SHELLEY

BY H.S. SALT

Percy Bysshe Shelley

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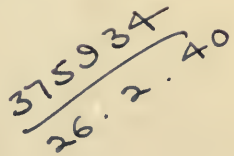
PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY

POET AND PIONEER

A BIOGRAPHICAL STUDY

BY

HENRY S. SALT



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PREFACE

In this Study of Shelley I have embodied, in fulfilment of a long-made plan, the greater part of my Shelley Monograph (1888) and "Shelley's Principles" (1892), together with some passages of scattered essays that have been published from time to time. In its main features it is a new book rather than a new edition.

It has been my purpose to *interpret* Shelley, not to criticise or eulogise him. I have shown, in the Introduction and elsewhere, the futility of the criticisms that have been lavished on our great democratic poet by literary gentlemen who first abused him, and then apologised for him, and even now are quite unable to appreciate him at his real worth. On the other hand it has been just as far from my desire to depict him as a "hero," or "perfect character" (whatever that may be), or indeed under any of the romantic conceptions

which his followers are absurdly supposed to entertain. It is in the remarkable *unity* of Shelley's character—in the consistency that ruled his thoughts and actions from the day of his departure from Field Place to the day of his drowning at Leghorn—that we find the true and only key to a right understanding of his genius.

But while avowing that I have written more especially for those readers who are in sympathy with Shelley's aims, I do not own to being in any blameworthy sense a "partisan." For what does the term "partisan" denote? If it suggests a garbling or unfair colouring of facts, the charge is a serious one and should not be made without proof; but if it is merely applied to those who hold the Shelleyan view of certain debatable questions, then all the critics are equally, on one side or the other, partisans.

Nor do I offer any apology for writing as a controversialist; for it is impossible that a genuine study of Shelley can (at present) be other than controversial. In exhibiting specimens of the blunders made by a former generation of critics, I have also acted with fixed intent; for it is only through such knowledge of past fallacies that current fallacies can be exposed. To "let bygones be bygones" is an amiable maxim,

but it is not a method which commends itself to the historical or literary student—least of all in a case where a strong appeal is to be made to the indisputable verdict of Time.

There appears to be no likelihood of any further authentic information being published concerning Shelley. No serious Shelley student can regard as authentic such posthumous gossip as Mr. W. Graham's "Chats with Jane Clermont," or place reliance on the unsupported statements made, or alleged to have been made, in extreme old age by an eccentric lady whose word was always unreliable, and whose "errors and misfortunes chiefly sprang from her determination to be a heroine of romance at any cost."* We are promised in 1909, thirty years after Miss Clairmont's death, certain "clearly specified matter, intensely interesting," which the octogenarian lady confided to the "boy of twenty," whom she had never seen before; but the biographers of the next century will scarcely give credence to "reminiscences" of this sort without asking for the proofs.

My estimate of Shelley is based on a careful examination of the material which we already possess; though

* Dictionary of National Biography.

in dealing with the various and sometimes conflicting records left by those who knew him, I have been compelled to use my own judgment in accepting some statements and rejecting others. "The rule of criticism," says Shelley himself, "to be adopted in judging of the life, actions, and words of a man who has acted any conspicuous part in the revolutions of the world, ought not to be narrow. We ought to form a general image of his character and doctrines, and refer to this whole the distinct portions of action and speech by which they are diversified." I have kept this principle before me in the following Study of Shelley as Poet and Pioneer.

I am indebted to the courtesy of Mr. H. Buxton Forman for permission to use the illustration of Shelley's house at Marlow. H. S. S.

INTRODUCTION.

I.

It is very instructive to note the series of changes which public opinion has undergone, and is undergoing, with regard to Shelley's character. During the poet's life and for some time after, his detractors had the field most entirely to themselves, the voices raised on his behalf being those of a few personal friends or literary enthusiasts who could scarcely make themselves heard amid the general chorus of detestation.* It is only by a study of the contemporary criticism of Shelley's poems that we can realise the intensity of the feeling aroused by his attacks on the established code of religion and ethics, which seem to have filled his readers with a conviction that he was a monster of abnormal and almost superhuman wickedness.

"We feel," wrote one of these outraged moralists in

* Leigh Hunt, in particular, deserves grateful mention for his early recognition of Shelley's noble qualities.

reference to "Queen Mab,"* "as if one of the darkest of the fiends had been clothed with a human body to enable him to gratify his enmity against the human race, and as if the supernatural atrocity of his hate were only heightened by his power to do injury. So strongly has this impression dwelt upon our minds that we absolutely asked a friend, who had seen this individual, to describe him to us—as if a cloven foot, or horn, or flames from the mouth, must have marked the external appearance of so bitter an enemy to mankind." In the same article, Shelley is variously alluded to as "the fiend-writer," "the blaster of his race," and "the demoniac proscriber of his species." The Englishman who, meeting the poet in an Italian post-office, asked whether he was "that damned atheist, Shelley," and unceremoniously knocked him down, was merely translating into action the almost unanimous sentiment of his fellow-countrymen concerning the author of "Queen Mab."

But as time went on, bringing with it a period of political reform instead of governmental repression, and as the disinterested nobleness of Shelley's character was vindicated in the narratives of Hogg, Medwin, and other biographers, while the high value of his poetry was recognized—slowly and reluctantly at first—by the more discerning critics, it gradually came about that he was viewed in a milder light by the succeeding generation of readers. A kindly though somewhat sorrowful tone was now adopted towards him, a real admiration for his poetical genius and personal sincerity being

* *Literary Gazette*, May, 19, 1821.

tempered by a stern censure, more in grief than anger, of the misguided principles on which his life was framed.

Thus he no longer figured as a deliberate scoundrel, fired with infernal animosity against the salvation of mankind, but as a wild enthusiast, possessed of many noble instincts, though unhappily warped and perverted by the sophisms of Godwin and other mischievous innovators. Had religion been differently represented to him; had he been more wisely educated by those who had charge of him in his youth; had he studied history more carefully; or conversed with Samuel Taylor Coleridge; or enjoyed this, that, or the other advantage which his fate withheld—then, it was argued, Shelley's career would have been a wholly different one, and to quote the words of Gilfillan, we should have seen the demoniac "clothed, and in his right mind, sitting at the feet of Jesus." "Poor, poor Shelley," exclaimed Frederick Robertson, when he meditated on these touching possibilities; and his words give us the keynote of this particular phase of Shelley criticism. The age of abuse and vilification had now become obsolete, and the "poor, poor Shelley" era had succeeded it.

This, it is important to note, has been the prevailing conception of Shelley's character for the last forty years, though there have not been wanting signs that it is destined to be replaced in its turn by a new and more accurate interpretation. Meantime the occasional splenetic outbursts of certain crabbed periodicals should be regarded as a survival or recrudescence of the

abusive period—a few belated bottles of a sour old vintage, which in the changed atmosphere of a later day explode from time to time, and sprinkle some musty cellar with their pent-up bitterness. The main tendency of the age has been distinctly towards a more genial estimate of Shelley, a view which has been fully, and perhaps finally, expressed in the thoroughly representative work of Dr. Edward Dowden, whose opinion of Shelley's ethics may be summed up in the judgment he pronounces on "Queen Mab," that "such precipitancy may constitute a grave offence against social morality, yet we may dare to love the offender."

Dr. Dowden is the authorised exponent of what may be called the apologetic view of Shelley, which asks that the poet's social heresies may be forgiven him in consideration of the beauty of his poems and the devoted though mistaken earnestness of his life. But, like all transition ideas, this view of Shelley, when strictly examined, will be found to be an untenable one, however gracious and welcome it may be (and the spirit of Dr. Dowden's work is especially generous and liberal) when contrasted with the old contumely of seventy years back, since it rests on the assumption that ennobling poetry can result from an immoral and therefore pernicious ideal. In estimating the lifework of such a character as Shelley's, it must surely be an error to set aside as valueless the central underlying convictions, while professing admiration for the poetry which resulted therefrom, as if the proverb "by their fruits ye shall know them" did not hold good in literature as elsewhere.

It will be shown in this volume that there can be no mistake whatever about the attitude which Shelley took up, not in "Queen Mab" only, but in the whole body of his writings, towards the established system of society, which, as he avowed in one of his later letters, he wished to see "overthrown from the foundations, with all its superstructure of maxims and forms." The principles which he inculcated are utterly subversive of all that orthodoxy holds most sacred, whether in ethics or religion; if he was wrong in them, he is deserving of the severest possible condemnation; if right, of equally unstinted praise. In neither event is there any permanent basis for the apologetic theory, which, by its vague and vacillating attempt to reconcile the irreconcilable, has made an enigma out of a personality which is singularly intelligible and clear.

Now this denudation of Shelley, by readers who could appreciate what is called the "pure poetry" of the "Sensitive Plant" or the "Cloud," but were horrified at the anarchic doctrines of "Queen Mab" or "Laon and Cythna," has been a remarkable and instructive process. The poet who, above all others, has been a source of strength and inspiration to social and religious reformers, whose lines were familiar watchwords in great democratic movements such as Chartism and free thought—this great revolutionary poet has been reduced by our dilettante literary professors to a mere singer and sentimentalist, has been compassionated, and patronised, and white-washed, and apologised for, and forgiven, until we have before us a meaningless and impossible nondescript, a monster,

half idiot, half angel, who is alleged to have built up a noble personality, and an immortal fabric of song, on a foundation of thought which the critics, in so far as they have condescended to examine it at all, have pronounced, with almost one accord, to be visionary or rotten or immoral.

Against this, the orthodox view of Shelley, there remains now to be set the rational and scientific one, the view which has all along been held by a handful of democrats and free-thinkers, but has only begun within recent years to attract any considerable share of the public attention. According to this newer estimate, Shelley was the poet-pioneer of the great republican and humanitarian movement which we now see to be impending; he intuitively anticipated, in his own character and aspirations, many of the revolutionary ideas which are already in process of development. We do not assert that he was personally a faultless being, that he was free from individual eccentricities and foibles, or that he did not share the intellectual errors and disabilities of his time; but we do say that his outlook, so far from being that of a weak-minded visionary, was, in the main, an exceptionally shrewd and prophetic one, inasmuch as all the chief principles which were essential to his creed are found to have increased enormously in importance during the seventy years that have elapsed since his death.

We hold that this philosophy of Shelley's must be considered together with, and not apart from, his poetry, that the two are inextricably connected and interwoven, and that Shelley the poet is, to a large

extent, unintelligible, when dissociated (as he is still commonly dissociated) from Shelley the pioneer. The central facts of his life, and the leading points of his life-creed are so obvious and unmistakable, that there is positively no room for the apologetic theory of the academicians. He may have been the "fiend-writer" that his early critics represented him; he certainly was not the nincompoop of Matthew Arnold's epigram, the "beautiful and ineffectual angel, beating in the void his luminous wings in vain." Imbecility is never beautiful; and an angel, however luminous, who should conduct himself in the aforesaid idiotic manner, would really be a far less ornamental personage than the sootiest denizen of the pit.

Indeed, it must be said that in thus shutting their eyes to the ideas that inspired Shelley's writings, while sentimentalising about the purity of his character and the ethereal beauty of his song, our modern critics have invented an even more monstrous personage than the sulfureous Shelley of their forefathers, that demon with whom it was at least possible to transact business on the basis of his demonhood. If only on the principle of *de mortuis nil nisi bonum*, I would speak in no wise disrespectfully of a defunct demoniac personage, who, like Milton's Satan, was decidedly a fine fiend in his way, and possessed, what his successor as certainly lacks, the great primal qualities of courage and consistency. It was at any rate, an intelligible conception of Shelley, in an age when to be a revolutionist was regarded as synonymous with being a scoundrel; for when you are going about to vilify the character of an

opponent, it is as well perhaps (if only for the sake of artistic effect and verisimilitude) to do the business in a conscientious and thoroughgoing manner.

For this reason I am now inclined to think that Mr. Cordy Jeaffreson's view of the poet, as set forth in *The Real Shelley*, was a work of greater insight than most Shelley students (myself included) were at first ready to allow. We have been prejudiced against the book by the tone of rancorous malevolence which makes itself so unpleasantly evident on a number of minor personal matters, and have overlooked or underestimated one great central merit in which Mr. Jeaffreson has a distinct advantage over certain amiable apologists. He at least saw, though from a hostile standpoint, the *importance* of Shelley's opinions. His book was a forlorn hope, a last attempt to stem the rising tide of appreciation, and to show that the earlier and sulfureous Shelley was in very truth the "real" one. Such an attempt was necessarily doomed to be a failure; but it may be that this recognition, however offensively expressed, of an adversary's formidable prowess was a greater compliment to Shelley than the vapid hero-worship of the "enthusiasts." It is "better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven"; better to be an effectual demon, with that "power to do injury" of which the early critic complained, than an "ineffectual angel" patronised by literary prigs.

And if this is true of Shelley's biographers, it is not less true of his critics. Why is it that so many distinguished and learned men, who have undertaken to enlighten the world concerning Shelley, have failed so

grotesquely that even the efforts of the Quarterly Reviewers seem successful by comparison? Simply because with every intention to be just, they were devoid of that insight into the objects of Shelley's gospel which is absolutely essential to a right understanding of the meaning of his life. Wanting this insight, they have seen only chaos and indecision in a career which was remarkable for its pertinacious directness of aim, and have heard only what Carlyle described as "inarticulate wail," in the clearest trumpet-call that ever poet sounded; and having thus created, out of the dust of their own minds, a mythical personage still more unreal than the "Real Shelley" of Mr. Cordy Jeaffreson they have proceeded to express their virtuous astonishment at the perplexing and contradictory nature of this phantom of their own imagining.

Mr. Walter Bagehot,* [for example, was so amazed at the perversities of Shelley's intellect, as viewed from the Bagehottian standpoint, that he set him down as actuated by mere impulse rather than by a reasoning faculty.

Mr. Leslie Stephen,† again having no sympathy with revolutionary ideas, will not allow Shelley credit for even average powers of thought, but finds "the crude incoherence of his whole system too obvious to require exposition," and asserts that "that which is really admirable is not the vision itself, but the pathetic sentiment caused by Shelley's faint recognition of its obstinate insubstantiality."

* "Estimates of some Englishmen," 1858.

† "Godwin and Shelley," *Cornhill*, vol. 39.

Even Mr. J. A. Symonds, whose pleasant monograph is valued by all Shelley students, was misled by the same social prejudice, when he stated that "the blending in him of a pure and earnest purpose with moral and social theories that could not but have proved pernicious to mankind at large, produced at times an almost grotesque mixture in his actions no less than in his verse." But how if these theories should *not* be proved so pernicious as Mr. Symonds confidently assumed them to be? And, in that case what becomes of the "grotesque mixture" in Shelley's actions and character?*

It may here be pertinent to quote some highly suggestive lines on Shelley which deserve to be far more widely known.

> Holy and mighty Poet of the Spirit
> That broods and breathes along the Universe!
> In the least portion of whose starry verse
> Is the great breath the spherèd heavens inherit,
> No human song is eloquent as thine;
> For by a reasoning instinct all divine,
> Thou feel'st the soul of things, and thereof singing,
> With all the madness of a skylark, springing
> From earth to heaven, the intenseness of thy strain,
> Like the lark's music all around us ringing,
> Laps us in God's own heart, and we regain
> Our primal life ethereal! Men profane
> Blaspheme thee; I have heard thee "Dreamer" styled:
> I've mused upon *their* wakefulness—and smiled.†

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* In a letter dated July 1, 1892, Mr. Symonds wrote to me as follows:—"Since I wrote the little book to which you allude, I have changed some of my views in your direction."

† Thomas Wade's "Poems and Sonnets," 1835.

The fact is, the exponents of the apologetic theory, while doing honour to Shelley's poetical genius and exalted enthusiasm, have altogether underrated the keenness of his intellectual insight into the vexed problems of modern times. Being accustomed, by the force of class-tradition to ignore the Shelleyan ideals, that is, the fountain-head of the poet's singing, as chimerical fancies derived at second-hand from the fanatics of the French Revolution, they have inevitably failed to enter into the spirit of his song. His book of prophecy lies open before them, but must remain in great part unintelligible, until sympathy, the sole clue to the understanding of a new gospel, shall enable their eyes to decipher the cryptogram of those revolutionary pages, which, once mastered, will put an end to the foolish talk about the "incoherence" of Shelley's message and the "hallucinations" of his brain.

Without at all forgetting the great literary services that have been rendered to Shelley's writings during the past quarter-century, I deny that he can be fully appreciated, even as a poet, under the present form of society, unless by those (and scarcely even by those) who look for the changes which he looked for, and desire to hasten that bloodless revolution which was at once the theme and the inspiration of his poetical masterpieces. As the number of such reformers increases (and it is increasing very sensibly at the present time), the apologetic view of Shelley, that kindly but unscientific product of a confused transitional period, will gradually pass away, and in its place we shall have the new, the appreciative estimate,

which will honour England's greatest lyric poet, not on the absurd ground that he sang beautifully and pathetically on behalf of a foolish and pernicious theory, but because, seeing clearly that the current forms of religion and morals would have to be revolutionized, he expressed that conviction, which each succeeding year is proving to be a true conviction, in words of consummate tenderness and power.

This new method of Shelley criticism is not merely in prospect, but has already commenced. It was heralded by James Thomson's remarkable article contributed to the *National Reformer* in 1860, and by the memoir which Mr. W. M. Rossetti prefixed to his edition of the poems ten years later—a strong and sensible piece of writing which deserves the gratitude of all who believe in the ultimate recognition of Shelley's true greatness. I do not mean to imply that Mr. Rossetti necessarily subscribed to the bulk of Shelley's social opinions; but his memoir was, as far as I know, the first considerable contribution to Shelleyan literature in which not the poetry only, but the conceptions that determined the poetry, were treated with due seriousness, and without a word of that unhappy extenuation or patronage which strikes so false a note in so many other essays. As to the valuable critical work done in late years by Mr. Rossetti, Mr. Buxton Forman, Dr. Garnett, and others, it may truly be said to have been instrumental in preparing the way for a better understanding of Shelley in his ethical as well as his literary capacity.

