

Shelley

By

Sydney Waterlow

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Chapter I. Shelley and His Age

In the case of most great writers our interest in them as persons is derived from our interest in them as writers; we are not very curious about them except for reasons that have something to do with their art. With Shelley it is different. During his life he aroused fears and hatreds, loves and adorations, that were quite irrelevant to literature; and even now, when he has become a classic, he still causes excitement as a man. His lovers are as vehement as ever. For them he is the "banner of freedom," which,

"Torn but flying,
Streams like a thunder-cloud against the wind."

He has suffered that worst indignity of canonisation as a being saintly and superhuman, not subject to the morality of ordinary mortals. He has been bedaubed with pathos. Nevertheless it is possible still to recognise in him one of the most engaging personalities that ever lived. What is the secret of this charm? He had many characteristics that belong to the most tiresome natures; he even had the qualities of the man as to whom one wonders whether partial insanity may not be his best excuse--inconstancy expressing itself in hysterical revulsions of feeling, complete lack of balance, proneness to act recklessly to the hurt of others. Yet he was loved and respected by contemporaries of tastes very different from his own, who were good judges and intolerant of bores--by Byron, who was apt to care little for any one, least of all for poets, except himself; by Peacock, who poured laughter on all enthusiasms; and by Hogg, who, though slightly eccentric, was a Tory eccentric. The fact is that, with all his defects, he had two qualities which, combined, are so attractive that there is scarcely anything they will not redeem--perfect sincerity without a thought of self, and vivid emotional force. All his faults as well as his virtues were, moreover, derived from a certain strong feeling, coloured in a peculiar way which will be explained in what follows--a sort of ardour of universal benevolence. One of his letters ends with these words: "Affectionate love to and from all. This ought to be not only the vale of a letter, but a superscription over the gate of life"--words which, expressing not merely Shelley's opinion of what ought to be, but what he actually felt, reveal the ultimate reason why he is still loved, and the reason, too, why he has so often been idealised. For this universal benevolence is a thing which appeals to men almost with the force of divinity, still carrying, even when mutilated and obscured by frailties, some suggestion of St. Francis or of Christ.

The object of these pages is not to idealise either his life, his character, or his works. The three are inseparably connected, and to understand one we must understand all. The reason is that Shelley is one of the most subjective of writers. It would be hard to name a poet who has kept his art more free from all taint of representation of the real, making it not an instrument for creating something life-like, but a more and more intimate echo or emanation of his own spirit. In studying his writings we shall see how they flow from his dominating emotion of love for his fellow-men; and the drama of his life, displayed against the background of the time, will in turn throw light on that emotion. His benevolence took many forms--none perfect, some admirable, some ridiculous. It was too universal. He never had a clear enough perception of the real qualities of real men and

women; hence his loves for individuals, as capricious as they were violent, always seem to lack something which is perhaps the most valuable element in human affection. If in this way we can analyse his temperament successfully, the process should help us to a more critical understanding, and so to a fuller enjoyment, of the poems.

This greatest of our lyric poets, the culmination of the Romantic Movement in English literature, appeared in an age which, following on the series of successful wars that had established British power all over the world, was one of the gloomiest in our history. In some ways the England of 1800-20 was ahead of the rest of Europe, in others it lagged far behind. The Industrial Revolution, which was to turn us from a nation of peasants and traders into a nation of manufacturers, had begun; but its chief fruits as yet were increased materialism and greed, and politically the period was one of blackest reaction. Alone of European peoples we had been untouched by the tide of Napoleon's conquests, which, when it receded from the Continent, at least left behind a framework of enlightened institutions, while our success in the Napoleonic wars only confirmed the ruling aristocratic families in their grip of the nation which they had governed since the reign of Anne. This despotism crushed the humble and stimulated the high-spirited to violence, and is the reason why three such poets as Byron, Landor, and Shelley, though by birth and fortune members of the ruling class, were pioneers as much of political as of spiritual rebellion. Unable to breathe the atmosphere of England, they were driven to live in exile.

It requires some effort to reconstruct that atmosphere to-day. A foreign critic [Dr. George Brandes, in vol. iv. of his 'Main Currents of Nineteenth Century Literature'] has summed it up by saying that England was then pre-eminently the home of cant; while in politics her native energy was diverted to oppression, in morals and religion it took the form of hypocrisy and persecution. Abroad she was supporting the Holy Alliance, throwing her weight into the scale against all movements for freedom. At home there was exhaustion after war; workmen were thrown out of employment, and taxation pressed heavily on high rents and the high price of corn, was made cruel by fear; for the French Revolution had sent a wave of panic through the country, not to ebb until about 1830. Suspicion of republican principles--which, it seemed, led straight to the Terror--frightened many good men, who would otherwise have been reformers, into supporting the triumph of coercion and Toryism. The elder generation of poets had been republicans in their youth.

