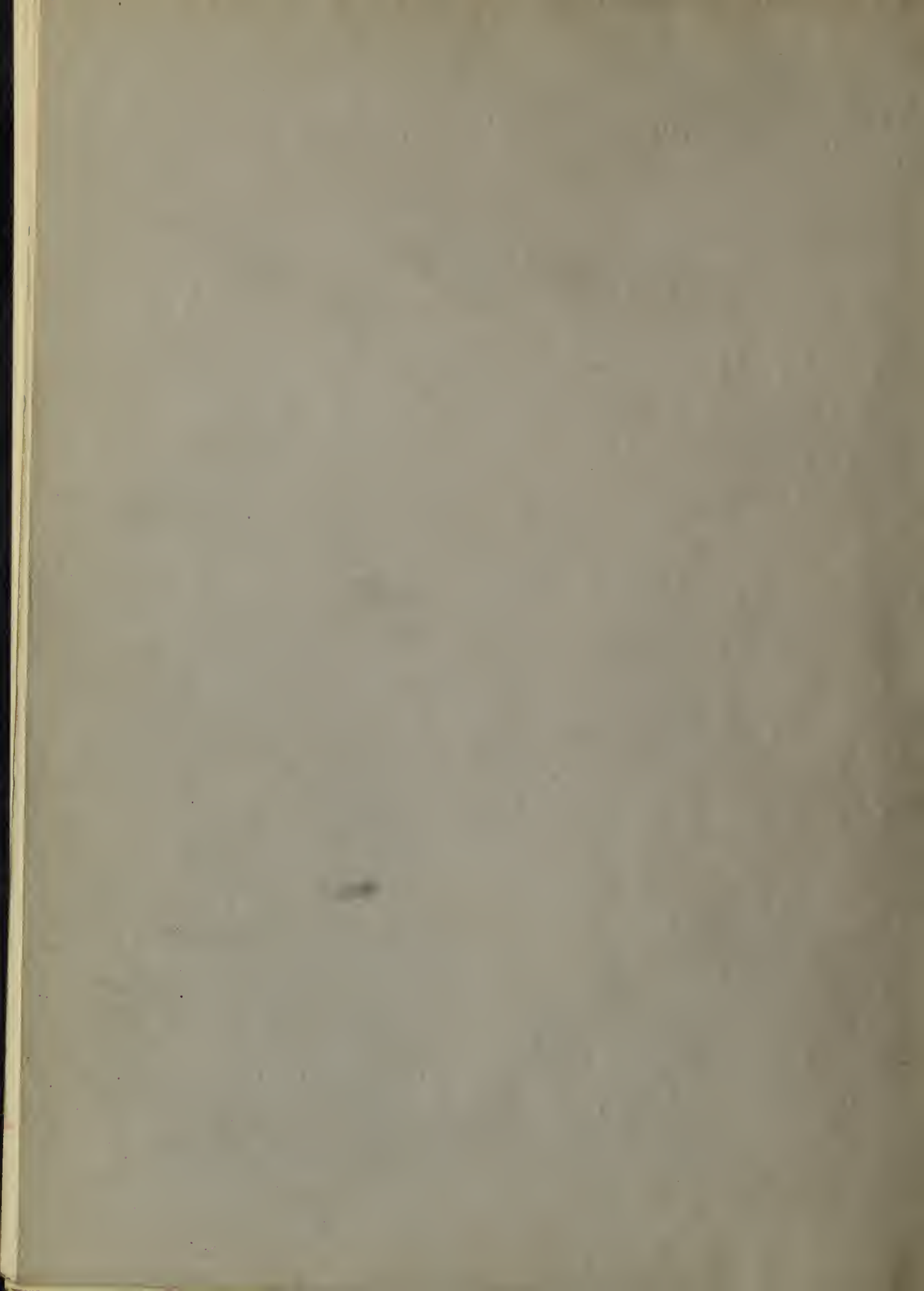
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