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SHELLEY'S VEGETARIANISM.

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BY
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WILLIAM E. A. AXON, F.R.S.L.,

VICE-PRESIDENT AND HON. SEC. OF THE VEGETARIAN SOCIETY.

*Read at a Meeting of the Shelley Society, University College, Gower Street,
London, November 12th, 1891.*

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VEGETARIANISM

(V.E.M.),

That is, the practice of living on the products of the **V**egetable kingdom, with or without the addition of **E**ggs and **M**ilk and its products (butter and cheese), to the exclusion of Fish, Flesh, and Fowl.

SHELLEY'S VEGETARIANISM.

BY WILLIAM E. A. AXON, F.R.S.L.,

Vice-President and Hon. Secretary of the Vegetarian Society.

[Read at a meeting of the Shelley Society, University College, Gower Street, London, November 12th, 1890.]

I.

LET us first see what are the facts as to Shelley's Vegetarianism. The practice is as old as Paradise, but the word was not invented until 1847, and in all the earlier literature of the subject we read of "natural diet," "vegetable regimen," "Pythagorean system," and other phrases, but never of "Vegetarianism." The question has already been discussed in Howard William's "Ethics of Diet," 1883; in the introduction to the reprint of the "Vindication of Natural Diet," 1887; by Mr. H. S. Salt, in "Almonds and Raisins," 1887; and in "Book Lore," Vol. iii., p. 121.

Shelley's taste in food always appears to have been that of a healthy child, having no liking for flesh foods, but enjoying bread and fruit and sweets of all kinds. Prof. Dowden says that at Oxford, where there was a certain anticipation of a vegetable diet, "his fare, though temperate, was not meagre; he was, as Trelawney knew him in Italy, 'like a healthy, well-conditioned boy.' We find him vigorous, capable of enduring fatigue, and in the main happy; not troubled by nervous excitement or thick-coming fancies."—(Dowden's "Life," Vol. i., p. 87.) Shelley, however, did not formally adopt Vegetarianism until the spring of 1812. Harriet Westbrook wrote from Dublin to Miss Hitchiner, on March 14th, 1812, "You do not know that we have forsworn meat and adopted the

Pythagorean system. About a fortnight has elapsed since the change, and we do not find ourselves any the worse for it. . . . We are delighted with it, and think it the best thing in the world." But they did not hesitate to provide a "murdered fowl," which has become historic, for Miss Catharine Nugent, the kindly, keen-witted, and patriotic Irishwoman, who earned her living as a furrier's assistant, and charmed the visitors by her pleasant conversation and generous heart. And there was need of both hope and courage, for "I had no conception," says Shelley, "of the depths of human misery until now. The poor of Dublin are assuredly the meanest and the most miserable of all."

Mr. Cordy Jeaffreson thinks that Shelley took up Vegetarianism in imitation of Byron's dietetic habits. The influence of the Vegetarians, "with whom he lived intimately at London and Bracknell," cannot, in Mr. Jeaffreson's opinion, "be held accountable for his first trial of a diet which he adopted in Dublin before making their acquaintance. Perhaps he adopted the Byronic diet just as he adopted the Byronic shirt collar. in imitation of the poet whom he admired so greatly."—"Real Shelley," Vol. ii., p. 143.) But what evidence is there that Shelley knew of Byron's spasmodic displays of Vegetarianism? Shelley's first essay was but of short duration, for the poet with his wife and sister-in-law left Dublin for Holyhead "at two o'clock in the afternoon of Saturday, April 4. They tacked against a baffling wind to get clear of land; the whole of Sunday they struggled against the breeze; and at length, two hours past midnight, reached Holyhead in a drenching mist. Lighted by the sailors' lanterns, they scrambled for a mile over the rough way, and having tasted no food since leaving Dublin, and being much exhausted by the voyage, they forgot that they were Pythagoreans, and fell to with exceeding good will upon a supper of meat—the abhorred thing!"—(Dowden's "Life," Vol. i., p. 267.)