Wordsworth had said of the Revolution that it was "bliss to be alive" in that dawn; Southey and Coleridge had even planned to found a communistic society in the New World. Now all three were rallied to the defence of order and property, to Church and Throne and Constitution. From their seclusion in the Lakes, Southey and Wordsworth praised the royal family and celebrated England as the home of freedom; while Thomson wrote "Rule, Britannia," as if Britons, though they never, never would be slaves to a foreigner, were to a home-grown tyranny more blighting, because more stupid, than that of Napoleon. England had stamped out the Irish rebellion of 1798 in blood, had forced Ireland by fraud into the Union of 1800, and was strangling her industry and commerce. Catholics could neither vote nor hold office. At a time when the population of the United Kingdom was some thirty millions, the Parliamentary franchise was possessed by no

more than a million persons, and most of the seats in the House of Commons were the private property of rich men. Representative government did not exist; whoever agitated for some measure of it was deported to Australia or forced to fly to America. Glasgow and Manchester weavers starved and rioted. The press was gagged and the Habeas Corpus Act constantly suspended. A second rebellion in Ireland, when Castlereagh "dabbled his sleek young hands in Erin's gore," was suppressed with unusual ferocity. In England in 1812 famine drove bands of poor people to wander and pillage. Under the criminal law, still of medieval cruelty, death was the punishment for the theft of a loaf or a sheep. The social organism had come to a deadlock--on the one hand a starved and angry populace, on the other a vast Church-and-King party, impregnably powerful, made up of all who had "a stake in the country." The strain was not to be relieved until the Reform Act of 1832 set the wheels in motion again; they then moved painfully indeed, but still they moved. Meanwhile Parliament was the stronghold of selfish interests; the Church was the jackal of the gentry; George III, who lost the American colonies and maintained negro slavery, was on the throne, until he went mad and was succeeded by his profligate son.

Shelley said of himself that he was

"A nerve o'er which do creep
The else unfelt oppressions of this earth,"

and all the shades of this dark picture are reflected in his life and in his verse. He was the eldest son of a Sussex family that was loyally Whig and moved in the orbit of the Catholic Dukes of Norfolk, and the talk about emancipation which he would hear at home may partly explain his amazing invasion of Ireland in 1811-12, when he was nineteen years old, with the object of procuring Catholic emancipation and the repeal of the Union Act--subjects on which he was quite ignorant. He addressed meetings, wasted money, and distributed two pamphlets "consisting of the benevolent and tolerant deductions of philosophy reduced into the simplest language." Later on, when he had left England for ever, he still followed eagerly the details of the struggle for freedom at home, and in 1819 composed a group of poems designed to stir the masses from their lethargy. Lord Liverpool's administration was in office, with Sidmouth as Home Secretary and Castlereagh as Foreign Secretary, a pair whom he thus pillories:

"As a shark and dog-fish wait
Under an Atlantic Isle,
For the negro ship, whose freight
Is the theme of their debate,
Wrinkling their red gills the while--

Are ye, two vultures sick for battle,
Two scorpions under one wet stone,
Two bloodless wolves whose dry throats rattle,
Two crows perched on the murrained cattle,
Two vipers tangled into one."

The most effective of these bitter poems is 'The Masque of Anarchy', called forth by the "Peterloo Massacre" at Manchester on August 16, 1819, when hussars had charged a peaceable meeting held in support of Parliamentary reform, killing six people and wounding some seventy others. Shelley's frenzy of indignation poured itself out in the terrific stanzas, written in simplest language so as to be understood by the people, which tell how

"I met a murder on the way--
He had a mask like Castlereagh--
Very smooth he looked, yet grim;
Seven blood-hounds followed him."

The same year and mood produced the great sonnet, 'England in 1819'--

"An old, mad, blind, despised and dying king,
Princes, the dregs of their dull race, who flow
Through public scorn,--mud from a muddy spring."