So, too, of much that has been done by the Shelley

Society; for though I do not insinuate that the members of that very respectable body, which is now sleeping the sleep of the just, were deliberate abettors of Shelley's revolutionary doctrines, I have yet in mind the remark made by Mr. H. M. Stanley to one of the Society's officers: "You are a funny people, you Shelleyites," said the famous explorer, with a perspicacity which suggests that Livingstone and Emin were not the only persons who were found out by him, "you are playing—at a safe distance yourselves, maybe—with fire. In spreading Shelley you are indirectly helping to stir up the great socialist question, the great question of the needs and wants and wishes of unhappy men; the one question which bids fair to swamp you all for a bit," Precisely so. The fuller appreciation of Shelley's character, will be found to keep pace with the progress of social reform, or, if you will, of social revolution.

II.

We see therefore that, the demoniac theory being exploded, there are two contending views of Shelley at present before the public. There is on the one hand (*vice* the demon deceased) the amiable, angelic, "ineffectual" Shelley, who is to be extolled as the inspired lyrical singer and well-meaning enthusiast, but not to be regarded for a moment as a serious interpreter of

life. On the other hand, there is Shelley the poet-prophet of democracy, the pioneer and martyr of the freedom—religious, social, political—which is beginning to dawn on us at the present day. It is to be observed that each of these Shelleys found adequate representation in the Centenary Meetings of 1892; and as these meetings were of something more than ephemeral interest, expressing as they did the various tones of a public opinion which had been gradually forming for three-quarters of a century, I have no scruple in here referring to them at some length.

Let us speak first of those gatherings where the ineffectual Shelley was set assiduously in the foreground, and the unpresentable revolutionist was kept as assiduously in the rear. Are we to say that all such maimed and apologetic representations of the poet are mischievous and inadvisable? By no means; for we must in fairness recognise that this transition stage, of regarding Shelley as a sort of celestial penitent, has somehow to be got through; and those who are at present in that stage must get through it, and out of it, as best they may. It was better that they should come to the conclusion that the centenary was to be celebrated, even in this inconsistent and half-hearted manner, than that it should not be celebrated by them at all. At the same time, it is incumbent on those who have arrived at a fuller understanding of Shelley to take care that the further and more advanced view is kept steadily in mind; and that the apologetic section of his admirers are not permitted to explain him away altogether, to divest him of every shred of his

strong human personality, and to purge him until he stands in a sort of fatuous, vapid deification—

Pinnacled dim in the intense inane.

That Shelley's centenary should have been observed, in one way or another, at Horsham, the place of his birth, and at Eton and Oxford, where he received the education of a "gentleman," is really a remarkable and gratifying result. For, even apart from the proverbial neglect of a prophet by his own country, it would have been difficult to select any places less likely to do honour to an avowed revolutionist than those which did in fact do honour to him. Rustic stolidity—academic superciliousness—it were puzzling indeed to say which of these qualities would be the more alien to the ardent Shelleyan temperament, with its keen, throbbing sense of freedom, equality, brotherhood. Yet, thanks to the exertions and organizing ability of those who had it in charge,* the Horsham celebration was a memorable and successful event, and gave full satisfaction to both parties alike. The respectable patrons of Shelley the angel were delighted, on their part, to find themselves represented by so congenial a spokesman as Mr. Edmund Gosse; while the adherents of the democratic Shelley were equally delighted at the points which Mr. Gosse gave them in his clever, but rather recklessly audacious address. For when the chief speaker,

* Especially that indefatigable Shelley student, Mr. J. Stanley Little.

at one of the chief celebrations of the Shelley centenary, gravely shook his head over the fact that certain revolutionists, and social anarchists, and vegetarians, and free-thinkers had had the astounding hardihood to claim Shelley as an ally—and when he went on, with similar gravity, to reassure his audience by the comforting statement that this violent action (on the part of the said revolutionists, social anarchists, vegetarians and free-thinkers) was but a "phase," and had passed away—then, as it seemed to some of us, the cult of the gentlemanly, respectable, law-abiding Shelley had reached its climax of self-deception, and might thenceforth be reasonably expected to sink into a rapid decline. Mr. Gosse's oration, however seriously intended, was in effect a *reductio ad absurdum* of the silly fiction which our literary men have been industriously circulating for the last forty years.

The case of Eton was scarcely less striking than that of Horsham. About twenty years ago, Dr. Hornby, then head-master of Eton, scouted the suggestion of placing a bust of Shelley among the recognized Etonian worthies in the Upper School, and expressed in so many words his authoritative judgment that Shelley was "a bad man." Now this remark of Dr. Hornby's should be of considerable interest to every Shelleyan collector and archæologist; for it shows that Dr. Hornby is himself a distinguished survival of an antique type, namely, the believer in the diabolic Shelley, who passed away at least a generation ago. Extremely few individuals of this persuasion are known to be still in existence there is, as I have remarked,

Mr. Cordy Jeaffreson, and I understand that an authentic specimen is still in preservation at the office of a certain journal, while no doubt there must be a few others lying hidden, here and there, in out-of-the way country parsonages.

Dr. Hornby, then, about twenty years back, avowed his adherence to this obselete form of belief. But in the centenary year Dr. Hornby, as Provost of Eton, and chairman of the Governing Body, was compelled to yield to the pressure of Etonian opinion, and to give a reluctant consent to the erection of the bust. Thus Dr. Hornby's "bad man" (like Lord Salisbury's "black man") triumphed over academic superstition; and Shelley has the honour of standing, in the questionable company of soldiers and prelates and politicians, among those very buildings which once beheld him tormented and baited by his schoolfelows.* There is one other alleged utterance of Dr. Hornby's which I must repeat while I am on this subject. He yielded as I have said to the expression of Etonian feeling; but at the same time he remarked in mild and pathetical remonstrance that he "wished Shelley had been at Harrow." There you have, in a word, the true sentiment of the respectable classes as regards Shelley. They have observed his centenary, because the idea has arisen that it is incumbent on them to do so; but inwardly they wish him—at Harrow.

* The bust, by W. W. Story, of Rome, was erected in the Upper School, on June 1st, 1894.

I am not acquainted with the exact circumstances that led to the acceptance by University College, Oxford, of the statue of Shelley, executed by Mr. Onslow Ford, and presented by Lady Shelley on June 14th, 1893, to the very institution from which the poet was summarily expelled in 1811; but I suppose it may safely be assumed that a similar process of reconciliation had there also been at work. At any rate the result affords us an interesting basis for certain statistical calculations, as to the average durability of orthodox prejudice against a distinguished offender. Eighty-two years, it seems, is the period that must elapse between the ignominious dismissal of an "atheist" by the college authorities, and the erection by their successors of the statue of that same atheist within the same college walls. I do not think we have any right to complain that as things go, this period is an excessive one; and it must in justice be remembered that this transaction could not have been completed in less than double or treble the time, had it not been for the soporific and reassuring influence of the angelic version of Shelley. For what matters it if Shelley himself lived and died an atheist—when we have it on Mr. Edmund Gosse's authority, that "whatever name he might give himself, he, more than any other poet of the age, saw God in everything." Let us be thankful for small mercies, and rejoice that the authorities of University College did not avail themselves of that suggestion which was somewhat rashly ventured by Mr. Bernard Shaw,*

* *Albemarle Review*, Sept. 1892.

and decide to decorate the walls of the Shelley chapel with "a relief representing Shelley in a tall hat, bible in hand, leading his children on Sunday morning to the church of his native parish."

As a set-off against these orthodox celebrations of the angelic Shelley, we have those other less respectable meetings, where a glimpse of the actual, the human Shelley was positively obtainable. Nothing was more significant, in the course of the centenary, than the manner in which democrats, socialists, secularists, vegetarians, *all* sections of the most advanced reformers, came forward to bear witness, each party in its own way, to the vital and growing influence of Shelley's genius. It is easy for Mr. Gosse to sneer at the so-called faddists and fanatics, who, in the words of that distinguished quietist, "still skirmish a little in the obscurer corners of Shelley's career." But the fact remains that the gathering in the Hall of Science was, both in point of numbers, and in its enthusiasm and intellectual vigour, by far the most notable Shelley meeting that was held. It was a meeting of men who had no time to waste in sentimentalising about the poet's "shining garments, so little specked with mire"; but who had *felt* the message that Shelley lived to utter, and could pay him the better tribute of devoting their energies to the cause that he held so dear.

I have already expressed the opinion that the angelic Shelley is moribund, that he is beginning to go the way of his diabolical predecessor, and that he will not long continue to beat his luminous wings in vain,

either in the void or elsewhere. This conviction has been strengthened by the general drift of the numerous notices of Shelley that have appeared in English and American papers during the last few years. There has been a very large acceptance of the new view of Shelley, and this has been quite as observable in America as in England, at any rate in the case of the leading journals and magazines. The New York *Critic*, for example, gave prominence in the centenary year to an article in which the three phases of Shelley's reputation were unhesitatingly recognised and accepted, "the phase of the fiend-writer, too base for anything but the lowest epithets, the phase of the lost angel, angelic but reprobate, and the phase of the prodigal returned, the crowned genius of Revolution."

But how are we to be assured that this unauthorised view of Shelley is not a delusion and a fad? How is a bewildered reader to form a reliable judgment between the old theory and the new? At a time when almost every reviewer or essayist begins his review or essay with a reference to what "the late Mr. Matthew Arnold" thought on this subject (whatever the subject may be), and expatiates on the peril of differing from so illustrous an authority—how, under such circumstances, can we so confidently set aside Matthew Arnold's verdict (which is practically identical with that of nine-tenths of our literary critics), as superannuated and unscientific?

We can do so for this reason, that the humblest Shelley-student has access to a criterion which is of a thousand times more importance than the pronounce-

ment of any master or professor—I refer to the criterion of time. If Shelley was what he is commonly represented to have been, an amiable enthusiast and visionary, and if, as Mr. Leslie Stephen assures us, "the crude incoherence of his whole system is too obvious to require exposition," we might reasonably have expected that the seventy years which have passed since the death of this deluded dreamer would have scattered his hallucinations to the winds. Yet, strange to say, Mr. Leslie Stephen himself complains, and in the same essay, that "the devotees of some of Shelley's pet theories have become much noisier than they were when the excellent Godwin ruled his little clique." But is it not, on the face of it, a rather remarkable fact, that a system so crude as to need no refutation, should be thus steadily gaining new adherents after three-quarters of a century? The inference seems to be that Shelley's vision was a good deal more penetrating than that of some of his most intolerant and self-satisfied critics.

Do we claim, then, it is sometimes asked, that Shelley was an "original" thinker. Certainly not—in that sense which implies the contribution of brand new ideas to philosophy or ethics. Shelley's social views, as everyone knows, were largely drawn from Rousseau and the French school, from Paine, William Godwin, and Mary Wollstonecraft. But while borrowing freely he could also freely assimilate and vitalize; and it has been well said of him that "he was Paine and Godwin, with a large heart added." This is an addition which amounts to little less than a new creation, for it is

unfortunately rare to find the perfect balance and conjunction of intellect and feeling. There is an originality in the selection and treatment, as well as in the promulgation, of ideas, and this faculty, this "reasoning instinct all divine," Shelley possessed in an eminent degree. He intuitively grasped and assimilated those democratic conceptions which were destined to survive the violence of tyrannical oppression and the slower but more searching ordeal of time; and if his ethical creed be compared with that of the other poets and thinkers of his age, in the light of the history of the past half-century, it is not Shelley who will be found deficient in sagacity and foresight.

But though inspired by these philosophical ideas, Shelley was by nature and temperament essentially a poet. He was the poet-prophet of the great humanitarian revival, and as he sang of the future rather than of the present, and of a distant future rather than of a near one, there is of necessity a vagueness in many of his poetical utterances, though this is fortunately to a great extent corrected and counterbalanced by the clearness of his prose essays. An attempt is sometimes made to discount the effect of his writings on the score of his youthfulness; he had not time, it is said, to mature his own thoughts, much less to instruct those of other people. This objection, however, can hardly be taken very seriously, for, in the first place, opinions must stand or fall by their intrinsic worth and not by the age of their advocate; and secondly, as Shelley himself said to Trelawny, "the mind of man, his brain, and nerves, are a truer index of his age than the calendar."

In saying this, I wish to guard myself at the outset against the charge of "idolatry" which is generally brought against those whose opinion of a great writer happens to be in advance of the popular estimate. To assert that the Shelleyan creed is nobler and saner than the so-called morality which it is destined to replace does not imply a belief that it is itself a perfect creed, or that it will not ultimately be succeeded by something still better. But ninety-nine out of a hundred of the objections at present made against the doctrines of Shelley are quite beside the mark, simply because they are the result, not of a clear-eyed, large-minded survey of those doctrines, but of narrow and prejudiced environments. It may sound paradoxical, but it is a fact that a new idea must be appreciated before it can be criticised—you must know what a man means and feels (in other words you must sympathise with him), before you will comprehend either the merits or the defects of his system.

The object of this volume is not to attribute to Shelley an impossible perfection, but to point out that, so far from being the pitiable compound of impulsive benevolence and crack-brained fanaticism which his apologists have represented him to be, he was a pioneer of a definite intellectual and social movement, which, whether for good or evil, is steadily advancing in interest and importance. The recognition of Shelley the man is beginning to follow hard on that of Shelley the poet; and though there is little doubt that those critics of the present day who deprecate anything more than "the very baldest and briefest

statement of the facts of the poet's life," * are truly expressing the natural disinclination of the privileged classes to hear more than they are obliged to hear of this most persistent prophet of reform, yet it must be already apparent that this naive injunction of silence will produce exactly as much impression on the study of Shelley as did Canute's imperial prohibition on the flowing tide. If the present century has had much to say about Shelley, the next will have still more, and the critics who would minimise the growing interest in his life, personality, and principles, will only succeed in exhibiting their own complete inability to understand the spirit and tendency of the age in which they live.

* H. D. Trail, *Macmillan's Magazine*, July, 1887

CHAPTER I.

Heir to Field Place.

A GREAT revolutionary outbreak is something more than a violent sundering of the accumulated bondages of the Past; it is a rent, however momentary, in the veil that divides us from the Future. Through that rent, as by a sudden lightning flash, the near is fused in the remote, and men have glimpses, though but broken and partial glimpses, of far regions which later centuries shall inherit. Future ideas, future hopes, future faith, and future freedom—these, and a thousand other forecasts of realities not yet realised, are poured into the lap of the Present, there to grow and fructify when the moment that gave them birth is forgotten. Is it possible that, at such great crises, the heart and soul of man, *as he will be*, are in some rare instances anticipated and incarnated in the form of man *as he is?*

Shelley has often been called the child of the French Revolution. It is my purpose to depict him, not according to the common notion, as merely an impassioned singer and wild-hearted visionary, full of noble though misdirected enthusiasm, and giving

promise of better things if his brief life had been prolonged, but rather as one who was charged with a sacred and indispensable mission, which was seriously undertaken and faithfully fulfilled. His life and writings were a mirror held up to our present social system from without; he came like a messenger from another planet to denounce and expose the anomalies that exist on the earth, to show the glaring contrast between might and right, law and justice, ephemeral custom and essential piety.*

It has sometimes been the humour of imaginative moralists to illustrate this contrast between the conventional and the natural by the narration of a supposed visit to a fabled "Utopia" or "New Atlantis." Or the process has been reversed, and the follies and frailties of artificial society have been shown through the medium of some "Chinese Philosopher" or intelligent "Traveller from New Zealand." Or, yet again, as in Edward Bellamy's "Looking Backward" and William Morris's "News from Nowhere," the writer has projected himself in a dream into the happier commonweal of the future, and has thus emphasised by contrast the evils and miseries of the present. But Shelley largely embodied in his own person and feelings what other writers have but fancifully suggested, and the moral at which they have hinted was by him directly and persistently enforced. He was *himself* the visitor from another

* "He was like a spirit that had darted out of its orb and found itself in another world. I used to tell him that he had come from the planet Mercury."—*Leigh Hunt*.

region, and the Utopia from which he came was indeed nothing else than a future phase of society. He anticipated in his temperament a later period of social and moral evolution; his gospel of humanity was the creed of a new era that is slowly dawning on mankind.

A life devoted to such a message involves, in the very nature of things, a subjection to misunderstanding and abuse from the majority of one's fellow-mortals. The man who is born a few centuries before his kindred age, must be, in relation to contemporary thought and contemporary institutions, a man devoid of piety and reverence: he stands towards public opinion somewhat as a cultured and liberal thinker of to-day would stand towards the customs and prejudices of the middle ages, could such a one be suddenly plunged back into the society of a past period, and invited to applaud the morality of the torture-chamber and the stake. It is for this reason that the pioneers of all great movements bring not peace into the world, but a sword; they are the disguised emissaries of the implacable Future, sent to sow dissension and heart-searching in the Present's comfortable camp.

And in Shelley's case, as though the anachronism of his birth were not sufficiently remarkable, all the attendant circumstances combined to intensify and accentuate it. That he should have been born heir to the typical country seat of a typical country family, and plunged into scenes and society from which his nature was utterly alien and remote, was surely the strangest defiance of all hereditary laws—an incongruity of fate for which not only Shelley himself is to

be compassionated, but most of all those deluded relatives who laid claim on him as kith and kin.