After their return to London they resumed their "bloodless banquets," but Hogg, who was allowed to have whatever he pleased on his visits, was not well pleased by the flesh-pots set before him when he visited the young Vegetarians—although the word had not then been invented. Shelley appears to have been completely indifferent to regular meals, ate only when he was hungry, and if he could

obtain a loaf of bread and some common raisins had a meal of luxury ready compounded. Harriet would send him out for penny buns, and with these and a liberal supply of tea they were happy. This was the poet's favourite beverage throughout life.

The liquor doctors rail at, and which I
Will quaff in spite of them; and when we die
We'll toss up who died first of drinking tea,
And cry out, "Heads or tails?" where'er we be.

He was in 1813 on intimate terms with the Newtons, "at whose delightful vegetable dinners even water, if presented, must first have been freed by distillation from its taint of lead; the innocent dainties were such as might have gratified our Mother Eve's angelic guest—all autumn piled upon the table, with dulcet creams and nectarous draughts,

And lucent syrups, tinct with cinnamon,
Manna and dates in argosy transferred
From Fez. . . .

"We luxuriated, ran riot," says Hogg, "in tea and coffee, and sought variety occasionally in cocoa and chocolate. Bread and butter and buttered toast were eschewed; but bread and cakes—plain seed cakes—were liberally divided amongst the faithful." Honey, and especially honeycomb, were dear to the poet's lips; he did not think scorn of radishes; and one addition to the vegetable dietary seems to have been all his own—in country rambles he would pick the gummy drops from fir-tree trunks and eat them with a relish.—(Dowden's "Life," Vol. ii., p. 369.) The story told by Hogg of a meal made by Shelley at an inn on Hounslow Heath when he devoured with gusto successive portions of eggs and bacon shows, if it be accurate, that his abstinence from flesh meat was not without some breaks. The anecdote has a certain parallel in the statement of Shelley's enthusiastic appreciation of Mrs. Southey's teacakes, and is cited by Mr. Cordy Jeaffreson "as an example of Shelley's alternate abstemiousness and self-indulgence in food. Resembling Byron," he continues, "in habitual abstinence and indifference to the quality of the fare that sustained him, Shelley also resembled Byron in occasional acts of feasting that might almost be called excesses of greediness."—"Real

Shelley", Vol. i., p. 387.) Peacock had the ordinary Philistine dislike of Vegetarianism, and records that Shelley "had certainly one week of thorough enjoyment of life," when on the excursion from Old Windsor to Lechlade he adopted, for the time, the ordinary method of diet, which found favour with the author of "Nightmare Abbey." Mr. Jeaffreson, who is, if possible, more prejudiced on the subject than Peacock, and who writes with the easy assurance of what is apparently an absolute ignorance of both the theory and practice of Vegetarianism, describes it as a "regimen of starvation," which obliged both Byron and Shelley to have recourse to laudanum! "In drinking laudanum to deaden the pangs of spasmodic dyspepsia, consequent on long persistence in a lowering and otherwise hurtful diet, Shelley, be it observed, took opium when he had been slowly reduced to a condition that rendered the drug more powerful to derange his nerves for several days, than it would have been had he been previously sustained by sufficient food."—"Real Shelley," Vol. i., p. 145.) This is pure assumption, for which there is neither historical nor physiological evidence. To describe the diet of Wesley and Howard, of Plutarch and Porphyry, the diet of great workers and great thinkers in all ages as starvation leading to opium is to show a curious want of acquaintance with the real truth of the matter.

Shelley's Vegetarianism is seen in its pleasantest and most picturesque aspect at Marlow. The "Quarterly Review" declared that Shelley was "shamefully dissolute" in his conduct. On this Leigh Hunt wrote: "We heard of similar assertions when we resided in the same house with Mr. Shelley for nearly three months; and how was he living all that time? As much like Plato himself as all his theories resemble Plato—or rather still more like a Pythagorean. This was the round of his daily life. He was up early, breakfasted sparingly, wrote this 'Revolt of Islam' all the morning; went out in his boat, or in the woods, with some Greek author or the Bible in his hands; came home to a dinner of vegetables (for he took neither meat nor wine); visited, if necessary, the sick and fatherless, whom others gave Bibles to and no help; wrote or studied again, or read to his wife and friends the whole evening; [took a crust of bread or a glass of whey for his supper, and went early to bed." Mr. Jeaffreson very