and to the same group belongs that not quite successful essay in sinister humour, 'Swellfoot the Tyrant' (1820), suggested by the grunting of pigs at an Italian fair, and burlesquing the quarrel between the Prince Regent and his wife. When the Princess of Wales (Caroline of Brunswick-Wolfenbuttel), after having left her husband and perambulated Europe with a paramour, returned, soon after the Prince's accession as George IV, to claim her position as Queen, the royal differences became an affair of high national importance. The divorce case which followed was like a gangrenous eruption symptomatic of the distempers of the age. Shelley felt that sort of disgust which makes a man rave and curse under the attacks of some loathsome disease; if he laughs, it is the laugh of frenzy. In the slight Aristophanic drama of 'Swellfoot', which was sent home, published, and at once suppressed, he represents the men of England as starving pigs content to lap up such diluted hog's-wash as their tyrant, the priests, and the soldiers will allow them. At the end, when the pigs, rollicking after the triumphant Princess, hunt down their oppressors, we cannot help feeling a little sorry that he does not glide from the insistent note of piggishness into some gentler mood: there is a rasping quality in his humour, even though it is always on the side of right. He wrote one good satire though. This is 'Peter Bell the Third' (1819), an attack on Wordsworth, partly literary for the dulness of his writing since he had been sunk in clerical respectability, partly political for his renegade flunkeyism.

In 1820 the pall which still hung over northern Europe began to lift in the south. After Napoleon's downfall the Congress of Vienna (1814-16) had parcelled Europe out on the principle of disregarding national aspirations and restoring the legitimate rulers. This system, which could not last, was first shaken by revolutions that set up constitutional governments in Spain and Naples. Shelley hailed these streaks of dawn with joy, and uttered his enthusiasm in two odes--the 'Ode to Liberty' and the 'Ode to Naples'--the most splendid of those cries of hope and prophecy with which a long line of English poets has encouraged the insurrection of the nations. Such cries, however, have no visible effect on

the course of events. Byron's jingles could change the face of the world, while all Shelley's pure and lofty aspirations left no mark on history. And so it was, not with his republican ardours alone, but with all he undertook. Nothing he did influenced his contemporaries outside his immediate circle; the public only noticed him to execrate the atheist, the fiend, and the monster. He felt that "his name was writ on water," and languished for want of recognition. His life, a lightning-flash across the storm-cloud of the age, was a brief but crowded record of mistakes and disasters, the classical example of the rule that genius is an infinite capacity for getting into trouble.

Though poets must "learn in suffering what they teach in song," there is often a vein of comedy in their lives. If we could transport ourselves to Miller's Hotel, Westminster Bridge, on a certain afternoon in the early spring of 1811, we should behold a scene apparently swayed entirely by the Comic Muse. The member for Shoreham, Mr. Timothy Shelley, a handsome, consequential gentleman of middle age, who piques himself on his enlightened opinions, is expecting two guests to dinner--his eldest son, and his son's friend, T. J. Hogg, who have just been sent down from Oxford for a scandalous affair of an aesthetical squib. When the young men arrive at five o'clock, Mr. Shelley receives Hogg, an observant and cool-headed person, with graciousness, and an hour is spent in conversation. Mr. Shelley runs on strangely, "in an odd, unconnected manner, scolding, crying, swearing, and then weeping again." After dinner, his son being out of the room, he expresses his surprise to Hogg at finding him such a sensible fellow, and asks him what is to be done with the scapegoat. "Let him be married to a girl who will sober him." The wine moves briskly round, and Mr. Shelley becomes maudlin and tearful again. He is a model magistrate, the terror and the idol of poachers; he is highly respected in the House of Commons, and the Speaker could not get through the session without him. Then he drifts to religion. God exists, no one can deny it; in fact, he has the proof in his pocket. Out comes a piece of paper, and arguments are read aloud, which his son recognises as Palley's.

"Yes, they are Palley's arguments, but he had them from me; almost everything in Palley's book he had taken from me." The boy of nineteen, who listens fuming to this folly, takes it all with fatal seriousness. In appearance he is no ordinary being. A shock of dark brown hair makes his small round head look larger than it really is; from beneath a pale, freckled forehead, deep blue eyes, large and mild as a stag's, beam an earnestness which easily flashes into enthusiasm; the nose is small and turn-up, the beardless lips girlish and sensitive. He is tall, but stoops, and has an air of feminine fragility, though his bones and joints are large. Hands and feet, exquisitely shaped, are expressive of high breeding. His expensive, handsome clothes are disordered and dusty, and bulging with books. When he speaks, it is in a strident peacock voice, and there is an abrupt clumsiness in his gestures, especially in drawing-rooms, where he is ill at ease, liable to trip in the carpet and upset furniture. Complete absence of self-consciousness, perfect disinterestedness, are evident in every tone; it is clear that he is an aristocrat, but it is also clear that he is a saint.

