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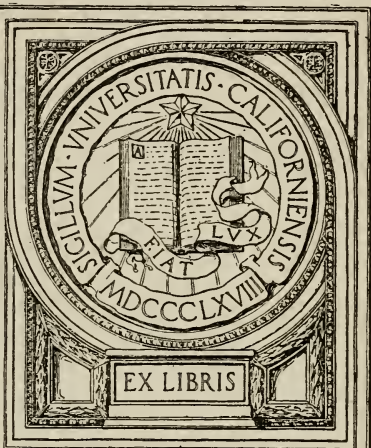
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TRELAWNY

with

SHELLEY

and

BYRON

BY

JOAQUIN MILLER

1922

The Biblio Company
Pompton Lakes,
New Jersey

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TRELAWNY
WITH
SHELLEY
AND
BYRON

The Ramapo Press Publications, No. 1.

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Written at The Heights, Oakland, California
January 1, 1893

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English - Alumnus

TRELAWNY WITH SHELLEY
AND BYRON

And shall Trelawny die?
And shall Trelawny die?
Then forty thousand Cornishmen
Will know the reason why.

Edward John Trelawny of London, Italy, Greece, Wales, the whole world in fact, was certainly the most singularly fortunate man I ever met, and I have known not a few notable and brave men. He claimed to be not only a descendant of the hero referred to in this stirring old chorus, but to be a descendant of kings. To be frank about it there were few things worth claiming that "Old Tre," as the clubmen and scribes in and about London used to call him, did not lay claim to in some way. He had a right to claim much, for what man had ever seen so much or known so

much of this world and its great soldiers, sailors, statesmen and poets? He was the most intimate friend of both Byron and Shelley, was with them in their last hours and laid them both to rest. And this Trelawny was for more than fifty years sole authority on certain facts touching these immortal poets. It is this that makes Trelawny and his books so fascinating. And it is in reference to these poets that I purpose to consider this strange man and his rude and realistic books; for, as you may know, it was this man who asked Fletcher, Byron's faithful servant to go out from the room where he lay after death to bring a glass of water in order that he might have a chance to lift the sheet and inspect the dead man's feet. And this is only one of the many cold-blooded, not to say brutal, acts which this man has set down with all the determined precision of detail that might characterize a surgeon in the amputation of a limb. We shall be able to pass them nearly all by, however; but no one can help wondering all the time how it happened that this bloodless fellow claimed to be the best friend of these

two most sensitive of all noble-born Englishmen from the day when he first met them till he laid them in the grave.

Trelawny was left standing like a lone stormtorn pine on a mountaintop years and years after his last friend was dead. He must have been far up in the eighties when I saw him. Only a few years ago he sent me to Oakland here a revised copy of his books on Byron, Shelley and himself, and for aught I know he may be still living.* He was a forceful man in every way, and but for this cold-blooded coarseness and realism might have been a great man. He told me that he had no schooling or opportunities at all, socially or otherwise, having been a sailor from 10 to well nigh 30. And this only increases our wonder at his familiarity with Byron, Shelley, Lady Blessington and others of their time. When last I saw him he was trying to reform the world by "living naturally," as he called it. I visited him at a very humble hut up the Thames, where he lived alone, ate vegetables, drank water from the river only, and, notwithstanding his wild sailor life and lively days in the Levant,

* Trelawny died in Worthing, England, 13 August, 1881.

never touched either rum or wine or tobacco. He was in robust health and insisted on bringing up a fresh bucket of water with his own hands from the river.