candidly allows to Hunt "that the truthfulness of his viewy account of Shelley's manner of living at Marlow is placed beyond question by the evidence of contemporary letters and the more precise statements of witnesses in no degree open to suspicion. Without adhering rigidly to the diet, which writers imperfectly acquainted with the philosopher's doctrine and discipline are wont to style Pythagorean, Shelley refrained from meat and wine during the greater part of his Marlow time. Once and again he lapsed suddenly or by degrees from the rules of the Vegetarians, but only to return to them with a stronger opinion that his health required him to abstain from flesh and fermented drinks. It was not possible for a man so sympathetic and observant of human life about him to live anywhere without compassionating the unfortunate of his own species; and there is a superabundance of evidence that, living at Marlow during a season of insufficient employment and keen distress for struggling people, he did all, and more than all, he could afford for the relief of the poor of his immediate neighbourhood."—("Real Shelley," Vol. ii., pp. 357-358.)

Of this period Prof. Dowden has given a very charming picture: "The scale of beneficence which began with the philosopher Godwin descended to the humblest cottager in Marlow; but it went far lower. If any priest or Levite desire to expatiate on the folly of the Samaritan who showed mercy on his neighbour that lay stripped and half dead, he may know for his behoof that Shelley cherished as his kindred even the humblest living creatures, injuring

No bright bird, insect, or gentle beast.

In divine folly, like that of St. Francis, he claimed a brotherhood with all beings that could thrill with pain or joy. It was his own Lady of the Sensitive Plant who cared tenderly for insects, whose intent, 'although they did ill, was innocent.'

And all killing insects and gnawing worms,
And things of obscene and unlovely forms,
She bore in a basket of Indian woof
Into the rough woods far aloof.

At Marlow the manservant, Harry, played the part of the Lady of the Garden, when his Vegetarian master would purchase crayfish of the men

who brought them through the streets, and would order his servant to bear them back to their lurking places in the Thames. Miss Rose, who tells this singular illustration of Shelley's faith that love should be the law of life, was, as a child, for some time an inmate of Shelley's home at Marlow. One day in early summer the strange gentleman, bare-headed, with eyes like a deer's, and with the pale green leaves of wild clematis wound about him, had glanced at her as he came out of the wood; by and by he returned with a lady, fair and very young, who asked her name, and begged to know if they might see her mother. They had taken a fancy to little brown-eyed Polly, and if her mother could spare her, and had no objection, they would like to educate her. Next morning Polly went to their house, where she spent part of almost every day until they left Marlow. Shelley's manner, she says, to all about him was playful and affectionate. At five they dined, Shelley's dinner consisting often of bread and raisins, always eaten off one particular plate. After dinner he would read or write until ten o'clock, at which hour Polly, if sleeping at the house, retired to bed. Before she slept Mrs. Shelley would see her, and talk to her of what she and her husband had been reading or discussing, always winding up with 'And now, Polly, what do you think of this?' On Christmas eve Shelley related the ghostly tale of Bürger's Ballad of Leonore, a copy of which, in Spenser's translation, with Lady Diana Beauclerc's designs, he possessed, working up the horror to such a height of fearful interest that Polly 'quite expected to see Wilhelm walk into the drawing-room.' A favourite game with Shelley was to put Polly on a table, and tilt it up, letting the little girl slide its full length; or she and Miss Clairmont would sit together on the table, while Shelley ran it from one end of the room to the other. On the day on which he left Marlow for ever, Shelley filled his favourite plate with raisins and almonds, and gave it to Polly—a relic which she treasured for almost half a century, when, by her desire, it was placed among the objects belonging to his father, which remain the possession of Shelley's son."—(Dowden's "Life," Vol. ii., p. 123.)

It cannot be said that the poet's life was really hygienic. "A Vegetarian diet," observes Prof. Dowden, "and abundance of cold water,

were less likely to affect Shelley's health injuriously, than was the intellectual excitement which set in with him at hours when other mortals are struck and strewn by the leaden mace of slumber. Shelley's drowsy fit came on early, and when it had passed, he was as a skylark saluting the new day, but at midnight."—(Dowden's "Life," Vol. i., p. 337.)