The catastrophe of expulsion from Oxford would have been impossible in a well-regulated university, but Percy Bysshe Shelley could not have fitted easily into any

system. Born at Field Place, Horsham, Sussex, on August 4, 1792, simultaneously with the French Revolution, he had more than a drop of wildness in his blood. The long pedigree of the Shelley family is full of turbulent ancestors, and the poet's grandfather, Sir Bysshe, an eccentric old miser who lived until 1815, had been married twice, on both occasions eloping with an heiress. Already at Eton Shelley was a rebel and a pariah. Contemptuous of authority, he had gone his own way, spending pocket-money on revolutionary literature, trying to raise ghosts, and dabbling in chemical experiments. As often happens to queer boys, his school-fellows herded against him, pursuing him with blows and cries of "Mad Shelley." But the holidays were happy. There must have been plenty of fun at Field Place when he told his sisters stories about the alchemist in the attic or "the Great Tortoise that lived in Warnham Pond," frightened them with electric shocks, and taught his baby brother to say devil. There is something of high-spirited fun even in the raptures and despairs of his first love for his cousin, Harriet Grove. He tried to convert her to republican atheism, until the family, becoming alarmed, interfered, and Harriet was disposed of otherwise. "Married to a clod of earth!" exclaims Shelley. He spent nights "pacing the churchyard," and slept with a loaded pistol and poison beside him.

He went in to residence at University College, Oxford, in the Michaelmas term of 1810. The world must always bless the chance which sent Thomas Jefferson Hogg a freshman to the same college at the same time, and made him Shelley's friend. The chapters in which Hogg describes their life at Oxford are the best part of his biography. In these lively pages we see, with all the force of reality, Shelley working by fits in a litter of books and retorts and "galvanic troughs," and discoursing on the vast possibilities of science for making mankind happy; how chemistry will turn deserts into cornfields, and even the air and water will yearn for fire and food; how Africa will be explored by balloons, of which the shadows, passing over the jungles, will emancipate the slaves. In the midst he would rush out to a lecture on mineralogy, and come back sighing that it was all about "stones, stones, stones"! The friends read Plato together, and held endless talk of metaphysics, pre-existence, and the sceptical philosophy, on winter walks across country, and all night beside the fire, until Shelley would curl up on the hearthrug and go to sleep. He was happy because he was left to himself. With all his thoughts and impulses, ill-controlled indeed, but directed to the acquisition of knowledge for the benefit of the world, such a student would nowadays be a marked man, applauded and restrained. But the Oxford of that day was a home of "chartered laziness." An academic circle absorbed in intrigues for preferment, and enlivened only by drunkenness and immorality, could offer nothing but what was repugnant to Shelley. He remained a solitary until the hand of authority fell and expelled him.

He had always had a habit of writing to strangers on the subjects next his heart. Once he approached Miss Felicia Dorothea Browne (afterwards Mrs. Hemans), who had not been encouraging. Now half in earnest, and half with an impish desire for dialectical scores, he printed a pamphlet on 'The Necessity of Atheism', a single foolscap sheet concisely proving that no reason for the existence of God can be valid, and sent it to various personages, including bishops, asking for a refutation. It fell into the hands of the college authorities. Summoned before the council to say whether he was the author, Shelley very

properly refused to answer, and was peremptorily expelled, together with Hogg, who had intervened in his behalf.

The pair went to London, and took lodgings in a house where a wall-paper with a vine-trellis pattern caught Shelley's fancy. Mr. Timothy Shelley appeared on the scene, and, his feelings as a Christian and a father deeply outraged, did the worst thing he could possibly have done--he made forgiveness conditional on his son's giving up his friend. The next step was to cut off supplies and to forbid Field Place to him, lest he should corrupt his sisters' minds. Soon Hogg had to go to York to work in a conveyancer's office, and Shelley was left alone in London, depressed, a martyr, and determined to save others from similar persecution. In this mood he formed a connection destined to end in tragedy. His sisters were at a school at Clapham, where among the girls was one Harriet Westbrook, the sixteen-year-old daughter of a coffee-house keeper. Shelley became intimate with the Westbrooks, and set about saving the soul of Harriet, who had a pretty rosy face, a neat figure, and a glib school-girl mind quick to catch up and reproduce his doctrines. The child seems to have been innocent enough, but her elder sister, Eliza, a vulgar woman of thirty, used her as a bait to entangle the future baronet; she played on Shelley's feelings by encouraging Harriet to believe herself the victim of tyranny at school. Still, it was six months before he took the final step. How he could save Harriet from scholastic and domestic bigotry was a grave question. In the first place, hatred of "matrimonialism" was one of his principles, yet it seemed unfair to drag a helpless woman into the risks of illicit union; in the second place, he was at this time passionately interested in another woman, a certain Miss Hitchener, a Sussex school mistress of republican and deistic principles, whom he idealised as an angel, only to discover soon, with equal falsity, that she was a demon. At last Harriet was worked up to throw herself on his protection. They fled by the northern mail, dropping at York a summons to Hogg to join them, and contracted a Scottish marriage at Edinburgh on August 28, 1811.