On August 4th, 1792, there was probably no country gentleman in England who was better satisfied with himself, his position, and his prospects than Mr. Timothy Shelley, of Field Place, Horsham, Sussex. For on that day the felicity of his marriage with the beautiful Elizabeth Pilfold was crowned by the birth of a son, who was to all appearances destined to maintain the time-honoured traditions of the Shelley house and property. The heir of a wealthy landowner and baronet, the child of a father who studied the interests of the Whig party in politics and precepts of the accomplished Chesterfield in private life, he could scarcely fail to follow dutifully in the course which Providence had marked out for him. It could not be doubted that if he lived to manhood, he would be a sturdy country squire of the old-fashioned sort, fond of his bottle of wine, devoted to field sports, and above all a determined upholder of orthodox constitutional principles. Mr. Timothy Shelley, well-meaning and kind hearted man that he was, felt that he could be the best of fathers to a son who promised to be so close a likeness of himself.

But as years passed on, and the child grew into a tall, slim boy, with great dreamy eyes, and long curling hair, his parents found themselves less and less able to forecast with confidence the future bent of his character. There was something strange and unaccountable about his manner and occupations which was out of harmony with the course of life at Field Place, and made him

a puzzle and enigma to his anxious and disappointed relatives. It was naturally disquieting to a country gentleman's equanimity to hear that his son and heir, instead of employing his holidays in learning the ancestral art of killing hares and peasants and partridges, was in the habit of playing familiarly with a large snake on the lawn; or entertaining his infant sisters with stories of an aged alchemist, said to have his abode in certain disused garrets and passages of Field Place; or, worse still, endangering his own safety and that of the household by the recklessness of his chemical experiments. It was an unhealthy sign, too, that an English boy should care less for the society of grooms and gamekeepers than for solitary rambles about the Sussex lanes, and mysterious nocturnal wanderings in which neither sense nor purpose could be discovered.

Then again, the reports from Dr. Greenlaw, of whose school at Brentford he had now become an inmate, were far from satisfactory or encouraging. If Tom Medwin, his cousin and school-fellow, could get on well with masters and boys, why could not Bysshe do the same, since he might be presumed to be Tom's equal in ability? It was provoking to the father to learn that his son was ridiculed and teased by his school-fellows; and being a man of the world, he knew well that in such cases it is the victim himself who is to blame; nor was he any better pleased by a letter which Mrs. Shelley received from Bysshe, giving a long account of a sentimental attachment to one particular school-fellow, whose admirable qualities were described

with much emphasis and exaggeration. Mrs. Shelley wisely decided to return no answer to the letter, in the hope that her silence might administer the most forcible reproof to this emotional tendency, which was probably fostered by the boy's unfortunate habit of reading volume after volume of romance.

But of all Bysshe's singularities, the most alarming to his parents was his strange and reprehensible habit of recounting imaginary scenes and conversations; for they clearly saw that this confusion of the boundary-line between fact and fiction was a sympton of an intellectual and moral laxity especially deplorable in a boy of Bysshe's position. Such eccentricities might be smiled at or pardoned in the case of a poor aspirant in art or literature; but they could not be tolerated in one who was eventually to be a county magnate and Whig member for the borough of Shoreham.

What did it all portend—snakes, alchemist, inflammable liquids, star-gazings, and romance readings? These things were little to the liking of a sober-minded country gentleman such as Mr. Timothy Shelley, who being by nature somewhat irascible and domineering, would doubtlesss speak out rather strongly on the subject of Bysshe's misdemeanours, never for a moment thinking of that more charitable explanation of the mystery—that the lad was not responsible for the singularity of his actions, or was responsible to the tribunal of a later age and society.

On the other hand, there were occasions when Mr. Shelley was inclined to feel proud of his son, and to become reconciled to the idea that he was going to be

"clever" like his grandfather, Sir Bysshe, that rather eccentric old gentleman, who at that very time was about to receive a baronetcy from his leader, the Duke of Norfolk, in return for his past services to the Whig cause. Could it be that the boy was likely to prove what is called a genius? We are not told whether Mr. Shelley ever speculated on this point; but we may be quite sure that, if he did so, he looked forward with some complacency to the enlistment of Bysshe's powers on the side of social order and respectability, which were already threatened by the insidious and subversive doctrines of the revolutionary party. Whigs and Tories were at least agreed upon one point—that the strongholds of constitutionalism and religion must be henceforth defended with no uncertain hand against the increasing assaults of democracy and free-thought.

It was a time when revolution was "in the air." The example of France and America had already given the signal for other national uprisings; Ireland was in a state of chronic commotion and overt rebellion; while in England certain mischievous agitators were busily engaged in "setting class against class," and were striving to impress the labourers and artisans with the wild notion that they were the victims of social injustice and oppression. One William Godwin had lately published a book named "Political Justice," which Mr. Shelley doubtless heard spoken of as particularly harmful and seditious; and it was possibly reported at Field Place, as an instance of the extreme depravity of the times, that a woman of the name of Wollstonecraft had

been wicked enough to write a vindication of the supposed "Rights" of her sex. The good old cause of the throne and the constitution was evidently in need of a champion; and if Bysshe, who seemed to be so unlike boys of his own age, should turn out to have talent, here was a worthy object for a youthful patriot's ambition.

Such, we may not unreasonably surmise, were the family expectations which the interloper known as Percy Bysshe Shelley was destined in a brief course to shatter. I shall not waste any labour on the futile task, to which some Shelley critics have devoted time and temper, of estimating the rights and wrongs, the palliations and the aggravations, of the antagonism between Shelley and his father, an antagonism which showed itself at an early date and widened into an irreconcilable estrangement as the years went on. No verdict of "bad son," or "bad father" is to be given in such a conflict; the pathos of the position—a typical position—lies far deeper than that. Estrangement, whether veiled or recognised, must inevitably result between those who, albeit blood-relations, are by temperament strangers from the first; and it is worse than useless to adjudicate praise or blame between divergent parties who have no single feeling in common. On the one side is the Family, with its constant demand that each and all of its members shall think and live in subjection to its domestic ideal, and to that superannuated code of "self-sacrifice," which enacts that unselfishness shall create a vacuum into which selfishness may rush, with the ultimate effect of preventing all vital in-

dividuality. On the other side is the young and ardent spirit, possessed of larger aspirations and wider aims, which realizes that the true piety of life consists neither in gratifying nor in mortifying self, but in faithfully following the highest line of self-development. What compromise can there be between two such adverse principles as these, when, as in Shelley's case, neither the one nor the other will give way?

No complaint can fairly be made against Sir Timothy Shelley, except the fatal one that he was a country gentleman. There is no adequate explanation of Shelley's revolt from his father, except that he was not a country gentleman. Incidental faults there doubtless were, as moralists have pointed out, on one side and the other; but we need not be concerned to justify or apologise for these.* At the root of the whole matter lay the simple fact that Shelley had no conception of "filial duty," as that obligation is interpreted. He was in the ordinary parlance, and according to ordinary notions, an "unnatural son." That is to say, he could make no pretence of loving or reverencing his father because he *was* his father, or of consulting the supposed interests of the Shelley family because his own name was Shelley. Throughout life he loved those whom he felt to be lovable, and he recognised no narrower family interests than the welfare of his fellow men.

The fetish of the Family was the first antiquated

* As, for example, the elaborate curse on Sir Timothy, which Shelley (according to Hogg's rather doubtful story) recited by the special request of his schoolfellows,

idol against which Shelley rebelled, and by that rebellion betrayed at the very outset that he was indeed no native English growth of the early nineteenth century, but a stranger from a far land. It was no fault of his that, heralding an age which shall have cast off the domestic superstition, he was prematurely launched into an age when that superstition was rife, and thereby involved in sorest trials and misunderstandings—sorer even than those by which sensitive childhood is not unfrequently perplexed. It was not his fault, but his misfortune, or rather it was a dramatically poignant condition of a rare and subtle destiny, that the most ethereal genius of English literature should have been born the heir to Field Place.

CHAPTER II.

The Education of a Gentleman.

I.

MR. TIMOTHY SHELLEY now looked forward to his clever son gaining academical distinction, and thereafter filling his place in Parliament with honour and success; to gain which end, he was of opinion that he must give him the advantage of the best education which an English youth can enjoy. Himself a disciple of Chesterfield, he knew the paramount importance of an easy grace of manner and elegance of bearing; he therefore determined to send the boy to Eton and Oxford, where, in the contact with others of his own social position, he would doubtless lose those unaccountable and very unfortunate eccentricities by which his character was at that time deformed. So this incomprehensible scion of the Future, who, being ignorant of his own origin, was not able to explain or protest, found himself subjected, from the age of twelve years to eighteen, to no less incongruous an ordeal than "the education of a gentleman." Let us take a brief view of him, as he underwent this process, at each of

the two venerable "seats of learning" to which he was attached.*

A visitor to Eton College during one of the numerous play-hours of the students (I am speaking of a time some ninety years ago) might have chanced to be a witness of a "Shelley-bait," a strange and suggestive spectacle, illustrative in a remarkable degree of the temper and manners of the average English schoolboy in his gregarious condition.

A crowd of lads of various sorts and sizes might have been seen encircling, jeering, pelting, and in every conceivable way annoying and persecuting a solitary individual, whose appearance seemed to indicate that he differed in some essential points of character from the mass of his school-fellows. He was slight and graceful in stature, and in the expression of his face there was something wild and spiritual, yet at the same time full of "exceeding sweetness and sincerity"; the other features that immediately arrested attention were the long dark brown hair and the large, blue, earnest-looking eyes. In spite of his occasional brief paroxysms of rage, caused by the attacks of his tormentors, he did not look like one who had been guilty of any very heinous offence. What then was the crime for which he had been outlawed from the good-will of his fellows?

Alas! it was a serious one; it was none other than

* "Yes, it is a seat of learning; it is a seat in which learning sits very comfortably, well thrown back, as in an easy chair, and sleeps so soundly that neither you nor I, nor anybody else, can wake her."—*Hogg's "Shelley at Oxford."*

the unpardonable sin of rebelling against that great deity of boys and men—Custom. This youthful iconoclast, who answered to the name of Percy Bysshe Shelley, had already commenced, to his infinite discredit and discomfort, to hold and advance certain opinions of his own, which by no means coincided with the established Etonian creed, the full acceptance of which was an indispensable condition of school-boy salvation.

In the first place, he had audaciously violated the fundamental doctrine of the Etonian constitution—he had refused to "fag."

Secondly, he had been guilty of the high crime and misdemeanor of neglecting and despising the lawful and necessary practice of athletic games and exercise, and of occupying himself in various frivolous and contemptible amusements; as, for instance, in dabbling and messing with all sorts of chemical compounds, or floating paper boats on ponds in the neighborhood of Eton, or reading strange books which were wholly unintelligible to his more sensible school-fellows, or, worst of all, incorrigible milk-sop that he was, in taking solitary walks, and even—so it was whispered—visiting a churchyard at Stoke Park, where some poet or other had written an Elegy.

The third count in the indictment was that the offender had shown himself indifferent to the conventionalities of personal adornment as practised at Eton, and had even been known to go out without a hat.

It was naturally felt that this rebellion against all

that is most sacred to the school-boy mind was an act of flagrant madness and atheism. A decree, therefore, had gone forth that the criminal should be known by the name of "Mad Shelley" and "The Atheist," and should undergo a course of that vigorous but wholesome treatment which the faithful have so often found effective for the reclamation of those who wander from the fold of orthodoxy. Who shall blame the Eton boys for acting as they did? A public school in such matters is but a microcosm—a reflection of the greater world that lies around it and beyond; and when a herd of school-boys think fit to tease and slander one who differs from his fellows, such conduct is but typical of that of the over-grown school-boys of mature life.

But at any rate, it may be thought, the boy might have turned, for the necesssary consolation and protection, to the masters who had undertaken the duty of educating him. Unfortunately there was little or no sympathy with Shelley in that quarter. Why should busy men take any special interest in an apparently half crazy boy, whose Latin verses, although fluently written, were often defective in metrical correctness, and who instead of seeking distinction in the ordinary channels persisted in following a line of study of his own, such as translating Pliny's "Natural History" and reading Godwin's "Political Justice"? To burn down willow-stumps with gunpowder, to keep an electric battery in one's room, and to send up fire-balloons by night, are proceedings not exactly calculated to win the hearty approbation of a schoolmaster; and it is no wonder that Shelley's tutors, in their dislike of the eccentricities that

lay on the surface of his nature, should have failed to discover the real underlying wealth.

So the poor outlaw, whose heart even now was full of love for every living being, and whose mind was aglow with the divine thirst for knowledge, could find no favour with either masters or boys, but pined in vain for the seclusion of his green Sussex lanes and the more congenial society of the friendly snake that haunted the lawn of Field Place. Sadly and slowly it dawned upon his mind that this life which had seemed at first to be all fresh and pure and fair, was blighted by a withering curse—the curse of the tyranny which selfish and sordid natures inflict on the gentle and harmless.

It was in this mood and under these influences that Shelley, as he stood alone one May morning on the "glittering grass" of the Eton Playing Fields, was visited by one of those sudden impulses by which many a heroic spirit has been summoned, in a moment's inspiration, to take his part once and forever in the battle of life.

I do remember well the hour which burst
My spirit's sleep: a fresh May dawn it was,
When I walked forth upon the glittering grass,
And wept, I knew not why; until there rose
From the near schoolroom, voices that, alas!
Were but one echo from a world of woes—
The harsh and grating strife of tyrants and of foes.

And then I clasped my hands and looked around—
But none was near to mock my streaming eyes,
Which poured their warm drops on the sunny ground—
So without shame I spake:—"I will be wise

> And just and free and mild, if in me lies
> Such power, for I grow weary to behold
> The selfish and the strong still tyrannize
> Without reproach or check." I then controlled
> My tears, my heart grew calm, and I was meek and bold.

To be wise and just and free and mild, and by the power thus acquired to help the oppressed to shake off the tyranny of the oppressor, this was the life-work to which he solemnly dedicated himself—the shy gentle shrinking boy who had been sent to Eton to acquire that external polish which his parents judged to be the chief characterstic of a gentleman!*

So the rapturous moments passed, and the darkness of the school life, with its petty tyrannies and wretched meannesses, again settled down on Shelley. But hence forth there was a brighter side to his existence; he had

* This incident of Shelley's moral and intellectual awakening, recorded in the introductory stanzas of "Laon and Cythna," is referred by Professor Dowden and all recent authorities to the period of Shelley's school-life at Brentford, and not at Eton. I venture, however, to think that Lady Shelley was right, when in the "Shelley Memorials," she indicated Eton as the scene of Shelley's vow. It is in the highest degree improbable that any boy, even such a boy as Shelley, would have experienced such emotions before the age of twelve; but this difficulty vanishes if we suppose the vow to have been made at Eton, where Shelley stayed till he was eighteen. It is significant too, that in his letter to Godwin, dated Jan. 10, 1812, Shelley distinctly attributes the awakening of his moral sense to his reading of "Political Justice," and there is evidence in the same letter that he first read this book somewhere about the year 1809.

a hope, a faith, an object before him; and he could bear with greater constancy the many trials that daily befell him during his stormy passage through that great educational establishment, where it is probable that he alone, of boys or masters, was possessed of any enlightened love of knowledge, any thorough desire for education. Even in these early days he was an indefatigable reader; and though his course of study did not lead him in the direction of scholastic honours, he nevertheless acquired a knowledge of Greek and Latin almost by intuition, and rose steadily in the school during the six years he remained there, till he was eventually in the sixth form.

Nor was he destitute of friends, few but affectionate won from among the mass of school-fellows who for the most part misunderstood him; while in Dr. Lind, a retired physician then living in Windsor, he found what he could find in none of the Eton masters—at once a friend and a teacher, with whom he might hold free intellectual converse without shame or fear of reproof. The child's dream of a hoary-headed alchemist who could sympathize with the feelings on which others frowned, was thus realized in boyhood; and the contrast between the brutal ruffianism of Dr. Keate, the Etonian archimage, whose official wand was the rod and whose altar the flogging-block, and the gentle benevolence of Dr. Lind, of whom Shelley never spoke in after-life without gratitude and veneration, may suggest some serious thoughts to us, as it doubtless did to Shelley, as to the relative value of fear and love in the process of education.

II.

And now let us turn to the picture of Shelley at Oxford, where we find him entered as a member of University College in the autumn of 1810. He had at length escaped from the tedious thraldom of school life to the comparative freedom of the University, where he enjoyed ample time for reading, writing, conversing, arguing, and following to the utmost the bent of his own inclinations. At home he was for the time on cordial, if not affectionate terms with his father, who had learnt to look with equanimity, and perhaps with a sort of qualified admiration, on the strong tendency towards authorship which he noted, even at this early stage, as a distinctive feature of his son's character, and was even heard to speak with paternal pride of the "literary turn" and "printing freaks" of the promising youth.

It is recorded of Shelley that he often devoted sixteen hours out of the twenty-four to reading; classics and modern languages, poetry and prose, science and metaphysics—nothing seemed to come amiss to him. When "a little man," presumably one of the college tutors, informed Shelley one morning that "he must read," the pupil was able to answer, without any scruple or hesitation, that "he had no objection." Day after day, with one familiar friend, he used to read or discuss all sorts of subjects, connected or not connected with the academic course of study, notable among these, on account of their special influence on his mind, being the essays of Locke and Hume. Moreover he was

still greatly interested in the study of chemistry; and his rooms at Oxford, as at Eton, were strewn with crucibles, phials, galvanic batteries, air pumps, microscopes, and all the apparatus of the chemist, which continued to inspire in him a wild and lawless delight. Returning fresh from some dull and wearisome lecture on mineralogy, where a learned pedant had discoursed heavily "about stones," the youthful enthusiast would dilate to his wondering friend on the "mysteries of matter," and the glorious future in store for the human race when the dream of Bacon's "New Atlantis" should be realized, and the powers of nature organized and enlisted in the service of man.

But the "mysteries of mind" now began to claim a still larger share of his attention, poetry and philosophy being the two great objects to which the thoughts of this strange, self-educated youth were naturally and intuitively attracted. At first it was philosophy to which he felt the stronger inclination; and as if to verify the name bestowed on him by his Etonian schoolfellows, he had already adopted the materialistic and atheistic doctrines of the eighteenth century writers.