Shelley was not averse to physical exercise or even strenuous exertion. "It was, indeed, a point of honour with Shelley," says Prof. Dowden, "to prove that some grit lay under his outward appearance of weakness and excitable nerves; for he was an apostle of the Vegetarian faith, and a water drinker, and must not discredit the doctrine which he preached and practised."—(Dowden's "Life," Vol. ii., p. 119.) Writing to Leigh Hunt, 29th June, 1817, the poet says, "Do not mention that I am unwell to your nephew, for the advocate of a new system of diet is held bound to be invulnerable by disease, in the same manner as the sectaries of a new system of religion are held to be more moral than other people, or a reformed Parliament must at least be assumed as the remedy of all political evils. No one will change the diet, adopt the religion, or reform the Parliament else."—(Dowden's "Life," Vol. ii., pp. 119-120.)

Shelley left England for ever in 1818, and there is little precise information as to his dietetic habits in the last four years of his life. At times he was not a strict Vegetarian, for in 1820, writing to Maria Gisborne, he says of his household, "We eat little flesh and drink no wine." Yet to the end he was practically a Vegetarian placing upon Bread—"the staff of life"—his chief reliance.

Shelley's Vegetarianism was satirised in a curious squib published after his death in the *Medical Adviser* of Dec. 6, 1823, which was edited by Alexander Burnett, M.D. This is reprinted in "Book Lore," III., 121. The following letter from the late Sir Percy Shelley may be cited:—

Boscombe Manor,
Bournemouth, Hants,

Dear Mr. Kegan Paul,

Nov. 14, 1883.

My wife tells me that she forgot, when she wrote to you yesterday, to answer your inquiries as to my father's practice of Vegetarianism.

I think I remember my mother telling me that he gave it up to a great extent in his later years—not from want of faith, but from the inconvenience.

I made two attempts when I was young myself—each time I was a strict Vegetarian for three months—but it made me very fat and I gave it up. That was my only reason, and it took me several days to overcome my disgust for animal food when I returned to it.—Yours, very sincerely,

PERCY F. SHELLEY.

II.

For Shelley to hold a doctrine was to desire its active diffusion and general acceptance. It may be well here to give specific references to passages in which Shelley speaks of Vegetarianism. There is the passage in "Queen Mab," 1813 (viii, 211); the "Vindication of Natural Diet," 1813; "Laon and Cythna," 1818 (canto v., stanza li.); the opening lines of "Alastor," 1816; and a passage in the "Refutation of Deism," 1814, which includes a quotation from Plutarch. Shelley writes from Edinburgh to Hogg, on Nov. 26th, 1813: "I have translated the two essays of Plutarch, *περὶ σαρκοφαγίας*, which we read together. They are very excellent. I intend to comment upon them and to reason in my preface concerning the Orphic and Pythagoric system of diet."—(Dowden's "Life," I., p. 396.) This translation does not appear to have been printed. When "Queen Mab" was in the printer's hands he added to it a note which was also published in pamphlet form, as "A Vindication of Natural Diet." (London, 1813.) This was written under the influence of John Frederick Newton, the author of the "Return to Nature." "It is," observes Shelley, "from that book, and from the conversation of its excellent and enlightened author, that I have derived the materials which I here present to the public." He adopts Newton's explanation of the myth of Prometheus that it had reference to the first use of animal food, and of fire by which to render it more digestible and pleasing to the taste. In the same way he explains the consequences of eating of the tree of evil by Adam and Eve as an allegory that disease and crime have flowed from unnatural diet. Shelley points out that man resembles no carnivorous animal; that physiology indicates him to be a vegetable feeder; and that his loss of instinct in the matter of food can be paralleled by instances of other animals trained to reject their natural aliment. Man's adoption of a wrong diet brings him a diseased system. "Crime is madness: madness is disease." By a return to a natural

method of life man will regain health, and with it, as a natural consequence, sanity and virtue. Let man renounce fermented beverages, and the grain wasted on intoxicating liquor would be available for food. The matter devoted to the fattening of an ox would afford ten times the sustenance if taken direct from the land. Shelley thought that commerce generated vice, selfishness, and corruption, making the distance even greater between the richest and the poorest, and begetting a luxury that would be "the forerunner of a barbarism scarce capable of cure." The influence of hereditary disease would gradually be weakened by a return to nature. He ends by advice to those who may choose to try the system, and by personal testimony as to its advantages.