One peculiar thing about Trelawny was his desire for mystery touching his own life. He insisted to me in a most mysterious tone of voice that he had royal blood from some extinct race of kings in his veins, and that he had in early days been a famous pirate; and if "old Tre" could look over my shoulder at this moment I think nothing in this sketch would please him so well as an adherence to this account of himself. He certainly had circumnavigated the globe as a sailor, and had set foot here in California long before the most of us were born. He was well up in all the deeds of Morgan and other great pirates of the Spanish Main; and with increased mystery whispered that he knew to a dot the very spot where a shipload of gold was buried near the harbor of San Diego. You perhaps are aware that Lord Byron made him the hero of more than one wild poetic tale. He was "Conrad," "Lara," and the like. Possibly

here was the key to Byron's love for the fellow; he had use for him. And yet, what use could Shelley find for such a man, or what fellowship could he find in such coarse company? None. And so I am forced to the conclusion that Trelawny was not half so bad as he thought he was and tried to make others believe. I shall rather say that these refined men found him to be a bluff and honest though rough old savage, good at heart at all times and useful in handling their boats in emergencies. As to where he got money in order to be on a footing with such men, that is certainly a mystery. But there are plenty of ways to get a fortune without turning pirate.

We may stick a pin here and note that it is no new thing to find very good men trying to make out that they are or have been terribly bad. Byron himself, it seems to me, was of that sort. At the same time, while I cannot concede that Trelawny was entirely bad, we will have to concede that he was entirely coarse and rough. But let us now take up this book about Byron and Shelley, first published about fifty years ago. It may be noted, however, that subsequent

editions somewhat softened his asperities toward the two poets.

But certain hard things set down in the first edition could not be softened, and you find your teeth set on edge in every chapter. For instance, having once told us, giving date and place, that Shelley took such heavy doses of morphine that his life was endangered, he could not well alter the statement, and having told us that Byron was vain and silly, he could not say otherwise later on. And yet we must forgive him these lies, for they were born of the very air and time in which the book was first concerned. But here is a pleasant bit about Shelley which must be true.

“He would set to work on a book, or a pyramid of books, his eyes glistening with an energy as fierce as that of the most sordid gold-digger who works at a rock of quartz, crushing his way through all impediments, no grain of the pure ore escaping his eager scrutiny. I called on him one morning at 10; he was in his study with a German folio-pen resting on the broad marble mantelpiece over an old-fashioned fireplace, and with a dictionary in his hand. He al-

ways read standing if possible. He had promised over night to go with me, but now begged me to let him off. I then rode to Leghorn, eleven or twelve miles distant, and passed the day there; on returning at 6 in the evening to dine with Mrs. Shelley and the Williamses, as I had engaged to do, I went into the poet's room and found him exactly in the position in which I had left him in the morning, but looking pale and exhausted.

“ ‘Well,’ I said, ‘have you found it?’

“Shutting the book and going to the window he replied. ‘No, I have lost it,’ with a deep sigh. ‘I have lost a day.’

“ ‘Cheer up, my lad, and come to dinner.’

“Putting his long fingers through his mass of wild tangled hair he answered faintly: ‘You go, I have dined. Late eating don't do for me.’

“ ‘What is this?’ I asked as I was going out of the room, pointing to one of his bookshelves, with a plate containing bread and cold meat on it.

“ ‘That [coloring], why that must be my dinner. It's very foolish. I thought I had eaten it.’ ”

Now here is the final scene, the burning of poor Shelley. And let me here say that Shelley was burned because Trelawny willed it to be so, as in line with the life and desire of the poet; not because the Italian Government compelled it. This was not required at all. The body had, indeed, been buried some time before it was exhumed and burned. When they (Trelawny and Byron) had fired the funeral pile Byron said to Trelawny: " 'Let us humbly lower our heads and in silence try to pray.' * * * After the fire was well kindled we repeated the ceremony of the previous day; and more wine was poured over Shelley's dead body than he had consumed during his life. This with the oil and salt made the yellow flames glisten and quiver. The heat from the sun and fire was so intense that the atmosphere was tremulous and wavy. * * * The corpse fell open and the heart was laid bare. * * *

" 'Let us try the strength of these waters that drowned our friends,' said Byron suddenly, with his usual audacity. 'How far out do you think they were when their boat sank?'

“ ‘If you don’t wish to be put into the furnace you had better not try; you are not in condition,’ said Trelawny.