The dolorous tone of regret often employed by Shelley's apologists concerning this early line of reading shows an inability to grasp the full meaning of his career. It is true that he was by nature an idealist, and that the philosophy of negation is not consonant with the higher idealistic creed; yet this initial phase of keen and trenchant scepticism was a valuable and even indispensable preparation for one whose special mission was to overthrow the tyranny of conventional

methods of thought. Had it not been for this sharp brushing away of mystical cobwebs, Shelley's genius, always dangerously prone to metaphysical subtleties, might have lost itself, like that of Swedenborg or Coleridge, in a labyrinth of phantasies, and thus have wasted or misdirected its store of moral and intellectual enthusiasm.

It is important, too, to notice that the "materialism" of which Shelley became an adherent during his residence at Oxford was not, in his case, the mere cold profession of intellectual scepticism, but went hand in hand with a remarkable ardour in the cause of gentleness and humanity. Even as a boy, in Sussex, he had been keenly affected by the sight of want and suffering among the poor; and his reading of Godwin's works, by which he was profoundly moved at an early period of his life, had doubtless already set him thinking, not only on the contrast, but also on the connection between poverty and wealth. His chivalrous intervention on behalf of the down-trodden and oppressed, whether it were a starved child or an over-driven horse, had more than once brought wonder to the mind of the more phlegmatic companion of his daily rambles round Oxford.

This chosen companion was Thomas Jefferson Hogg, the Boswell of Shelleyan biography, destined to be remembered by succeeding generations of Shelley students with mingled feelings of gratitude, amusement, and disgust.* By nature and disposition he was

* "Apart from Shelley, Hogg was simply a rough diamond —a coarse-tongued jester, whose jokes did not improve with

a hard-headed, cynical man of the world, regarding all sentiment and enthusiasm with a kind of tolerant contempt, and firmly convinced that the great object of life is to be prosperous, comfortable, and sarcastic. But at the time when he first met Shelley, his worldly propensities were not yet fully developed, and his character was redeemed by a touch of literary taste and a love of intellectual liberty which were the chief bonds of the friendship that was soon established between the two undergraduates, one of whom was now preparing for the career of a philanthropist—the other for that of a lawyer.

The force of the strange influence which the shy and gentle idealist exercised over the mind of the shrewd and confident cynic may be measured by the warmth of the praise bestowed by Hogg on Shelley in the record of their life at Oxford, which he published more than twenty years later. It was the first instance of the homage which was so often paid to Shelley's unworldly and mysterious personality by such rough, busy, matter-of-fact men as chanced to be brought in contact with it; it was, as Carlyle wrote of the devotion

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time; magnetized by Shelley's genius into genuine and loyal admiration of faculties the most dissimilar to his own, he was able, in spite of his seeming disqualifications, to give us, in his "*Shelley at Oxford*," one of the best, perhaps the very best, of all the portraits of the poet, a portrait which, incorporated in his *Life of Shelley*, stands out in strong relief from the ineptitude and vulgarity of its surroundings."— *Shelley Society's Papers*, Vol. ii. Essay on "*Hogg's Life of Shelley*," by H. S. Salt.

of the true Boswell, "a genuine reverence for excellence; a worship for heroes, at a time when neither heroes nor worship were surmised to exist." But in Hogg's case the hero-worship was further set off and enhanced by the sense of amazement and pity aroused in his breast at the sight of Shelley's unbusiness-like habits and quixotic temperament. How would "his poor friend" have fared—so Hogg grandiloquently pondered—had not *he* been present to advise and assist him with his keen, practical sense and shrewd insight into character?

Meantime those were pleasant days when the two friends devoted the autumn afternoons to long country rambles, and when their after-supper conversations were prolonged until the College clock struck two. But already, at the close of Shelley's first term at Oxford, signs were not wanting that this happiness would be short-lived. His father's suspicions had been aroused on the subject of his heterodox opinions, and the Christmas holidays spent by Shelley at Field Place were a time of mutual distrust. Now there are some youthful aberrations which may be overlooked or condoned in respectable English households; there are others which cannot be overlooked, and unfortunately Shelley's belonged to the latter class. If it had been merely a propensity to gambling, swearing, drinking, or some of the other indiscretions not uncommon among Oxford students at that date, Mr. Timothy Shelley would perhaps not have quite despaired of his son. But when a young man, in all simplicity and good faith, sets himself to test and examine and inquire into

the truth of certain doctrines, which, according to the established code of religion and morality, he is bound to take for granted, then it is clear that such an offender must be disowned, until he sees the necessity of repenting and disavowing his errors. Unhappily this was a necessity that Shelley, in spite of his excellent education at Eton and Oxford, could not be brought to understand; and it must, I suppose, be attributed to his translunary origin that instead of recognising the force of the parental arguments, he actually had the temerity to attempt to "illuminate" his father.

The result was as might have been foreseen by a youth of more reasonable disposition. At the end of the vacation he returned to Oxford in disfavour with both his parents, and was thrown into a restless, unhappy, and excited frame of mind. "I will crush intolerance; I will at least attempt it." Such was his spirit early in 1811, and he already hoped "to gratify some of this insatiable feeling in poetry."

In March, 1811, Shelley and Hogg, still inseparable in their studies, and eager in the pursuit of knowledge, had come to the conclusion that they must henceforth devote a still larger portion of their time to their joint reading; both of them being quite unaware that the attention of the College authorities, which had for some time been attracted by their singularity of dress and general eccentricity of conduct, was now centred on a small pamphlet, entitled "The Necessity of Atheism," which Shelley had lately written and circulated and to which Hogg had contributed a pre-

face. With that childlike simplicity which could not, or would not, realize that learned men are actuated by other motives than a desire to investigate the truth, the youthful disputant had forwarded copies of his pamphlet to various dignitaries of the University and the Church, inviting free discussion, criticism, and, if possible, refutation of the principles enunciated.

The matter was brought under the cognisance of the Master and Fellows of University College, and after some previous consideration they summoned Shelley before them on March 25th, an official instinct perhaps suggesting to them that "quarter day" would be a fit and proper date for the vacation of certain premises in their great quadrangle. The aspect of the culprit who had thus attempted to undermine the pillars of the English Church was not such as would have been expected from the desperate nature of the deed. It is true that the wildness of his long hair, and the lack of spruceness in his costume, constituted a breach of etiquette on which the authorities necessarily looked with disfavour; yet there was something in the vivid animation of his expressive features, the mingled firmness and gentleness of his manner and gestures, and his tall yet bent and fragile figure, that would have been distinctly prepossessing, even to the minds of deans and proctors, could it have been dissociated from their abhorrence of his pernicious views. As he would neither disown the authorship of the obnoxious publication, nor answer any questions on the subject, a sentence of expulsion was at once pro-

nounced; and Hogg's generous intervention only resulted in his sharing the same fate.*

The two friends left Oxford for London the next morning, and it has been recorded by one who was present on the occasion that "no one regretted their departure." It was a departure that has been regretted by many persons in later years; but at the time it must have seemed unavoidable, and no blame can fairly be cast on those by whom it was decreed. They merely registered, in their individual capacity, that sentence of anathema which established and dominant churchdom has so often fulminated, and still continues to fulminate, in one form or another, against the great crime of inquiry.

Thus terminated Shelley's experiences of the education of a gentleman. Let us hope that, though he lost the crowning advantages of that highly-valued process, he had gained some other instruction in the course of his youth which exercised a beneficial influence on his after career. But the disappointment at the time was none the less a bitter one, and the blow was severely felt. "It would seem, indeed," wrote Hogg in his "Shelley at Oxford," "to one who rightly considered the final cause of the institution of a University, that all the rewards, all the honours, the most opulent foundation could accumulate, would be inadequate to remunerate an individual whose thirst for

* There is a legend that when Hogg heroically exclaimed before the magnates of University College, "If Shelley is an atheist, I am an atheist," one of the dons retorted, "No, you are only a fool."

knowledge was so intense, and his activity in the pursuit of it so wonderful and so unwearied." Shelley certainly desired no reward for what was in him a natural instinct rather than a deliberate effort, but he equally little anticipated that these very qualities would bring about his disgrace.

CHAPTER III.

Marriage without Love.

I.

IT was not until the middle of May, 1811, or nearly two months after the expulsion from Oxford, that Shelley's father, finding him deaf to threats and expostulations, consented to receive him at home, and to make him a small annual allowance, with permission to live where and how he liked. On his reappearance at Field Place, Shelley was doubtless regarded by his relatives much in the light of a prodigal son, though he himself was so far from admitting that he had sinned before heaven, that we find him on May 19th successfully "illuminating" his uncle with the very pamphlet which had been the cause of his present troubles.*

Nevertheless, his position at this time was especially lonely and disheartening, and had not his nature, though sensitive and impressionable in the extreme, possessed also a singular faculty of hopefulness and recovery, he

* "I am now with my uncle. He is a very hearty fellow, and has behaved very nobly to me, in return for which I have illuminated him." Letter to Hogg.

could hardly have persevered longer in what must have seemed a vain and useless struggle. He had long passed that point which is often reached in the early stage of independent thought, where young gentlemen may yet discover that they have made an error of judgment, and may make their way back to the fold of propriety and affluence. He had completely lost the affections of his cousin Harriet Grove, a beautiful girl to whom he had been greatly attached; he had forfeited his bright prospect at the University and the goodwill of his parents. What was he to do in life, and what hope could he entertain of carrying out any of the numerous schemes on which he had set his heart? He had thought at one time of studying medicine, but that plan did not commend itself to his advisers. His father urged him to become a Whig politician, but Whiggism was not exactly congenial to Shelley's tastes.

In this restless and unsettled state he found a temporary consolation in his correspondence with his friend Hogg, who was now studying for the legal profession at York, and thither he accordingly despatched a series of letters, written in alternate moods of nervous excitement and depression. Always quick to magnify and idealize what interested and affected him, he had now conceived an exalted notion of Hogg's virtues and magnanimity, and devoted himself eagerly to the consideration of a plan for the union of that "noble being" with his sister Elizabeth.

Miss Hitchener, a Sussex schoolmistress of advanced views, whose acquaintance he had recently made, was another correspondent to whom Shelley freely un-

burdened his mind on controversial subjects, and whom he regarded at this time as the ideal of female excellence. Then, again, there were letters to be exchanged, chiefly on religious questions, with Miss Harriet Westbrook, a school-fellow of his sisters, to whom he had been introdnced during his recent stay in London; but his interest in this correspondence did not at all equal that which he felt in the two others. Harriet Westbrook was a charming and good-natured girl; but Shelley's mind was still too full of the more beautiful Harriet Grove for him to be in any danger of again falling in love.

Yet this Westbrook family was fated within a short time to have a most powerful and malignant influence on the course of Shelley's life, or rather on his chances of personal happiness. Eliza Westbrook, Harriet's elder sister, a grown-up woman of unprepossessing appearance and character, was evidently interested and attracted by the young enthusiast who preached the regeneration of society, and was heir to Field Place. When she invited Shelley to the house of her father, a retired hotel-keeper, and talked to him of love, and (to quote Shelley's own words) was "too civil by half,' was it her sole object that Shelley and Harriet should be brought together, or was she herself in love with him, and using her more youthful and engaging sister as the readiest means of securing and of enjoying his society? The exact truth about these matters will probably never be published, even if any record survives; but those who have studied the various accounts of Shelley's life can hardly doubt that Eliza Westbrook was playing

some deep game at this time, and that Harriet was a mere tool and instrument in her hands.

How could it be otherwise? Harriet was a school-girl of sixteen, pretty and pleasing in appearance and manners, but utterly destitute of any real strength of character, the mere reflex of the surroundings in which her lot was cast; at first a methodist in religious creed, and looking forward to some day marrying a minister, though at the same time confessing in her own mind that the military were the most fascinating of men—afterwards an easy convert to Shelley's revolutionary arguments and social heresies. It is true that she was far from being actually illiterate; but her interest in literature was a mere passing illusion, derived at second-hand from opinions which she chanced to hear expressed around her. Neither in religion nor in culture had she any fixed principles or intellectual convictions which might prove a support and guidance. And though at this early age she was bright, winning, and compliant, there was a fibre of obstinacy and worldliness in her nature which was destined to make itself felt as the years went on. Philanthropic schemes, simplicity of living, and theories of universal freedom, might charm her fancy for awhile, but she was not one who would endure to make sacrifices for notions which could only affect her superficially, or dedicate a lifetime to a work for which in her heart she cared not at all.

This was the girl who was corresponding with Shelley in the early summer of 1811, until in August of the same year, under stress of her father's real or pretended tyranny, she threw herself on his protection, confessed

her secret affection, and so aroused the sympathy and pity of one who "if he knew anything about love was not in love," that the affair ended in their elopement and marriage.

"Foolish but generous," has been the usual verdict of Shelley's critics and biographers regarding the marriage with Harriet, the unhappy consequences of which were apparent to the last day of his life. Let it be frankly recognised that the folly was greatly in excess of the generosity. In sacrificing the strong objections which he felt to the ceremony of marriage, out of consideration for Harriet's personal interests and position, Shelley undoubtedly acted with his natural unselfishness; but otherwise we wholly miss in this disastrous action the clear-sighted and faithful adhesion to rational principles which was conspicuous in all the other great turning points of his life.

Had it not been for the restless, excited condition of his mind at this time, he would have seen, as he saw afterwards, that it could be no duty of his to devote himself to a girl whom he did not love, and of whose fitness to be his permanent companion he had by no means satisfied himself. From such a blunder there could only ensue a life-long crop of calamities, which, though insufficient to warp the main purpose of his strong and indomitable will, would yet have the power to cause him and others much acute suffering and misery. Unfortunately, in the low state of his spirits at that time, it seemed to Shelley that "the only thing worth living for was self-sacrifice," and this self sacrifice took the form of becoming the brother-in-law of Eliza Westbrook.

It is odd that the hostile critics who have been at pains to rake up every fault and foible of Shelley's career should as a rule, have looked complacently on this one great error of his lifetime; but no doubt their leniency is chiefly due to the tranquillising effect of the marriage service performed at Edinburgh on August 28th, 1811. That Shelley himself was soon a wiser and severer judge of his own conduct is proved by the tone of his letters to Miss Hitchener in October of the same year.

"In one short week," he writes, referring to his marriage with Harriet, "how changed were all my prospects. How bitterly I curse my bondage! Yet this was unavoidable."

Soon after their arrival in Edinburgh, Shelley and Harriet were joined by the admirable Hogg, in whose company they returned after a few weeks to York. There the party was further reinforced by the presence of Eliza Westbrook, who was henceforth to be a frequent inmate of Shelley's household, and to exercise complete control over Harriet in all domestic matters, an infliction which Shelley for pecuniary reasons, was unable to resent as he might otherwise have done. It was under these auspices that Shelley, whose age was then nineteen, commenced that ardent crusade against tyranny and intolerance which in one form or another was always the main object of his life.

It is no part of my purpose to follow him step by step through all his early wanderings during this most confused and restless period, in which he served a trying but perhaps useful apprenticeship before entering on a greater and more serious warfare; it will be

sufficient to note the position in which he found himself two years after his marriage, and to view from his own standpoint that retrospect of his past life which must have forced itself on his mind at that time.

II.

We do not read that there were any great or memorable rejoicings at Field Place when Shelley came of age in August, 1813. Mr. Timothy Shelley presumably did not regard the event as one that called for any festive celebration; while the Sussex farmers doubtless shook their heads portentously over the doings of the young heir whose escapades were rumoured to be so wild and incomprehensible. On an occasion when most young men of his position and expectation would have been receiving congratulatory addresses from their father's tenants, and making polite speeches in return, this misguided youth was residing in a cottage in a Berkshire village, with his wife and an infant daughter, receiving nothing in the way of congratulation, and brooding over schemes in which polite speeches had no part.

If he looked to the future, his prospects were far from encouraging; if he looked to the past, he could find little comfort or reassurance in the retrospect of his two years of married life His campaign against social and religious intolerance had failed to produce the slightest mitigation of the evils which he sought to cure, its only apparent result being to embitter his relations with society, and thereby to disturb his own security and peace of mind. His early ideals of personal

excellence had been in some cases rudely shaken, in others entirely destroyed. If there was one plan which, above all others, had been often present in his mind after the elopement with Harriet, it was to choose some beautiful yet unpretentious home, and there, in the neighbourhood of friends and sympathizers, to dwell "for ever" and devote his powers to the study of poetry and philosophy. Yet, instead of securing this blissful home of rest, he had roamed for two years from place to place, and led a life like that of the Wandering Jew whose character he was already fond of introducing in his writings.

The sojourn at York, short as it was, had been long enough to disillusion Shelley's mind respecting the virtues of his friend Hogg, whose conduct to Harriet had necessitated a sudden departure to Keswick, while the "noble being," whose lifelong companionship Shelley had so ardently desired, was now left to pursue his legal duties in solitude and remorse, and Shelley himself found material for much sorrowful reflection in this unsuspected baseness of his first and most trusted friend. At Keswick he made the acquaintance of Southey, of whose writings he had long been an admirer, and in whom he now thought to find a kindred spirit, moved by the same passionate enthusiasm for intellectual freedom; he found instead a kindly, middle-aged gentleman, who could not always see the point of a discussion, and whose mainstay in argument was his "Ah, when you are as old as I am!"

Disappointed in these personal experiences, Shelley

had then begun to turn his eyes towards the field of politics, and his interest had been naturally directed to Ireland as the scene which illustrated most forcibly and unmistakably the fatal effects of a policy of tyrannical repression. Yet what benefit could he conceive to have resulted from his two months' visit to Dublin in the early part of 1812? He might indeed feel confident in his own heart of the justice and truth of the opinions set forth in his "Address to the Irish People," but he could not be unaware that the publication of the pamphlet had failed to produce the immediate effect which he anticipated for it, nor could he foresee, by way of comfort for temporary failure, that the history of the next half-century would amply illustrate the essential wisdom of his views. At Dublin, too, as at Keswick, his youth had been much against him; and, as if nineteen were not an early enough age at which to begin the work of reforming the world, his Irish servant had given out that he was only fifteen, thus throwing an increased appearance of juvenility over an enterprise which had been undertaken in a very serious spirit.