Such is a meagre outline of this remarkable essay, of which a cheap reprint, edited by Mr. H. S. Salt and myself, has been issued. This has also been included in the publications of the Shelley Society. There is nothing fresh in the scientific averments or mythological speculations of the essay which are avowedly accepted on the authority of Newton's book. The interest resides in Shelley's way of looking at the food problem of the nation and the race. He goes to the root of the question when he says: "The whole of human science is comprised in one question—How can the advantages of intellect and civilisation be reconciled with the liberty and pure pleasures of natural life? How can we take the benefits and reject the evils of the system which is now interwoven with all the fibres of our being?" This thought is constantly recurring—how shall the greatest happiness of all be secured? Thus he says: "Whenever the cause of disease shall be discovered, the root, from which all vice and misery have so long overshadowed the globe, will lie bare to the axe. All the exertions of man, from that moment, may be considered as tending to the clear profit of his species. No sane mind in a sane body resolves upon a real crime. It is a man of violent passions, blood-shot eyes, and swollen veins, that alone can grasp the knife of murder."

Then there are considerations of the national aspects of the question. "The change," says Shelley, "which would be produced by simpler habits on political economy is sufficiently remarkable. The monopolising eater of animal flesh would no longer destroy his constitution by devour

ing an acre at a meal, and many loaves of bread would cease to contribute to gout, madness, and apoplexy, in the shape of a pint of porter or a dram of gin, when appeasing the long-protracted famine of the hard-working peasants' hungry babes. The quantity of nutritious vegetable matter consumed in fattening the carcase of an ox would afford ten times the sustenance, undepraving indeed, and incapable of generating disease, if gathered immediately from the bosom of the earth. The most fertile districts of the habitable globe are now actually cultivated by men for animals, at a delay and waste of aliment absolutely incapable of calculation. It is only the wealthy that can, to any great degree, even now, indulge the unnatural craving for dead flesh, and they pay for the greater licence of the privilege, by subjection to supernumerary diseases. Again, the spirit of the nation that should take the lead in this great reform would insensibly become agricultural; commerce, with all its vice, selfishness, and corruption, would gradually decline; more natural habits would produce gentler manners, and the excessive complication of political relations would be so far simplified that every individual might feel and understand why he loved his country, and took a personal interest in its welfare. How would England, for example, depend on the caprices of foreign rulers, if she contained within herself all the necessaries, and despised whatever they possessed of the luxuries of life? How could they starve her into compliance with their views? Of what consequence would it be that they refused to take her woollen manufactures, when large and fertile tracts of the island ceased to be allotted to the waste of pasturage? On a natural system of diet, we should require no spices from India; no wines from Portugal, Spain, France, or Madeira; none of those multitudinous articles of luxury, for which every corner of the globe is rifled, and which are the cause of so much individual rivalry, such calamitous and sanguinary national disputes."

Shelley's Vegetarianism was that of the idealist and the world-builder; of the prophets and the sons of the prophets, who amidst the darkness of the night see afar the heralding gleams of the coming dawn. A world without poverty, without war, without disease; no longer the abode of cruelty and oppression, but of confidence and peace: this was what he saw in his vision. A land redeemed from its curses; where

industry would ensure plenty, and where the forces of the world would be working for the solid happiness of the race. Shelley was not the first, nor, let us hope, the last, to see this beatific vision. When Isaiah called upon the people of Israel to obey the everlastingly divine rules, he painted in glowing colours the beauty of the City of the Just, where men should live out their days in peace and righteousness. The Hebrew prophet and the English poet both declare that in the Holy Mountain of the Lord "they shall not hurt nor destroy." That which they both foresaw was the Reign of Brotherhood. The Festival of the Nations, described in "Laon and Cythna," is a bloodless banquet, such as could not be provided by man, who

Slays the lamb that looks him in the face.