“But he stripped and went into the water, and so did I and my companion. Before we got a mile out Byron was sick and persuaded us to return to the shore. My companion, too, was seized with cramp, and reached the land by my aid. At 4 o’clock the funeral pyre burned low, and, when we uncovered the furnace, nothing remained in it but dark-colored ashes with fragments of the larger bones. Poles were now put under the red-hot furnace, and it was gradually cooled in the sea. I gathered together the human ashes and placed them in a small oak box, bearing an inscription on a brass plate, screwed it down and placed it in Byron’s carriage.”

And here is Trelawny’s account of the last resting place of the poet’s ashes in Rome.

“When I came to examine the ground with the man who had the custody of it I found Shelley’s grave amidst a cluster of others. The old Roman wall partly inclosed the place, and there was a

niche in the wall formed by two buttresses—immediately under an ancient pyramid, said to be the tomb of Caius Cestius. There were no graves near it at that time. This suited my taste, so I purchased the recess, and sufficient space for planting a row of the Italian upright cypresses. As the souls of heretics are foredoomed by the Roman priests, they do not affect to trouble themselves about their bodies. There was no ‘faculty’ to apply for nor Bishop’s license to exhume the body. The custode or guardian, who dwelt within the inclosure and had the key of the gate, seemed to have uncontrolled power within his domain. Without more ado masons were hired and two tombs built in the recess. In one of these when completed I deposited the box with Shelley’s ashes and covered it in with solid stone, inscribed with a Latin epitaph written by Leigh Hunt.”

After this funeral by the sea, Byron became still more restless, and in a little time longer he and Trelawny were sailing away to take part in the glorious attempt to restore Greece to her splendor and glory. On one sweet and restful

occasion, as they sailed up the Levant, says Trelawny. "I put a pencil and paper in his hand, saying: 'Perpetuate your curses on tyranny, for poets, like ladies, generally side with the despots.'

"He readily took the paper and set to work. I walked the deck to prevent his being disturbed. He looked as crest-fallen as a riotous boy suddenly pounced upon by a master and given an impossible task, scrawling and scratching out, sadly perplexed. After a long spell he said:

"'You think it is as easy to write poetry as smoke a cigar—look, it's only doggerel. Extemporizing verses is nonsense; poetry is a distinct faculty—it won't come when called—you may as well whistle for a wind; a Pythoness was primed when put upon her tripod. I must chew the cud before I write. I have thought over most of my subjects for years before writing a line.'

"He did not, however, give up the task and sat pondering over the paper for nearly an hour. Then, gnashing his teeth, he tore up what he had written and threw the fragments overboard.

"Seeing I looked disappointed, he

said: 'You might as well ask me to describe an earthquake while the ground is trembling under my feet. Give me time—I can't forget the theme; but for this Greek business I should have been at Naples writing a fifth canto of *Childe Harold*, expressing to give vent to my detestation of the Austrian tyranny in Italy.'

* * * "Some time after, I suggested he should write a war song for the Greeks; he did so afterward. I saw the original among his papers at Missolonghi and made a copy of it, which I have lost."

And here is a dialogue which *Trelawny* says he set down soon after it took place:

Byron—If death comes in the shape of a cannon-ball and takes off my head he is welcome. I have no wish to live, but I can't bear pain. Don't repeat the ceremony you went through with *Shelley*—no one wants my ashes.

Tre.—You will be claimed for *Westminster Abbey*.

Byron—No, they don't want me; nor would I have my bones mingled with that motley throng.

Tre.—I should prefer being launched into the sea to the nonsense of the land ceremonies.

Byron—There is a rocky islet off Maina—it is the Pirates' Isle, it suggested the "Corsair." No one knows it. I'll show it to you on the way to the Morea. There is the spot I should like my bones to lie.

Tre.—They won't let me do so without you will it.

Byron—I will, if you are with me when I die; remind me, and don't let the blundering blockhead doctors bleed me, or when I am dead maul my carcass.