Moved by the remonstrances of the cautious philosopher Godwin, with whom he had commenced a correspondence, he had presently withdrawn from further interference in Irish affairs, and wandered for a time through the picturesque parts of Wales and the coast of North Devon, amusing himself meanwhile by sending forth copies of his "Declaration of Rights," and other revolutionary documents, in floating bottles and balloons, or engaged in the more important occupation of writing his poem "Queen Mab."

During these wanderings Shelley had been reluctantly compelled to sacrifice another of his youthful ideals of human excellence. As he had once mistaken Hogg for the paragon of manly virtue, so for a longer time did he idealize his correspondent, Miss Hitchener, until she became, to his imagination, "a mighty intellect which may one day enlighten thousands." The addition of her presence to Shelley's household had long been looked forward to as an event of blissful augury; but when it had become a reality, a sad disappointment had ensued, with the result that the "Portia" whose genius Shelley had invoked to stimulate his own was induced after a few months to return to her Sussex home, to the unspeakable relief of her former friend and fellow-enthusiast.

As he looked back in 1813 over this restless period of desultory schemes and broken ideals, Shelley's heart must sometimes have been filled with a feeling akin to despair. It was indeed a strange and chequered experience that had been amassed by a youth of twenty-one. Well might he point out in his "Notes to Queen Mab" that time is not to be measured only by its duration, nor length of life merely by number of years, and that "the life of a man of virtue and talent, who should die in his thirtieth year," may be, by comparison, a long one.

It was, however, in his domestic affairs, that about this time Shelley began to find his chief cause for disquietude. His money troubles, the result in part of his own lavish generosity and total inability to economize, were now beginning to press heavily on

his mind. But this was not the worst of his anxieties.

Hitherto his marriage with Harriet had perhaps been a happier one than its origin could have warranted him in expecting, a sincere affection having gradually grown up between them, owing in great measure to Harriet's easy good temper and ready compliance with Shelley's habits and opinions. But the fatal seed of disunion was already sown in the fact that those revolutionary speculations, which were the life and soul of his being, were to Harriet nothing more than a matter of passing interest and excitement. As she grew up to full womanhood, the true purport of her character, latent hitherto and merged in Shelley's stronger personality, was slowly but surely developed, with the result that in addition to the disenchantment of his boyish ideals, and the failure of his philanthropic crusade, it was becoming evident to Shelley that he was soon likely to lose even the consolation of sympathy and tranquillity at home. There was a trait of coldness and insensibility in Harriet's nature which was in marked contrast with the impassioned earnestness of his own; while the presence of Eliza Westbrook, at first tolerated as a necessity, was every day becoming a more insufferable burden and annoyance.

Small wonder, then, that Shelley was dejected and despondent during the days which he spent at Bracknell, for he must have felt that a sharp crisis was approaching in his fate. He was destined yet to rise to nobler efforts and wiser methods of warfare; but

first there was a valley of deep humiliation to be crossed, and a heavy penalty to be paid for the grievous error which he had committed.

In the meantime the years had not passed without their natural pleasures and consolations. Through all the changes of his wanderings, through all his pecuniary embarrassments, he had contrived to satisfy that innate love of reading and self-instruction which was a lifelong instinct and positive necessity of his existence. Scarcely less powerful, even at this early age, was the desire to give his own thoughts and opinions to the world. Even as a schoolboy, he had found his way to the printer's, for his idealism was combined with a singularly practical disposition, in which theory was regarded as almost identical with performance.

Among the various productions of this youthful period, the majority of which he could not but acknowledge to be failures, "Queen Mab" at any rate must have given some satisfaction to its author, who could not have been left quite in ignorance that a few sympathetic hearts had here and there been thrilled by this eloquent expression of the gospel of humanity and free thought. Whatever else he had done, or failed to do, this strange youth of one-and-twenty had penned the most notable and spirited protest of his generation against that religious bigotry which stunts the fair growth of the human intellect, and against that commercial depravity which tramples out the gentler instincts of life. Never before in English poetry had the tyranny of the rich over the poor, of the strong

over the weak, been so indignantly, and withal so truthfully, denounced.*

The vigorous enthusiasm which had inspired "Queen Mab" was a proof that Shelley possessed that happy union of sensibility and determination which alone could enable him to go through life without either abating the keenness of his sympathies or withdrawing in despair from a crusade which might well have seemed to be hopeless. In a word, his chief support in this darkest period of his life was to be found in the inflexible tenacity with which he still clung to his early boyish vow—to be wise and just and free and mild.

To the comforts thus derived from a single-hearted integrity of purpose were added those of friendship. Shelley was soon reconciled to his old college comrade; and though their intimacy could never be restored on the former confident footing, Hogg was a frequent and

* I cannot follow Mr. Forman's example of relegating "Queen Mab" to the *juvenilia*, as if it were unworthy of the serious attention of Shelley students. It is in many ways a crude and ill-considered performance, but its defects lie more in the style than in the conception—to repeat what Shelley said of it in later years, "the matter is good, but the treatment is not equal." The views expressed in "Queen Mab" on religious and social topics are practically the same as those held by Shelley to the last day of his life, and, as Mr. Forman himself tells us, "the poem and its notes have p'ayed a considerable part in the growth of free-thought in England and America, especially among the working classes"; for both of which reasons it seems to me that "Queen Mab" will always maintain an honourable place in the records of its author's achievements.

welcome visitor, both at Bracknell and in London. In Peacock, the novelist, Shelley had lately made another friend, a man of more literary and cultured tastes than Hogg, but fully as sarcastic and cynical, an equally striking illustration of the singular attraction which Shelley could exercise on minds of a wholly alien cast from his own. By this time too the correspondence with William Godwin had led to a personal acquaintance, and Shelley frequently enjoyed the conversation of the philosopher whose moral and political writings had so profoundly influenced him.

Yet another friendship in which he found a solace was that of the Newtons and Boinvilles, two families whose gentle and refined tastes were in close accord with his own, and stimulated him in the direction of that simple vegetarian diet to which he had long been inclined, and which he had now actually adopted. To such confirmed mockers and *bon vivants* as Peacock and Hogg the principles of the humane diet were necessarily unintelligible, and it must often have been a relief to Shelley to turn from their pointless witticisms to the congenial society where he met with a more liberal and sympathetic intelligence.*

* Here are two specimens of the gross misrepresentations put upon Shelley's friendships. "I.S." suggests in the *Star*, 1894, that the cause of Shelley's readmission of Hogg to his household was a desire to lay a pitfall for Harriet. Mark Twain in his "Defence of Harriet Shelley," *North American Review*, July, 1894, speaks of the Boinville family as "an unwholesome prairie dog's nest," the insinuation being that Shelley was carrying on an intrigue with Cornelia Boinville. The disgrace of such suggestions recoils on those who make them.

III.

I have already stated that I regard the marriage with Harriet as the one great flaw in Shelley's otherwise consistent career. Not of course because it was a misalliance which alienated his aristocratic friends and ruined his worldly "prospects"; for that, under the circumstances, was rather in its favour—still less because he therein committed the social indiscretion of undertaking a legal responsibility when no such step could have been demanded of him, and when, by acting as ordinary youths would have done, he might have avoided all the odium that he afterwards incurred. Had Shelley been merely a "gentleman," or that other dismal product of civilisation, a "man of the world," he might justly be charged with folly in thus showing consideration for the honour of an inn-keeper's daughter. But, as the case stands, the error committed by him was simply that of allying himself with a woman whom he did not love. Love was the supreme instinct of Shelley's nature, the beacon-light which guided him safely through the stormy sea of his life, but here, at this one crisis, he rashly pledged himself in its default The fatal characteristic of the marriage with Harriet was that it was marriage without love.

On the other hand it can at least be pleaded, in extenuation of a blunder which darkened Shelley's lifetime, that of all earthly snares and perils to which a visitor from another planet may conceivably be liable, there is nothing half so formidable as the present confused relations of the sexes—that morass of misunder-

standing by whose flickering will-o'-the-wisps even a genuine lover may be deceived. That he did not love Harriet, was felt by Shelley himself; yet, the first false step being taken, he was compelled, in his generous desire to remove a hateful stigma from the woman who trusted him, to commit himself further and further to a fatal course—the alliance with one who could never be in any real sense his partner. There is a terrible significance in his after references to this period:—

> Nay was it I who wooed thee to this breast,
> Which like a serpent thou envenomest
> As in repayment of the warmth it lent?
> Did'st thou not seek me for thine own content?
> Did not thy love awaken mine? *

Towards the end of the year 1813 grave dissensions had arisen between Shelley and Harriet; and he was now face to face with the alternative of living on in a state of continual domestic disagreement, or of cutting the knot of his own troubles, and not less, as he might well believe, of Harriet's, by a bold and decisive step. "The institutions and opinions of all ages and countries have admitted in various degrees the principle of divorce." So wrote Shelley in his Chancery paper three years later, and the desire to obtain release, practically if not legally, from this matrimonial bondage, must certainly have existed in his mind in the spring of 1814, although for his children's sake he was even then willing to be nominally bound.†

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* "Julian and Maddalo."

† The object of the second marriage, performed in London in March 1814, was simply to establish the legitimacy of his child, as the validity of the Scotch marriage was open to question.

If so many persons of ordinary temperament have found it an almost intolerable burden to be yoked throughout life to an unsympathetic companion, we can judge what a death-in-life such an existence must have been to Shelley, whose quick and emotional disposition the more eagerly craved rest and sympathy at home in proportion to the acuteness of his struggle against the outer world. "In looking back to this marriage," says his cousin and biographer, Medwin, "it is surprising, not that it should have ended in a separation, but that for so long a time he should have continued to drag on a chain, every link of which was a protraction of torture."

It might indeed have been foretold that a girl who always looked "as if she had just that moment stepped out of a glass case" could not be a fit companion for one whose mind was set on wholly other objects than personal elegance; but though Shelley, as I have said, must himself bear the blame of having married one whom he did not love, and whose character he had not rightly fathomed, he might be pardoned for not foreseeing that Harriet's easy good temper would be replaced, as the years went on, by a mood of hardness and insensibility. For, through all the conflicting and perplexing records of this period, it is distinctly evident that it was Harriet and not Shelley who took up an attitude of deliberate coldness and estrangement. When we seek to go a step further, and to inquire into the precise origin of the discord, and the reason of Harriet's inflexibility, we find that the whole subject is shrouded in a mystery, which none of

Shelley's biographers have been able, or willing, to dispel.

It is worth noting, however, that in his poem of "Julian and Maddalo," Shelley himself left a sketch of a character,—that of a deserted and distracted lover,—which was certainly meant to be an idealized record of this passage of his life, though the true import of the poem has been generally overlooked.* We naturally wonder if the real history of Shelley's first marriage could have furnished material for the shuddering reminiscence and tragic horror of which this part of "Julian and Maddalo" is full. Those who read between the lines can see indications of the existence of some still graver breach of sympathy between Shelley and Harriet than such as could be accounted for by mere divergence of tastes, or even by that conviction of his wife's infidelity which Shelley, rightly or wrongly, entertained to the end.† In the statement drawn up at the time of the Chancery suit, Shelley thus alluded to his parting from Harriet: "Delicacy forbids me to say more than that we were disunited by incurable dissensions." The question of a possible

* The subject has been fully treated by me in an essay on "Julian and Maddalo." (Shelley Society's Papers, Part II.) some sentences of which are reproduced in this chapter.

† Some critics have been at the pains to point out that Shelley, as a "free lover," had no right to blame Harriet if she acted on those principles. Perhaps not, as a matter of abstract morality; nor do we learn that he did so blame her. But her conduct certainly bears on the question of the separation.

connection between the story told in broken utterances by the distracted lover in "Julian and Maddalo," and that unknown passage in Shelley's life, is one of peculiar interest to Shelley students. At any rate this was Shelley's position in the early months of 1814. There was a hopeless lack of sympathy between himself and his wife, but the barrier that separated them was not of his making; for however great the measure of his folly in originally allowing himself to be entrapped into the disastrous marriage, his conscience acquitted him of any guilt in his after-conduct towards Harriet, who had coldly rejected all offers of reconciliation.* What then was he to do? Was he to sacrifice happiness to respectability, and drag on a weary existence until death should relieve him or his wife from their loveless and hypocritical union? In the opinion of the orthodox world he was bound to do this; but in his own opinion, as expressed in his "Notes to Queen Mab," the opposite course was far more in accordance with all genuine morality. "A husband and wife," he had written, "ought to continue so long united as they love each other."

Conscientiously holding these views, he looked upon his marriage with Harriet as already at an end. To his protection, support, and assistance she was still, and would always be entitled; but their closer union would henceforth be as irrevocably dissolved as if the divorce court had pronounced a formal decree of separation.

* See the poem "To Harriet," May 1814.

CHAPTER IV.

Love Without Marriage.

I.

IT was at this darkest moment of his destiny that Shelley first became acquainted with Mary Godwin, whose life and fortunes were so soon to be indissolubly blended with his own. Her father, William Godwin had long exercised a moderating, and on the whole beneficial influence on the mind of his youthful admirer; and Shelley on his part had done, and was doing, his utmost to assist Godwin in the pecuniary embarassments which embittered his declining years. The philosopher and the poet were thus drawn somewhat closely together when Shelley was in London in the early part of 1814.

In this way an intimacy arose between Shelley and Mary, then in her seventeenth year, the daughter of the famous Mary Wollstonecraft, Godwin's first wife: and the friendship thus formed soon ripened into love—a love, be it remembered which was not a cause but a consequence of Shelley's estrangement from Harriet.*

* This is proved beyond question by the impartial evidence of dates. There was, as Professor Dowden shows, a "deep division" between Shelley and Harriet early in

Before passing judgment on Shelley and Mary for their conduct in this matter, it would be well if orthodox moralists could bring themselves to view the facts from the standpoint of the parties most concerned, and to remember that both Shelley and Mary, and indeed Harriet also, belonged to that not inconsiderable class of social heretics who see in the marriage-bond nothing more than a crumbling institution, devoid alike of moral or utilitarian value. Shelley's union with Harriet being practically though not legally at an end, neither he nor Mary could reasonably be blamed for not conforming to a standard of ethics from which they conscientiously and emphatically dissented. It was in no reckless or immoral spirit, but with a deep conviction of the essential innocence of their act that they plighted their love as they stood by Mary Wollstonecraft's grave in the old St. Pancras' churchyard. As the spot was full of sacred memories, so the vow there made was full of solemn and loyal intent.

> Alas, that love should be a blight and snare
> To those who seek all sympathies in one!
> Such once I sought in vain; then black despair,
> The shadow of a starless night, was thrown
> Over the world in which I moved alone:—
> Yet never found I one not false to me,
> Hard hearts, and cold, like weights of icy stone,
> Which crushed and withered mine, that could not be
> Aught but a lifeless clog, until revived by thee.

1814, whereas Shelley was unacquainted with Mary until May or June of the same year. It is therefore idle to assert that Shelley's quarrel with Harriet was the outcome of a newer fancy or "affinity."

Thou Friend, whose presence on my wintry heart
Fell, like bright Spring upon some herbless plain,
How beautiful and calm and free thou wert
In thy young wisdom, when the mortal chain
Of Custom thou didst burst and rend in twain,
And walked as free as light the clouds among,
Which many an envious slave then breathed in vain
From his dim dungeon, and my spirit sprung
To meet thee from the woes which had begirt it long.*

On July 28th, some two or three weeks after this event, Shelley and Mary left England for the Continent. About the middle of the preceding month Harriet had gone to live with her father and sister at Bath; and before his departure from England, Shelley, after a final interview, had been careful to provide that she should be in no want of money. If there was one crime of which he was by his very nature incapable, it was that of a cruel and selfish desertion; and he therefore appears to have had no sort of apprehension that in thus deliberately and determinately separating himself from his wife he would incur the odious charge of having wantonly deserted her. With all his early experience of intolerance, he had yet to realise that slander is the most effective weapon of religious bigotry, and that the social pharisaism which can look complacently on marriage without love can never forget or forgive the far less reprehensible practice of love without marriage.

* From the Dedication of "Laon and Cythna."

II.

It was a strange party that started from Godwin's house in the early dawn of that memorable summer morning—Shelley, with his eager eyes and wild spiritual expression; Mary, even at that early age, calm and sedate in manner, and noticeable for her fair hair and high, tablet-like forehead; and Godwin's step-daughter, Claire Clairmont, a lively, quick-eyed brunette, whose whim it was to accompany the fugitives in their adventures.

To baffle pursuit by driving in a post-chaise to Dover; to cross the Channel in an open boat at the imminent risk of their lives, to purchase an ass at Paris, on which to ride in turn during the onward journey to Switzerland; to despatch a letter to Harriet, with a suggestion, made in all sincerity and good faith, that she too should join the party as a friend and guest;* to hire a

* This letter, according to Matthew Arnold's judicial pronouncement, was "precisely the letter which a man in the writer's circumstances should not have written." Regarded from Arnold's standpoint, this is undoubtedly true, yet the letter, otherwise regarded, was a most natural and Shelleyan one, and might almost be employed as a test of a real comprehension of Shelley's elemental character. In a few centuries, perhaps, the critics (if there are then critics) will be able to understand that though Shelley considered his marital relations with Harriet to be finally at an end, he nevertheless desired still to assist and befriend her, and was not in the least likely to be debarred from offering what he considered a kindly suggestion by the knowledge (for he knew it as well as any one else) that he was outraging every

house for six months on the shore of the lake of Lucerne, and then to leave it after two days' sojourn; to travel homewards in public boats and fragile canoes down the Reuss and the Rhine; and to reach England with scarcely a crown in their purse after their "six weeks' tour"—these were a few of the incidents in what was perhaps the strangest and most romantic honeymoon ever vouchsafed by guardian sprites to mortal lovers.