This is the vision of the glorified earth as seen by the poet prophet:—

My brethren, we are free ! The fruits are glowing
Beneath the stars, and the night-winds are flowing
O'er the ripe corn. The birds and beasts are dreaming.
Never again may blood of bird or beast
Stain with its venomous stream a human feast.

To the pure skies in accusation steaming ;
Avenging poisons shall have ceased
To feed disease and fear and madness ;
The dwellers of the earth and air
Shall throng around our steps in gladness,
Seeking their food or refuge there.

Our toil from thought all glorious forms shall cull,
To make this earth, our home, more beautiful ;
And Science, and her sister Poesy,
Shall clothe in light the fields and cities of the free

.

Over the plain the throngs were scattered then
In groups around the fires, which from the sea
Even to the gorge of the first mountain-glen
Blazed wide and far. The banquet of the free
Was spread beneath many a dark cypress-tree ;
Beneath whose spires which swayed in the red flame
Reclining as they ate, of liberty,
And hope, and justice, and Laone's name,
Earth's children did a woof of happy converse frame.

Their feast was such as Earth, the general mother,
 Pours from her fairest bosom, when she smiles
 In the embrace of Autumn. To each other
 As when some parent fondly reconciles
 Her warring children, she their wrath beguiles
 With her own sustenance ; they relenting weep :—
 Such was this festival, which, from their isles
 And continents and winds and oceans deep,
 All shapes might throng to share that fly or walk or creep.

The poet's wide-reaching sympathy touches all sentient beings ; in the same spirit of the Higher Pantheism that breathes in the Song of the Sun of St. Francis of Assissi, he beholds in all the manifestations of the Divine.

It is easy for the careless, and the indifferent, no less than the sensual or the vicious, to deride such an ideal. It is possible even for those who would desire it to be true to be convinced of the impossibility of its realisation. There are men and women who acknowledge with pain Nature "red in tooth and claw" ; there are poets who tell us—shall we say with exultation ?—that "Carnage is Heaven's own daughter." Still the generous mind refuses to be contented with a future for humanity that leaves the poor in their wretchedness ; that makes one man die of sensual surfeit whilst another perishes of starvation ; that dooms men to war upon their brother men until the judgment day ; a future in which cruelty, lust, oppression, and wrongdoing are to be permanent elements. Man is surely worthy of a better fate than to be the tyrant of a world filled with the victims of his unbridled appetites and remorseless power. Man is the butcher of creation. Those who are not satisfied that man, who ought to be only a little lower than the angels, should for ever live by the torture and misery of his fellow-creatures must devise some way for his escape from the thralldom of evil. If any better expedient than that suggested by Shelley can be found by all means let it be propounded. At present we see that the poverty and misery of the poor, the luxury and sensuality of the rich, whilst equally hurtful, are largely preventible. It is certain that man can live without the use of intoxicants, and without the use of animal flesh. Why, then, should man turn

into liquid poison the golden grain intended for his food? Why should there continue to rise from the earth a chorus of pain, the cries of the creatures who are tortured and slain, to gratify his needless desires? When man puts to himself with seriousness and responsibility Shelley's question, "How can the advantages of intellect and civilisation be reconciled with the liberty and pure pleasures of natural life?"—it is difficult to see how it is to be answered, except with the response that Shelley gave, and by striving for the simplification of life, the avoidance of cruelty and slaughter, the arrangement of the community for the common good, the realisation of "a state of society where all the energies of man shall be directed to the production of his solid happiness." Such was Shelley's Vegetarianism, not a mere dietetic whim, but an endeavour after a higher and better life for mankind, an attempt to realise the "City of God," a city of justice, pity, and mercy; an endeavour to bring the universe into sympathetic harmony, and to provide a bounteous feast from which none should be excluded or turned away. Shelley's work in this direction will not be lost.

It will last,—and shine transfigured
 In the final reign of Right;
 It will pass into the splendours
 Of the City of the Light.

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