The story of the two years and nine months during which Shelley lived with Harriet must seem insane to a rational mind. Life was one comfortless picnic. When Shelley wanted food, he would dart into a shop and buy a loaf or a handful of raisins. Always accompanied by Eliza, they changed their dwelling-place more than twelve times. Edinburgh, York, Keswick, Dublin, Nantgwilt, Lynmouth, Tremadoc, Tanyrallt, Killarney, London (Half Moon Street and Pimlico), Bracknell, Edinburgh again, and Windsor, successively received this fantastic household. Each fresh house was the one where they were to abide for ever, and each formed the base of operations for some new scheme of comprehensive beneficence. Thus at Tremadoc, on the Welsh coast, Shelley embarked on the construction of an embankment to reclaim a drowned tract of land; 'Queen Mab' was written partly in Devonshire and partly in Wales; and from Ireland, where he had gone to regenerate the country, he opened correspondence with William Godwin, the philosopher and author of 'Political Justice'.

His energy in entering upon ecstatic personal relations was as great as that which he threw into philanthropic schemes; but the relations, like the schemes, were formed with no notion of adapting means to ends, and were often dropped as hurriedly. Eliza Westbrook, at first a woman of estimable qualities, quickly became "a blind and

loathsome worm that cannot see to sting", Miss Hitchener, who had been induced to give up her school and come to live with them "for ever," was discovered to be a "brown demon," and had to be pensioned off. He loved his wife for a time, but they drifted apart, and he found consolation in a sentimental attachment to a Mrs. Boinville and her daughter, Cornelia Turner, ladies who read Italian poetry with him and sang to guitars. Harriet had borne him a daughter, Ianthe, but she herself was a child, who soon wearied of philosophy and of being taught Latin; naturally she wanted fine clothes, fashion, a settlement. Egged on by her sister, she spent on plate and a carriage the money that Shelley would have squandered on humanity at large. Money difficulties and negotiations with his father were the background of all this period. On March 24, 1814, he married Harriet in church, to settle any possible question as to the legitimacy of his children; but they parted soon after. Attempts were made at reconciliation, which might have succeeded had not Shelley during this summer drifted into a serious and relatively permanent passion. He made financial provision for his wife, who gave birth to a second child, a boy, on November 30, 1814; but, as the months passed, and Shelley was irrevocably bound to another, she lost heart for life in the dreariness of her father's house. An Irish officer took her for his mistress, and on December 10, 1816, she was found drowned in the Serpentine. Twenty days later Shelley married his second wife.

This marriage was the result of his correspondence with William Godwin, which had ripened into intimacy, based on community of principles, with the Godwin household. The philosopher, a short, stout old man, presided, with his big bald head, his leaden complexion, and his air of a dissenting minister, over a heterogeneous family at 41 Skinner Street, Holborn, supported in scrambling poverty by the energy of the second Mrs. Godwin, who carried on a business of publishing children's books. In letters of the time we see Mrs. Godwin as a fat little woman in a black velvet dress, bad-tempered and untruthful. "She is a very disgusting woman, and wears green spectacles," said Charles Lamb. Besides a small son of the Godwins, the family contained four other members-- Clara Mary Jane Clairmont and Charles Clairmont (Mrs. Godwin's children by a previous marriage), Fanny Godwin (as she was called), and Mary Godwin. These last two were the daughters of Mary Wollstonecraft, the author of 'The Rights of Women', the great feminist, who had been Godwin's first wife. Fanny's father was a scamp called Imlay, and Mary was Godwin's child.

Mary disliked her stepmother, and would wander on fine days to read beside her mother's grave in Old St. Pancras Churchyard. This girl of seventeen had a strong if rather narrow mind; she was imperious, ardent, and firm-willed. She is said to have been very pale, with golden hair and a large forehead, redeemed from commonplace by hazel eyes which had a piercing look. When sitting, she appeared to be of more than average height; when she stood, you saw that she had her father's stumpy legs. Intellectually, and by the solidity of her character, she was better fitted to be Shelley's mate than any other woman he ever came across. It was natural that she should be interested in this bright creature, fallen as from another world into their dingy, squabbling family. If it was inevitable that her interest, touched with pity (for he was in despair over the collapse of his life with Harriet), should quickly warm to love, we must insist that the rapture with which he leaped to meet her had some foundation in reality. That she was gifted is manifest in her

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