But the months that followed this brief dream of happiness were like those that had preceded it, a time of trouble and anxiety; and it may be doubted if Shelley could ever have fought his way through the dreary close of this most trying year, had he not now been cheered by the sympathy of a gifted and intellectual woman. This alone could compensate him for the changed looks of shocked and alienated friends; for the coldness of Godwin, who bitterly resented the step his daughter had taken; for the accumulation of debts and the persecution of duns, which rendered life in London almost unbearable towards the end of the year; and, above all, for the pain of the occasional interviews with Harriet, whom he still continued to visit and advise.

Yet, in spite of the many trials which had to be undergone during this probationary period, Shelley's alliance with Mary Godwin was nothing less to him

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established code of propriety. The lack of humour, of which Arnold complains, was not on Shelley's part in this instance —it lies altogether elsewhere.

than the beginning of a new moral and intellectual life. It was not merely that through Mary's companionship and inspiration, his mind, which was always delicately balanced between hopefulness and despondency, was filled with reviving hope; but henceforth, partly from the experience gained in the past, and partly from the more stimulating influence of his new surroundings, he entered on a larger and fuller existence, with wider views of man and nature, and more wisdom in his manner of promoting the doctrines which he had so deeply at heart.

Repeated failure had made him realise the folly of expecting that any immediate tangible success would crown his appeal from prejudice to reason; yet his enthusiasm, so far from being dimmed and lessened by this knowledge, was on the contrary clarified and elevated. Instead of trusting to the barren pursuit of dialectics, he now made love and humanity the watch-words of his faith; and by a natural transition it was about this period that he finally abandoned the cold tenets of the materialistic creed and adopted the ideal philosophy of Plato and Berkeley. Very important too, in the strong impression left on Shelley's mind and powerfully affecting his subsequent writings, was his recent visit, in the six weeks' tour, to the mighty mountains and rivers of the Continent, for the first sight of the Alps and the Rhine were to him a new revelation of the holiness and majesty of Nature.

With the opening of the new year, Shelley was relieved from the pressing pecuniary cares by which he had so long been harassed. At the death of his

grandfather, Sir Bysshe, in January, 1815, he became the immediate heir to the estates, and henceforth received an annual income of £1,000. He had moreover the option of largely increasing the property to which he would succeed on his father's death, by agreeing to a perpetual entail; but he refused this, as he had refused a similar offer three years previously, on the ground that he could not fairly and conscientiously entail so great a "command over labour" on those who might use the power thus given for purposes of injustice or oppression.

In the summer and autumn of 1815 we see him settled awhile at Bishopsgate, on the border of Windsor Forest, and within reach of the Thames, where he enjoyed a period of greater tranquillity than had hitherto fallen to his lot. Yet it is noticeable that a tone of pensive melancholy pervades most of his writings of this date; his sufferings, physical and mental, had seriously undermined his health, and in the early months of this year the danger of consumption had compelled him to look death closely in the face. A sorrowful reminiscence, a legacy of despondency left from past calamities, thus gave a slightly morbid tinge to work which was in reality done under circumstances of unusual restfulness and prosperity;* but this dejection was soon to pass away, together with the particular symptoms of ill-health in which it originated. The close of Shelley's and Mary's stay at Bishopsgate was

* *e.g.*, his poem "Alastor," written under the oaks of Windsor Forest.

made memorable to them by the birth of their son William, the "delightful child" to whom some of the poet's most beautiful and pathetic verses were afterwards dedicated.

At the approach of the next summer, Shelley and Mary, again accompanied by Claire Clairmont, started on a second visit to Switzerland, and there spent three months in the neighbourhood of Geneva. Here they became closely associated with Byron, with whom Claire, unknown to her friends,* had already formed an acquaintance in London during the previous year. Both Byron and Shelley were exiles from their native land on account of their insults to the great social fetich of Respectibility, but except for this bond of union there was little in common between them—the one a professed cynic, a votary of pride and scepticism, the other an enthusiastic believer in the perfectibility of man and the gospel of gentleness and love.

"In the forehead and head of Byron," says Gilfillan, in a notable description which will bear to be once more cited, "there was a more massive power and breadth; Shelley's had a smooth, arched, spiritual expression; wrinkles there seemed none on his brow; it was as if perpetual youth had there dropped its

* According to her own letter to Byron (quoted in Dowden's *Shelley*, II., 6). In Mr. Graham's "Chats with Jane Clermont," she is said to have stated that the Shelleys were fully aware of her relations with Byron before they went to Geneva. In itself this would be likely enough, and would need no apology. But a contemporary letter is more reliable than an octogenarian reminiscence.

freshness. Byron's eye seemed the focus of lust and pride; Shelley's was mild, pensive, fixed on you, but seeing through the mist of its own idealism. Defiance curled Byron's nostril, and sensuality steeped his full, large lips; the lower portions of Shelley's face were frail, feminine, and flexible. Byron's head was turned upwards, as if, having proudly risen above his contemporaries, he were daring to claim kindred or to demand a contest with a superior order of beings; Shelley's was half bent in reverence and humility before some vast vision seen by his eye alone. In the portrait of Byron, taken at the age of nineteen, you see the unnatural age of premature passion; his hair is grey, his dress is youthful, but his face is old. In Shelley you see the eternal child, none the less because the hair is grey, and that sorrow seems half his immortality."

It might well have been thought that Byron, the haughty sceptic and misanthrope, would scorn the gentle and disinterested idealist whose creed appeared to him so visionary and quixotic. But this was not the case; for Byron discovered in Switzerland what he again realized two years later at Venice, that there was a strength and sincerity in Shelley's nature,—"genius joined to simplicity" was his own expression,—which was quite unlike anything he had seen in other men, and against which he felt neither inclination nor power to employ the shafts of his deadly sarcasm and invective. It was not Byron's habit to be too sparing or scrupulous in his remarks on friend or foe; but it is said that against Shelley he never uttered a word of detractation; while in their personal intercourse he

treated his opinion with marked and unusual deference. It was a notable tribute of admiration and respect, paid almost unconsciously by a proud and faulty spirit to one whom he secretly and instinctively felt to be his own superior, whatever might be the verdict of contemporary opinion. "If people only appreciated Shelley, where should *I* be?" was Byron's remark; and the words spoken playfully at the time of utterance have much significance when looked back to by later generations of readers.

Meantime the two poets, unlike in all else, but sworn allies in their revolt against the formalities of society, spent many long days together in the region which Rousseau's genius had immortalized. Water excursions by day, in which Shelley gratified to the full that passion for boating which he had already acquired on the Thames, and the telling of ghost-stories by night, from which originated Mary Shelley's novel "Frankenstein," made the months pass pleasantly enough, until Shelley and Mary returned to England in September.

Then again, as after their six weeks' tour in 1814, there awaited them a time of sorrow and calamity, two heavy blows falling in rapid succession. The first of these was the suicide of Fanny Imlay (known as Fanny Godwin in her step-father's household), the daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft by a previous marriage, and therefore the half-sister of Mary Shelley. Her gentle and unselfish disposition had endeared her greatly to Shelley as well as to Mary, and her death was long a severe grief to him, not to be obliterated even by the still heavier shock that was to follow, when he learnt

that Fanny's suicide had been followed by that of Harriet. At the very time when Shelley was searching for her in London, Harriet, in a fit of remorseful desperation at the state to which she had sunk, had drowned herself in the Serpentine, thus realizing in sad earnest a suicidal purpose of which she had been in the habit of speaking often in girlhood.

It was a dark and terrible ending to that ill-omened marriage for the commencement of which Shelley was in part, though not wholly, to blame; but unless we are prepared to assert that a single rash and foolish act, brings responsibility for the whole train of consequences that result therefrom, we cannot fix the guilt on Shelley's head for the conclusion of the tragedy. In the whole matter of the separation from Harriet he had acted conscientiously, deliberately, and with due regard for Harriet's interests as well as his own. He had sacrificed his own wish to keep the two children, out of deference to her earnest entreaty that they should be left with her, he had placed her in the hands of her nearest relatives, had visited her from time to time, and made her an ample pecuniary provision, which secured her from all want.

Cruelly then though he felt the shock of this death, which, as Leigh Hunt said, "tore his being to pieces." his own conscience acquitted him of any sense of guilt. "I am innocent," he solemnly declared in a letter written four years later, "of ill either done or intended; the consequences you allude to flowed in no respect from me."

It is obvious that the maxim *de mortuis nil nisi*

bonum has been stretched to the utmost in the case of Harriet Shelley, and that there has been an excessive tendency on the part of Shelley's representatives to overlook the fact that "too inexorable a forbearance with regard to one dead person would oftentimes effectually close the door to the vindication of another."* Let Shelley take his just share of the blame, whatever that may be; but let us not be so hypocritical as to pretend that the conduct of Harriet after the separation throws no light on the disputes by which the separation was caused.

At the time, however, the very peculiarity of the circumstances, which precluded all chance of inquiry or explanation, placed Shelley's character at the mercy of every foe; and so good an opportunity for blasting the fame of one who was in revolt against society was not likely to be lost. Hence arose the commonly received version, on which the contemporary judgment was almost wholly founded, that Shelley, by his shameless immorality and cruel desertion, had caused the death of an innocent and affectionate wife. But now, in the fuller light and with the increased knowledge of a later period, it is impossible to look into the real facts of the case, as distinguished from the supposed facts, without seeing that they entirely invalidate a verdict which originated in ignorance and prejudice, and has been maintained by the same means.

For in the first place it is not true that Shelley tired of Harriet, with the criminal fickleness attributed to him, because he chanced to meet a new attraction in

* De Quincey.

Mary. Nothing is more certain than that all possibility of concord between Shelley and Harriet was utterly lost before Mary had ever come upon the scene; moreover it clearly appears that it was Harriet and not Shelley who was mainly responsible for the disagreement.

Secondly, it is not true that Shelley wantonly "deserted" Harriet or left her without due provision. She had practically deserted him and made his home intolerable before his eyes had ever rested on Mary, though undoubtedly, when it was too late, her jealousy was aroused at the new connection formed by him.

Thirdly, Harriet's death was in no sense due to any action, or neglect of action, by Shelley; but partly to the degradation of the life to which she deliberately subjected herself, and partly to a morbid nature constitutionally prone to suicide. Indirectly, no doubt, the separation was the cause of her fate; but then we are face to face with the old question—What was the cause of the separation? And to this, finally, one answer alone can be given. It was the fatal lack of sympathy between Shelley and Harriet, which made disunion inevitable. She was the victim, as Shelley was the victim, of marriage without love.

It is necessary to state these things with unmistakable emphasis, because even to the present day there exists the grossest misapprehension of the facts and dates of the tragedy. It is perfectly fair, as I have already said, that those who regard the conventional marriage-tie as sacred should condemn Shelley as a

heretic; nor can anyone wish to shield him from a charge which it was part of his mission to incur, and of his honour to accept.* But the assertion that he stands convicted of hardness and inhumanity in his treatment of Harriet is one which must be met with instant and unhesitating denial. It is not too much to say that numbers of men who have been separated from their wives and have yet retained the respect of respectable society, have acted with far less than Shelley's gentleness and consideration. The odium cast on his name was the result originally of a false interpretation of a very complex series of events, and has been subsequently prolonged by the inability or unwillingness of a large section of the public to do justice to an iconoclast—especially in relation to that perilous "sex-question" which, above all other social issues, is a cause of prejudice and animosity.

In conclusion, I will quote Leigh Hunt's account of this incident in Shelley's life.

"Had he now behaved himself pardonably in the eyes of the conventional of those days, Shelley would have gone to London with the resolution of sowing his

* I need hardly waste time on the absurd argument that Shelley, being an advocate of "free love," had no right to avail himself, as he twice did for the sake of his children's legitimacy, of the institution of marriage. Such reasoning must be classed with the impudent contention that Mr. Bradlaugh, as a freethinker, ought not to have taken the oath; or Mr William Morris, as a socialist, to hold property; or Mr. Ruskin, as a champion of stage-coaches, to use the railway.

wild oats, and becoming a decent member of society; that is to say, he would have seduced a few maid-servants, or at least haunted the lobbies of the theatre, and then bestowed the remnant of his constitution upon some young lady of his own rank in life, and settled into a proper church-and-king man of the old leaven, perhaps a member of the Society for the Suppression of Vice. This used to be the proper routine, and gave one a right to be didactic. Alas! Shelley did not do so; and bitterly had he to repent not that he did not do it, but that he married while yet a stripling, and that the wife whom he took was not of a nature to appreciate his understanding, or perhaps to come from contact with it uninjured in what she had of her own. They separated by mutual consent, after the birth of two children. To this measure his enemies would hardly have demurred; especially as the marriage was disapproved by the husband's family, and the lady was of inferior rank. It might have been regarded even as something like making amends. But to one thing they would strongly have objected. He proceeded, in the spirit of Milton's doctrines, to pay his court to another lady."

And again of Harriet's suicide:

"Let the collegiate refusers of argument, and the conventional sowers of their wild oats, with myriads of unhappy women behind them, rise up in judgment against him! Honester men will not be hindered from doing justice to sincerity wherever they find it; nor be induced to blast the memory of a man of genius and benevolence, for one painful passage in his life, which

he might have avoided had he been no better than his calumniators."*

Of recent years our orthodox critics have conceived a marked distaste fer what they have styled "the Harriet problem" and "chatter about Shelley." They had no scruple whatever, during half-a-century of vilification, in utilising on every possible opportunity a calumnious story, as a means of blackening Shelley's name; but when once it began to appear that the facts might wear another aspect, and that the "chatter" would henceforth not be entirely one-sided, these naive moralists were smitten with a sudden aversion for the very controversy which they had themselves provoked! I would now suggest that if they are indeed so weary of "the Harriet question" (and no one will deny that Shelley has been the subject of unnecessary, as well as necessary, contention), the remedy is in their own hands. Let *them* cease to calumniate and *we* shall cease to explain. "*Que messieurs les assassins y commencent.*"

* *Autobiography*, 1860, p. 259.

CHAPTER V.

The "Hermit of Marlow."

ON the outskirts of the town of Great Marlow there is a small quaint-looking house, with an inscription on the outside to commemorate the fact that Percy Bysshe Shelley there "lived and wrote."* Here, during the greater part of 1817, dwelt Shelley and Mary with their son William, and here another child, a daughter, was born in September. Claire Clairmont, with her infant daughter Allegra, was again an inmate of their household.

Shelley and Mary had been married at the close of the preceding year, and though their own union of hearts had long before been complete, yet the ceremony, "so magical in its effects," as Shelley wrote of it, was in-

* There is a further record on the tablet that Shelley was visited in this house by Lord Byron, which is stated to be erroneous by all the biographers. According to the information given by Mr. W. Graham, in his "Chats with Jane Clermont," the tablet is right and the biographers wrong. It is not a matter of much importance; but it must be noted that Mr. Graham gives no evidence of his assertion beyond the extremely unreliable reminiscences of Miss Clairmont.

A. Evershed 1870.

strumental in bringing about a reconciliation with Godwin and other alienated friends.

> Now has descended a serener hour,
> And with inconstant fortune friends return.

Thus at last Shelley was able to secure a less interrupted spell of thinking, reading, and writing; and the time spent at Marlow was one of the most interesting and important periods of his life, a year of mingled happiness and sorrow, made memorable by the acquisition of life-long friendships and the creation of great and characteristic works in poetry and prose. The situation and nature of his new home were altogether favourable to the peculiarities of his mind and genius; for living close to the best scenery of the Thames, and yet within easy reach of London, he had always the choice of complete solitude or congenial society. At no other time did he enjoy such free scope for carrying into effect his ideals of private life, and for giving expression to his opinions on public policy. He was never more active, more enthusiastic,—in a word more thoroughly *himself*,—than during this final year of his residence in England.

Early in March 1817, the good people of Marlow were somewhat scandalized by the news that Albion House was tenanted by a strange family, who were rumoured to have announced an impious determination never to go to church or mix in the ordinary local society. All sorts of reports were quickly current about Mr. Shelley's antecedents, and these were in great measure confirmed, shortly after his arrival, by the

statement that, at the instance of the relatives of his former wife, he had just been deprived of the custody of her two children, no less eminent a personage than Lord Chancellor Eldon having declared Mr. Shelley's conduct to have been so "highly immoral" as to incapacitate him for the duty of taking charge of his own offspring.* Much interest was accordingly excited in the quiet little town by the advent of this dangerous and unprincipled young man, and some surprise was doubtless expressed that such respectable inhabitants as Mr. Peacock and Mr. Madocks should tolerate the acquaintance of one who, as it was sometimes darkly whispered, had come to Marlow with the purpose of keeping a seraglio.

The appearance, however, of the new-comer, odd though it was, did not convey the impression of any extreme wickedness or depravity to those who watched him, as he hurriedly returned, bare-throated,

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* Whatever we may think of the tyranny and inhumanity of Lord Eldon's judgment, it should be observed that he stated with extreme perspicacity what many later critics have failed to recognise—the conscientious deliberateness of Shelley's actions.