And here the curtain falls on the last act of the great poet. Trelawny says he could not induce Byron to drink brandy or anything else while in the mud and malaria of Western Greece. He says he never smoked, but tried to learn to chew tobacco. I here quote a few paragraphs from Trelawny's account of his death; observing that if he is not entirely truthful here he at least seems entirely so, and prudent, too, and thoughtful of Byron's friends at home and all the world.

“Fletcher gave me a sheet of paper, and from his dictation I wrote on Byron’s coffin the following particulars of his last illness and death:

“ ‘Particulars of Lord Byron’s death, as related by his servant, William Fletcher. Written on his coffin, at the house of the Primate of Argostoli, by Edward Thelawny, April 10, 1824. Lord Byron, taking his usual ride and being warm, was caught in a shower of rain. He had but very recently recovered from a violent epileptic fit, which had left him weak. In the course of the eve he complained of being unwell, and there were slight symptoms of fever. On the 11th he got up as usual, but complained of his head. * * * He was advised to be bled, but had a natural or acquired antipathy to bleeding. On the night of the 14th Fletcher advised a doctor being sent for from Zante. Fletcher thought him at this time confused in his ideas. Byron said: “Where are my shoes? I can only see three, and have been looking this hour.” Fletcher said, “There are four.” Byron said, “I’m in the hands of assassins; they will murder me.”

* * * This evening at about 7 o'clock he consented to be bled, and a few minutes after he fainted. They took about a pound. Very weak and debilitated, the pain in his head during the night, and he spoke confusedly of Fleming, Hobhouse and Douglas Kinnaird. This was on the 18th. He had been again copiously bled. He took bark at about two, drank a glass of wine and water. He was worse after this and became delirious and violent; began to talk and give directions; took hold of one of Fletcher's and one of Tita's hands. Fletcher said, "Shall I write?" Byron muttered to him for half an hour, his lips moving, but indistinct.

* * * Fletcher said again he did not understand. "Good God!" he said and tried to repeat it, but his lips only moved. He understood Fletcher and seemed to strain hard to make himself understood and to feel his inability. After 6 o'clock this evening he said, "I want to sleep." They had given him opiates, and from that time he never spoke word nor moved hand or foot, nor showed the least appearance of life, ex-

cept by difficulty in swallowing and stiffness.' ”

We need not follow Byron further. And it would seem that this remarkable old man, Trelawny, might well be left alone now. But no, the real event of his most wondrous life is yet to be told. He says Byron would surely have been made King of Greece had he lived. He now aspired to the throne himself. He continued in the struggle for Greek freedom; was fortified in Mount Parnassus, as if he had not yet been favored enough by the gods of song—think of it! He had fixed up a cave in Mount Parnassus with munitions of war, and for nearly a year held his fortress against the Turk and all coming. It is butchery to take up only a fragment of what befell now, but space forbids more. Here is his account of one incident. It appears that his mixed men were all more or less treacherous, his only friend being his dog. His guards got him to shoot at a mark in order to empty his pistol; then one of them shot him in the back, and then the dog leaped on the man who shot him and held him to the ground. All this in Mount Parnassus—think of

it! But here is what the friend of Byron and Shelley says:

“When I was shot I sat down on the rock I had been standing on; bending down my head to let the blood flow from my mouth a musket ball and several broken teeth came with it—the socket of the teeth was broken and my right arm paralyzed. I walked without assistance into the small grotto I had boarded up and floored and called my house; it was divided into two small rooms and there was a broad veranda in front. Squatting in a corner my servant cut open my dress behind and told me I had been shot with two balls between my shoulders, near together, on the right side of my spine, and one of them close to it. One of the balls, as I have said, its force expended on my bones, dropped from my mouth without wounding my face; the other broke my collarbone and remained in my breast—it is still there. No blood issued from the places they had entered at. We had no surgeon or medicines in the cave; the air was so dry and pure, our living so simple, that this was the first visit sickness or sorrow paid us. Nature makes

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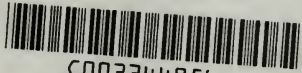
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