"This is a case in which, as the matter appears to me, the father's principles cannot be misunderstood; in which his conduct, which I cannot but consider as highly immoral, has been established in proof, and established as the effect of those principles; conduct, nevertheless which he represents to himself and others not as conduct to be considered as immoral, but to be recommended and observed in practice, and as worthy of approbation."

and sometimes bare-headed, from his expeditions to wood or river; indeed, there were some who descried a singular and striking benignity in his firm yet gentle manner, and eyes bright and wild as those of a deer. The lady, too, by whom he was often accompanied, seemed fair and innocent and young. Moreover, his extreme kindness to the distressed lace-makers of Marlow, and his instant generosity to those who claimed his help, soon created a strong reaction in his favour—at any rate among the poorer classes of the town. It was doubtless felt that one who had been seen to come home bare footed, having given his shoes to a poor woman whom he had met limping along the road, could not be altogether wicked, however gravely the parson might shake his head. "Every spot is sacred that he visited," so wrote an inhabitant of Marlow forty years after Shelley's sojourn there, and the words are a worthy testimony to the utter unselfishness of his disposition and the lasting impression left by his frank and gracious benevolence.

The decision of Lord Eldon in the Chancery suit, by which the Westbrooks had succeeded in depriving Shelley of the care of his daughter Ianthe and his son Charles, was perhaps the heaviest blow of all that he had to bear on account of his heretical opinions. It was a subject on which he could not easily trust himself to speak even to his nearest and dearest friends. But when the judgment of the court had been delivered, and the wretched suspense of the preceding weeks was at an end, he sought and found the best and surest consolation in

those literary labours to which he was ever eager to devote himself, and forgot his private sorrows in his anxiety for the welfare of a cause. It was foreseen by Shelley, with a sagacity of political instinct which deserves to be clearly recognised at the present day, that the two great questions which must, above all others, engage the earnest attention of all lovers of liberty, were the improvement of the condition of the working classes and the social and intellectual emancipation of women.

The state of the English poor during the early years of the nineteenth century, and especially after the conclusion of the war in 1815, was in many ways pitiable, and Shelley, with his keen sympathies, clear intellect, and strong sense of justice, was the last man to shut his eyes to the true causes of social inequality and distress, as several anecdotes recorded by Hogg and other friends testify very distinctly. When he adopted the revolutionary doctrines of Godwin's "Political Justice," and gave new expression to the same in his own "Notes to Queen Mab," he did this in no spirit of mere boyish bravado, but with a clear conviction from which he never afterwards swerved, although these subversive views on the subject of property obtained him more ill-will, according to one of his biographers, than any other of his heresies.

In the two political pamphlets which he published, during his residence at Marlow he reverted to these social topics of which he had treated in "Queen Mab," and though he had now outgrown those errors of style from which his youthful poem was not free, he

could conscientiously assert that his opinions had been strengthened and confirmed by the experience that the years had brought him. However statesmen might temporize and learned economists split straws, in their comfortable partiality for the established order of society, one writer at any rate, the despised and calumniated "Hermit of Marlow," went to the root of the matter in his plea for justice and freedom, and clearly asserted that the luxuries and comforts of the rich are a tax on the industry of the poor.

This fact, according to the upshot of Shelley's teaching, is the key to the right understanding of the great social problem, and until this fact is recognised and faced, no true solution will be found. But while thus insisting on the supreme importance of the question of property, Shelley was in other respects an ardent upholder of the program of political reform, as advocated by Leigh Hunt and the Radical party of the day.

It was in poetry however, and not in prose, that Shelley did his chief work at Marlow. For now it was that he wrote "Laon and Cythna," his epic of free thought and free love, in which the revolutionary opinions advanced in "Queen Mab" were still further developed, and the doctrine of human perfectibility, adopted from Godwin, was set forth in narrative and poetical form. In the character of Cythna, the heroine of the story, we have Shelley's ideal of woman as she shall be in the perfect state—the free, equal, fearless companion of man, no longer the dupe of religious and conventional superstitions, but saving and cherishing

all that is innocent and beautiful in life by her redeeming gospel-message of liberty and love.

It is no wonder that Shelley, with his lofty conception of the purity of woman's nature and the holiness of her mission, should have been, by a sort of magnetic attraction, an object of interest and affection to all women with whom he became acquainted. We are told by Hogg (who, it may be surmised, was the more impressed by the treatment Shelley received owing to the contrast afforded by his own experiences) that, from the moment the poet entered a house, he excited the liveliest and warmest solicitude of all female inmates from the highest to the lowest, and that "he was often called by names of endearment as Ariel, Oberon, and spoken of by the ladies of his acquaintance as the Elfin King, the King of Faery, and under other affectionate titles."

And it is certain that the fantastic traits in Shelley's youthful character had not been obliterated by the maturer qualities of philanthropist and poet; for the hermit of Marlow was still essentially the same person as the dreamy child of Field Place. "He took strange caprices," says the same friend and biographer, "unfounded frights and dislikes, vain apprehensions and panic terrors, and therefore he absented himself from formal and sacred engagements. He was unconscious and oblivious of times, places, persons and seasons; and falling into some poetic vision, some day-dream, he quickly and completely forgot all that he had repeatedly and solemnly promised; or he ran away after some object of imaginary urgency and importance, which

suddenly came into his head, setting off in vain pursuit of it, he knew not whither."

At Marlow he would sometimes playfully account for these strange absences and disappearances by saying that he had been raising the devil in Bisham woods; and the simple country folk might be pardoned for believing that there was something unearthly about this solitary haunter of waters and woodland places, when even his intimate friends felt a strong suspicion that he "came from the planet Mercury," or some other mysterious quarter.

It was known, too, that to escape an unwelcome visitor, or any of the wearisome ordinances of what mortals call "society," he did not hesitate to leap through an open window, or sit a whole day with barricaded doors: since, as he himself expressed it, he was not wretch enough to "tolerate" a mere acquaintance. But there was some society of which he never tired, that of children, for instance, with whom he was at once and always in sympathy, and especially that of the few congenial friends who frequently visited him. First and foremost among these was the warm-hearted, noble-minded Leigh Hunt, who was linked to Shelley by a close bond of true and lasting friendship; Peacock, Hogg, and Godwin were also visitors at Marlow, while at Leigh Hunt's house at Hampstead he became acquainted with Hazlitt, Keats and Horace Smith, for the last-named of whom he conceived a sincere affection.*

* The charge of fickleness in friendship, so often brought

Yet, dear as his friends were, there were times when, like all other men of great and original genius, Shelley felt a sense of loneliness and despondency. It had been so at Field Place, at Eton, at Oxford, and during the period of his first marriage, and it was destined to be the same to the end of his life. An Ariel cannot readily be comprehended by ordinary mortals, even though he preach the gospel of love, and live according to its strictest precepts and commandments.

For Shelley gave expression to his doctrines in practice no less than in theory, being strongly of opinion that individual self-reform is as necessary as the abolition of legalised injustice. Simplicity of living was an essential feature of the creed which asserted that "all men are called to participate in the community of nature's gifts." To rise early; to spend the mornings in study, the evenings in social converse; to write his poems as he drifted in his boat or sat in some leafy haunt; to walk now and then in Peacock's company from Marlow to London, a distance of over thirty miles;

against Shelley, is disproved by the simple fact that to the last day of his life he remained true to those who called him friend—Leigh Hunt, Peacock, Hogg, Medwin, Williams, Trelawny. Such coldness as arose between Shelley and Byron was certainly not the fault of the former, and it is admitted that his treatment of Godwin was patient and considerate in the extreme. The case of Miss Hitchener, the "brown demon," is the one usually cited by Shelley's assailants. She, however, was not a personal friend, but a correspondent whose character Shelley (then a boy of twenty), absurdly idealised, until experience dissolved the illusion.

to live frugally and healthily on a diet from which flesh and wine were excluded—such was his course of life during the year which he spent at Marlow.

It seems a matter for regret that his stay there could not have been further prolonged; but towards the end of 1817 a variety of reasons determined him and Mary to make another change of residence early in the new year. The chief cause of their desertion of a home which they had once thought would be permanent was probably their fear that their children, William and Clara, might be taken from them by another high-handed act of despotic bigotry; for they had learnt by bitter experience that "in this extraordinary country," as Leigh Hunt expressed it, "any man's children may be taken from him to-morrow, who holds a different opinion from the Lord Chancellor in faith and morals." They desired also to migrate to a warmer climate for the sake of Shelley's health, and by withdrawing for a time to a more secluded region, to be able to curtail their expenses, which had been rendered heavy of late by the too numerous loans to friends and relatives; while a further object was to aid Claire Clairmont in taking her child Allegra to Byron.

After much consideration, it was decided that all these conditions would be best fulfilled by a journey to Italy.

CHAPTER VI.

Exile in Italy.

I.

ITH the exception of a visit to Byron at Venice, in the autumn of 1818, of which a poetical record is found in "Julian and Maddalo," Shelley's first year in Italy was a time of comparative loneliness and cessation from literary labour. His position was in fact almost that of an exile, outlawed successively from the good will of his family, his university, and his native land. Accompanied by Claire Clairmont, whose daughter was transferred to Byron's charge soon after their arrival in Italy, Shelley and Mary visited Milan, Rome, Naples, and other cities, but could find no congenial resting-place such as they had found at Marlow. The winter, which was spent at Naples, left Shelley in a state of unusual dejection and despondency, as expressed by him in the well-known "Stanzas";

> Alas! I have nor hope nor health,
> Nor peace within nor calm around,
> Nor that content surpassing wealth
> The sage in meditation found,

And walked with inward glory crowned—
Nor fame, nor power, nor love, nor leisure,
Others I see whom these surround—
Smiling they live and call life pleasure;
To me that cup has been dealt in another measure

His infant daughter had died in the preceding autumn, and at Naples there died also, if report be true, a certain mysterious and enamoured lady who had made avowal of her love for the author of "Queen Mab" on the eve of his departure for Switzerland in 1816, and had since followed him from place to place with faithful but hopeless affection.

Such anecdotes as this (amounting to quite a list of secret perils, attempted assassinations,* strange occurrences and supernatural portents, of which the authenticity can neither be proved nor disproved) must be classed among the apocrypha rather than the history of Shelley's life; but they at least indicate the sense of romance with which that life was surrounded, and the inclination of even his intimate friends to regard him as an incomprehensible being, scarcely subject to the usual laws of space and time, of whom many things might be credited which are held to be incredible in the case of ordinary men.

There was, unhappily, no doubt about the reality of the blow which overtook Shelley and Mary on their visit to Rome in the following year; for in the early summer their only remaining child, William, died of a

* For example the Tanyrallt affair in 1813. It is no part of my purpose in this book to describe such incidents, which belong to a Biography rather than a Study of Shelley.

fever. This crowning sorrow, coming at a time when Shelley regarded himself, not without reason, as "hunted by calamity," "an exile and a Pariah," who could name at the most five individuals to whom he did not appear a prodigy of crime, might well have been expected to put a final close to all literary aspirations. But it was not so; for the same indomitable spirit which had carried him through the chancery suit, by which he had suffered even a heavier loss—the loss inflicted by the tyranny of man being more grievous than that dealt by the mysterious providence of nature—did not desert him now. The life in Italy, lonely, unhappy, almost desultory though it had hitherto been, was nevertheless acting like the summer warmth to ripen and bring to maturity the thoughts that were germinating in his mind; and the year 1819 accordingly witnessed the creation of his most characteristic and triumphant works. It was not as an idle wanderer that Shelley had become familiar with the aspect of Alps and Apennines, with the Italian sky and the Italian waters, and with the glories of such cities as Milan, Venice, Naples, Rome. The land of ideal scenery could not fail to foster and stimulate the most idealistic genius with which poet was ever endowed. Now were written the best and most vivid of the letters from Italy, which for richness of colour, combined with grace and naturalness of expression, have never been surpassed by those of any Englishman who has taken up his pen in a foreign land to describe what he saw and felt; now, too, was written the great tragedy of "The Cenci," pre-eminently the finest

and most remarkable of modern English dramas. But the chief production of this period, and indeed of Shelley's manhood, was his great "lyrical drama," that splendid vision of the ultimate emancipation of humanity, the third and crowning part of the trinity of poems which show how the world may be regenerated by the power of love. The sonorous rhetoric of "Queen Mab," and the polemic narrative of "Laon and Cythna," were now succeeded and perfected by the solemn idealistic phantasies of "Prometheus Unbound."

There is a legend told of one of Shelley's ancestors, which may perhaps be considered as allegorical and prefigurative of this great humanitarian trilogy. "Sir Guyon de Shelley," says Hogg, "one of the most famous of the Paladins, carried about with him at all times three conchs, fastened to the inside of his shield, tipt respectively with brass, with silver, and with gold. When he blew the first shell, all giants, however huge, fled before him. When he put the second to his lips, all spells were broken, all enchantments dissolved, and when he made the third conch, the golden one, vocal, the law of God was immediately exalted, and the law of the devil annulled and abrogated, wherever the potent sound reached."

Was Shelley thinking of this golden conch when he described, in his great poem, that "mystic shell" from which is sounded the trumpet-blast of universal freedom? For truly such a trumpet-blast, to those who have ears to hear and hearts to understand it, may be said to ring through every passage of "Prometheus Unbound."

It was in the autumn of this same year, after the completion of his poetical masterpiece that Shelley once more reverted to those social subjects of which he had treated in his Marlow pamphlets, and deserted, to quote his own words, "the odorous gardens of literature, to journey across the great sandy desert of politics." The time was an anxious and critical one, the bitter class-strife under which England had long been suffering having culminated on August 16th in the famous "Peterloo" massacre, when the soldiers fired on the unarmed people at a reform meeting near Manchester —the darkest hour, perhaps, of all the dark and disgraceful period of the Regency. Shelley, who in spite of his absence in Italy, continued to take a deep interest in English politics, now conceived the notion of writing a series of political poems; but though some of these were written and even forwarded to Leigh Hunt, they were not published till many years afterwards; while his "Philosophical View of Reform," a prose essay written about the same time, is to this day known only by excerpts and paraphrases.

In these writings Shelley never fails to enforce what he regarded as the central fact of the situation, that it is social and not only political reform that is needed, to avert a revolution; wealth on the one hand and want on the other being the two fertile causes of discord and misery. In the "Masque of Anarchy," that "flaming robe of verse," as Leigh Hunt called it, he distinctly asserted that real liberty cannot exist in a country where there is penury and starvation; while in the stirring lines, "To the Men of England," we find

the true democratic doctrine thus admirably and tersely expressed:

> "The seed ye sow another reaps;
> The wealth ye find another keeps;
> The robes ye weave another wears;
> The arms ye forge another bears.
>
> Sow seed—but let no tyrant reap;
> Find wealth—let no impostor heap;
> Weave robes—let not the idle wear;
> Forge arms—in your defence to bear."

But this defence was to be, according to Shelley's teaching, as far as possible a passive and constitutional protest. He had imbibed Godwin's strong abhorrence of any violent outbreak, and believed that it would be better and wiser to postpone even the attainment of reforms which are otherwise desirable, such as universal suffrage and the abolition of aristocracy, rather than to risk the stability of a righteous cause by any immature attempt at establishing a republic. It was because he aimed at a complete but bloodless revolution that he distrusted and deprecated much of the teaching of Cobbett and his followers, in whose speeches he detected too many traces of the spirit of revenge.

On the other hand, he did not disguise his belief that if the aristocracy and plutocracy set themselves stubbornly and persistently against the gradual introduction of reforms, a forcible remedy would eventually become justifiable. "I imagine," he says, "that before the English nation shall arrive at that point of moral and political degradation now occupied by the Chinese,

it will be necessary to appeal to an exertion of physical strength."

During the latter half of 1819, the year in which these various works were produced, Shelley and Mary, having left Rome after the death of their child, were living at Leghorn and Florence, with Claire Clairmont still in their company. At Florence another son was born on November 12th, and was named Percy Florence. This event did much to raise the drooping spirits of the parents, and as it was felt that a more settled mode of life was now desirable, both for the infant's sake and for Shelley's health, which was affected by periodical attacks of spasms, the exact cause of which was never satisfactorily determined, they decided to take up their abode at Pisa, that place being especially recommended on account of the purity of the water. They accordingly left Florence early in the new year, and journeyed down the river Arno by boat.

II.

Pisa soon became to Shelley in Italy what Marlow had been to him in England. He came there out of health and out of spirits, depressed by the apparent failure of his literary hopes, and disgusted by the coldness or insolence of the Englishmen he met abroad. Hitherto he and Mary had been leading a solitary and cheerless life among people with whom they were wholly out of sympathy; being, as Shelley had himself decribed it, "like a family of Wahabee Arabs, pitching their tent in the midst of London"; but at

Pisa they found health and repose, and gradually gathered round them a circle of congenial and sympathetic friends. They stayed there during the whole of 1820 and 1821, with the exception of visits occasionally made to Leghorn, and more frequently to the baths of San Giuliano, a village distant about four miles; so that there was truth in Shelley's words when he wrote on a later occasion to Mary, "Our roots never struck so deeply as at Pisa, and the transplanted tree flourishes not."

The manner of Shelley's life at Pisa was much the same as at Marlow. He was up early, and was busily engaged in reading or writing till two o'clock, with a hunch of dry bread beside him for food, and water for drink. Among his favourite books were Plato, the Greek dramatists, the Bible, Dante, Petrarch, Calderon, Goethe, Schiller, Shakespeare, Lord Bacon, Spinoza, and Milton. In the afternoon he would sail in his skiff on the Arno, or go off, book in hand, to the solitary pine-forests by the shore. In the evening he would again read, or devote the time to conversing with friends. Next to his books and his boat, Shelley's chief source of delight was in the numerous plants which he and Mary gathered round them in their Pisan home, and which throve well in that mild and equable climate; hence, perhaps, originated the idea of "The Sensitive Plant," which was written at this date.

To society, in the conventional sense of the word, he was still as averse as ever, finding "saloons and compliments" too great bores to be endurable, and having

the same horror as at Marlow of the wearisome and officious visits of "idle ladies and gentlemen." "The few people we see," so he informed Medwin, "are those who suit us—and, I believe, nobody but us." He was also equally disinclined to dress in the approved fashion of society, declaring a hat to be little better than "a crown of thorns," and a stiff collar a halter. "I bear what I can, and suffer what I must," he groaned on one occasion, when compliance was absolutely demanded of him; but the Ariel in his nature could not often be induced thus to shackle itself in the prison-house of decorous costume.

At the beginning of their residence at Pisa the only families with which the Shelleys were intimate were the Gisbornes, who had a house at Leghorn, and the Tighes, who lived at Pisa under the assumed name of Mr. and Mrs. Mason; in both of which households Shelley found enlightened views and opinions to a great extent in accordance with his own. Maria Gisborne, once the intimate friend of Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, was a woman of quick intelligence and keen sensibility, in whose society and conversation Shelley took much pleasure, and by whom he was first introduced to the study of the Spanish language, and especially the works of Calderon. Mrs. Mason was a still more remarkable character. As a girl she had been the pupil of Mary Wollstonecraft, and had then become the wife of Lord Mountcashel, from whom she was afterwards separated; she was famous also as an ardent democrat, although a countess, and a thoroughly patriotic Irishwoman, until all her hopes

were dashed by the disastrous Act of Union in 1800. No wonder that Shelley and Mary spent much time at the Masons' house at Pisa, and that they valued the society of such friends with whom they could freely exchange opinions on social and political topics without being looked on with aversion and mistrust. The correspondence with the Gisbornes was also a pleasure to Shelley, and he took great interest in a scheme originated by Henry Reveley, Mrs. Gisborne's son by a former marriage, for starting a steamer to ply between Leghorn and Marseilles.

In the autumn of 1820 Claire Clairmont ceased to be a regular inmate of Shelley's family, her misunderstandings with Mary having rendered a change advisable.* Sisters by connection and not by birth, and differing widely in character and temperament, Mary and Claire were not likely to be drawn so closely together as to make it possible that they should always have the same home. Claire was excitable, quick-tempered, and prone to take offence on slight provocation; and this accorded ill with Mary's calm, sedate, and somewhat exacting habit of mind. It was agreed, therefore, that Claire should take the post of governess in a family at Florence. Shelley, who was better able than Mary to sympathize with Claire, and who was full of pity for her on account of the harsh treatment she received from Byron, and the prolonged separation from her child Allegra, did all he could to cheer and comfort her in her new position. Friendly correspond-

* See Note appended to this chapter.

ence was also maintained with Mary, and it was not long before Claire again visited them at Pisa.

We have seen how, in the preceding year, Shelley's interests had been specially aroused by the social condition of the English working classes; it was now to be arrested by the movements in favour of national independence, by which the South of Europe was agitated in 1820 and 1821. Spain was in arms against the tyranny of Ferdinand VII.; there was an insurrection at Naples against the dynasty of the Bourbons; and Greece was already on the point of proclaiming its independence of Turkish misrule. Shelley, the determined and consistent enemy of oppression in all its forms and phases, was deeply interested in the cause of these rising nationalities, and it was his good fortune at this time to number among his friends some sincere and earnest-minded patriots. Vaccá, his medical adviser at Pisa, was not only a skilful and eminent physician, but an enthusiastic advocate of Italian freedom, and his professional visits to his friend and patient were the more helpful and beneficial alike to body and mind, since he wisely forebore to afflict Shelley with drugs, but was always ready to engage in a "profound and atheistical" conversation. Still more stimulating to Shelley's zeal was his friendship with Mavrocordato, the exiled Greek prince who afterwards became a leader in the Hellenic revolution, and who even now, inspired by Shelley's prophetic spirit, was plotting revolt and looking forward to the emancipation of his fellow-countrymen from the Turkish tyranny.

It was at this time, and under these circumstances,

that Shelley wrote his splendid odes "To Liberty" and "To Naples," which were followed in 1821 by the still loftier and more ambitious "Hellas," a poetic vision of the delivery of Greece, which was to a great extent realized by the result of the war of independence.

It is here worthy of note that Shelley's detestation of tyranny was not of the partial and intermittent kind exhibited by certain English politicians and poets, who have sympathized warmly with the national aspirations of foreign countries, while they have been hostile to the progress of equally important and equally justifiable movements at home. "There is no such thing as a rebellion in Ireland," he wrote, in 1821, "nor anything that looks like it. The people are indeed stung to madness by the oppression of the Irish system, and there is no such thing as getting rents or taxes, even at the point of the bayonet, throughout the southern provinces. But there are no regular bodies of men in opposition to the Government, nor have the people any leaders." If the Irish people had then found leaders, as they have since done, there can be little question as to the bestowal of Shelley's sympathies.

At Pisa he was visited by his cousin and schoolfellow, Medwin, whom he had not seen for at least seven years. Since that time Medwin had become a cavalry officer, and had travelled in the East; but he still retained his habit of dabbling in poetry, and was soon as eager as ever to resume his joint literary labours with the fellow-poet who had assisted him, nine years before, in such juvenile productions as "The

Wandering Jew." In spite of the literary sins of carelessness and inaccuracy which he committed at a later date as a biographer, Tom Medwin deserves to be kindly remembered by students of Shelley's life. Vain and self-complacent though he was, he was profoundly impressed by the greatness of Shelley's genius, which in many ways he was better able to understand than were Hogg and Peacock, since he was at least free from the cynicism which made them blind to much that far less clever men could perceive and appreciate.

Among other acquaintances who occasionally figured in Shelley's circle were Sgricci, the famous Italian *improvisatore*, whose unpremeditated utterances in the theatre at Pisa greatly surprised and delighted Shelley ; Count Taaffe, an eccentric Irishman, whose poetical pretensions caused much amusement to his audience ; and Pacchiani, a disreputable professor, who made himself useful to the Shelleys by introducing them to more worthy friends—above all, to Emilia Viviani, a name immortalized in English literature by the rapturous verses of the "Epipsychidion."

It was a strange and memorable meeting, in the Pisan convent of St. Anne, between the beautiful and passionate-souled Italian girl, whose life was wasting away under the constraint of her enforced seclusion, and the young English poet, himself not unacquainted with tyranny and misfortune, who had devoted his whole being to the quest after that ideal beauty which, if it could be embodied in any earthly shape, might most surely be found in the form of womanly perfection. It seemed to Shelley that in Emilia Viviani he had dis-

covered a visible image and personification of that divine spirit of love, that "dim object of his soul's idolatry," which he had long worshipped by intuition, and to which he had always appealed as the one redeeming power by which a sorrowful world might be regenerated. From this spiritualized union of hearts sprang the rhapsody of the "Epipsychidion," a poem ever sacred to the "esoteric few" for whom it was written, while, as Shelley remarked in his Preface, "to a certain other class it must ever remain incomprehensible."

Years later, when Emilia had broken the bonds of an unhappy marriage—the still worse slavery for which she had been compelled to exchange her convent life—Medwin saw her at Florence shortly before her death. "I might fill many a page," he says, "by speaking of the tears she shed over the memory of Shelley."

III.

In the Autumn of 1821, after a pleasant summer spent chiefly at the baths of San Giuliano, where they had a boat on the canal that united the streams of the Arno and the Serchio, the Shelleys once more found themselves settled at Pisa, again surrounded by a considerable circle of friends. Claire, it is true, was no longer of their party; and Prince Mavrocordato had already sailed for Greece, to take part in the war of independence which was even now commencing; but the Masons were still living at Pisa, and Medwin returned there towards the close of the year. More

important actors had also begun to appear on the scene.

Byron, to whom Shelley had paid a visit at Ravenna in August, had now transferred his household to Pisa for the winter months, and the friendly intercourse between the two poets was continued, until a coldness sprang up between them owing to the indignation felt by Shelley at Byron's conduct to Claire, whose daughter Allegra had been left, against the mother's wishes, in a convent near Ravenna. In the meantime a scheme had been started for the establishment of a new liberal periodical, to which Byron, Shelley, and Leigh Hunt should be the joint contributors; and in order to carry out this idea, it was arranged that Leigh Hunt should shortly set out with his family and take up his abode at Pisa.

Vague hopes also floated through Shelley's mind of forming a still larger colony of select spirits in his Italian home; he would be like Lucifer, and "seduce a third part of the starry flock." "I wish you, and Hogg and Hunt," so he had written to Peacock in the preceding year, "and I know not who besides, would come and spend some months with me together in this wonderful land." These wishes, however, were not fated to be realised. Peacock, who was now married, showed no inclination to leave his native country; and though a visit from Hogg was talked of, it was never carried out; while Horace Smith, a true friend, for whom Shelley always had a deep regard, was compelled to give up his intended journey on account of his wife's health; and Keats, another old acquaintance whom

Shelley had earnestly hoped to see at Pisa, had died at Rome early in 1821, a loss commemorated by Shelley in the splendid elegy of the "Adonais."

But, as a set-off against these losses and disappointments, Shelley and Mary had lately formed the closest and most intimate friendship of their married life, a friendship which was of special value to Shelley as affording him solace in his fits of dejection, and stimulating that passion for lyric composition to which his mind was now chiefly directed. It was by Medwin that the long-promised introduction was given; but when Shelley, writing in 1820 before Medwin's visit to Pisa, had expressed the hope of seeing "the lovely lady" and her husband on their arrival in Italy, and the conviction that such society would be of more benefit to his health than any medical treatment, he little thought how amply his words would be fulfilled. Who could have anticipated that the outcast poet, in his distant place of sojourn, would find a devoted friend and admirer in a retired lieutenant of Dragoons, who sixteen years before this time had been his schoolfellow at Eton, and possibly a witness of the "Shelley-baits" that were then in vogue; and further that the wife of this friend would be discovered by Shelley to be the "exact antitype" of the guardian spirit of his own "Sensitive Plant";

> A lady, the wonder of her kind,
> Whose form was upborne by a lovely mind.

Yet so in reality it turned out; for none of Shelley's friends—Leigh Hunt perhaps alone excepted—proved to be so true and sympathetic as Edward Williams;

while Jane, with her sweet voice and gentle manner, soon became to the Pisan company, and to Shelley in particular, "a sort of embodied peace in the midst of their circle of tempests." They had spent the summer of 1821 in a village in the neighbourhood of San Giuliano, where Williams and Shelley had been constantly together on the waters of the Serchio Canal, and they were now living in the same house with the Shelleys at Pisa, opposite the mansion occupied by Byron on the Lung Arno.

Thither came also, before the winter was far advanced, the latest but not least memorable of Shelley's friends, a man "of savage, but noble nature"—the tall, dark, handsome Trelawny, whose contempt for orthodox opinions and habits, together with the adventurous sea-faring experiences of his early manhood, seemed to indicate a mixture in his nature of pagan and pirate. Like all who were brought into close connection with Shelley, he soon became conscious of the indefinable charm of the poet's character and genius.

Amid this congenial companionship Shelley was at the height of his powers. After devoting a long morning to that love of study which even the least literary of his friends found to be infectious in his company, he would be off with Edward Williams to breast the current of the Arno in his light skiff, his passion for boating still remaining as strong as ever; or he would join Byron's party in riding or pistol-practice, his skill in the latter pastime giving proof that the imaginative temperament of an idealist is not incompatible with the possession of a steady eye and hand; or he would walk abroad

with Trelawny and other companions, all of whom he could distance by his long stride across broken ground. But his favourite haunts were the solitary sandy flats and the wild pine-forests that bordered the coast near the estuary of the Arno, where, as in the Bisham woods at Marlow, he could sit and write in complete quietude and seclusion, with no fear of human interruption to the visions that passed before him.

Here were written some of the most beautiful poems in that well-known series of lyrics addressed to Jane Williams, which was the chief production of Shelley's genius in the winter of 1821-22. These lyrics, in the directness and simplicity of their style and the predominance of the personal element, reflect faithfully the feelings and workings of the mind of the revolutionary poet, when, after giving expression to the doctrines which he believed to be of vital importance to the welfare of mankind, and reaping the consequent harvest of hatred and misrepresentation, he paused awhile in his "passion for reforming the world," and solaced himself in the sweet assurance of the sympathy and friendship accorded him in all frankness and sincerity by a gentle and tender-hearted woman.

NOTE.

The relations between Shelley and Claire Clairmont have been eagerly seized on by the scandal-mongers as a means of prolonged mud slinging. It is true that we are told by Prof. Dowden that some of Shelley's letters to Claire, "written when the sense of her desolate position was keen with him, contain utterances which, if we did not know how ardently Shelley gave himself away in friendship, might be

regarded as the speech of a lover." But this knowledge of Shelley's ardent nature is just what the veriest tyro in Shelley criticism ought to be fully possessed of; and it is useless to argue with those who are determined to put the astute "man of the world's" construction on Shelley's intimacy with Claire. Here, as in other respects, Matthew Arnold, the "Superior Person" of literature, has been Shelley's worst traducer, and has shown how completely the apostle of culture failed to understand Shelley. Now if his charge of "inflammability," supplemented as it is by pointed allusions to Shelley's romantic friendships with Cornelia Boinville, Claire Clairmont, Emilia Viviani, and Jane Williams, had come from some obdurate Philistine or confirmed gossip-monger, it need scarcely have caused surprise or demanded an answer: but that such a critic as Matthew Arnold should have thus mistaken the affections of so rare and pure a spirit as Shelley's for the vulgar libertinism of a snobbish man-about-town, is a subject for disappointment and regret. It recalls to mind what Shelley himself remarked about the misrepresentations of his *Epipsychidion*: "I desired Ollier not to circulate this piece except to the συνετοι, and even they it seems, are inclined to approximate me to the circle of a servant-girl and her sweetheart."

The true explanation of this aspect of Shelley's character is amply supplied in the reminiscences recorded by his personal friends. He was emotional, warm-hearted, sympathetic; and in his relations with women, as with men, he entirely disregarded conventional usages and etiquette; but at the same time his nature was so obviously free from any taint of grossness, that words and actions which would have seemed suspicious in other men, were felt, by those who knew him, to be, in his case, simple and harmless. This is placed beyond all doubt by the testimony of Hogg, who, cynic that he was, would have been the last man to be deceived by any fallacious plea of "platonic friendship." Why did not Matthew Arnold, in his enumeration of Shelley's erotic

misdemeanours, make mention of those nocturnal confabulations of which Hogg has recorded one or two anecdotes? Presumably because the same biographer has also recorded the explanation. "It has happened," says Hogg, "that he had only one female disciple during the watches of the night, and the winged hours sped not less rapidly in interesting, engrossing debate. In two or three cases I have heard there was a noise about it, but most assuredly without other foundation than that such nocturnal consultations are unusual."

So, too, Mr. Cordy Jeaffreson, who will not be accused of an idolatrous partiality for Shelley. "No sympathetic student of the poet's character and story," he says, "can entertain even a momentary suspicion of the refinement and purity of Shelley's regard for the gentle and fine-natured woman (Jane Williams) to whom he addressed the saddest and sweetest poetry of his life's closing term. To say this of the feelings that swayed his soul in all its successive services of homage towards his friend's wife, is indeed to say no more than I will declare of each and all of the so-called platonic attachments that preceded the worship of Jane Williams." (II., 423).

I have already stated, in the Preface, that I cannot regard Mr. William Graham's alleged "Chats with Jane Clermont" as reliable information. To take a single instance,—Miss Clairmont is represented as being found "at her guitar, the same guitar that Shelley gave her, and made immortal by his dedication," and as claiming the well-known poem, "The Invitation," as "very complimentary" to herself! If she really said this, about the poems and the guitar of which Jane Williams was undoubtedly the recipient, what credence can be given to anything else said by her? The fact that Mr. Graham interviewed her in "the early eighties," whereas she had died in 1879. becomes a trifle in comparison.

CHAPTER VII.

Cor Cordium.

I.

BEFORE the commencement of the hot weather in 1822, Shelley and Mary had moved their household from Pisa to the neighbourhood of Lerici, a small town on the Gulf of Spezzia, where they purposed spending the summer months. Edward and Jane Williams were again of the party, and Claire Clairmont, saddened now and subdued by the recent death of her child Allegra, was a visitor from time to time; but Trelawny still remained at Pisa in Byron's company, and Shelley henceforth held but little communication with Byron, being desirous to withdraw himself as much as possible from a society in which he had ceased to take pleasure.

The Casa Magni, the house occupied by the Shelleys and Williamses, was a solitary and desolate-looking building, standing amid the wildest scenery of the Gulf of Spezzia, with a precipitous wooded slope behind it, and the sea in front. So close was it to the shore that the plash and moan of the waves could be heard in all the rooms, so that the inmates almost fancied them-

selves to be on board a ship in mid-sea, rather than lodged in a durable dwelling. At the very door of the house, or even within the large unpaved entrance hall, was kept the light skiff, made of canvas and reeds, in which Shelley, fond as ever of the paper boats of his boyhood, delighted to float on the waters of the bay, to the no slight apprehension of his friends and neighbours. In addition to this fragile toy-boat, he was now the possessor of a small undecked yacht, the "*Ariel*," lately built for him at Genoa, in which he and Edward Williams could sail to Leghorn and other neighbouring ports, and even meditated still longer voyages along the Mediterranean coasts.

It was a pleasant change to Shelley, this relapse into wild, unconventional life, after the comparatively large demands made on his time by his acquaintances at Pisa; and he was never happier than when sailing in his "*Ariel*" under the blazing Italian sun, or listening to the music of Jane's guitar on the moonlit terrace of the Casa Magni. He was in no mood at this time for any great creative work, or for any close co-operation in the joint literary enterprise for which Leigh Hunt was already on his way to meet Byron at Pisa. To Mary, who was in weak health when they came to Lerici, there was something ominous and disquieting in the "unearthly beauty" of the place, and the savage wildness of its scenery; but Shelley only felt the influence of these surroundings in a sense of temporary suspension and mental passiveness. "I stand, as it were, upon a precipice," so he wrote in June, "which I have ascended with great, and cannot descend with-

out greater peril; and I am content if the heaven above me is calm for the passing moment."

For the moment the heaven was calm, but the calmness was of that kind which too often precedes and prognosticates a storm. The droughts of the early summer were followed by a period of fierce heat and sultry splendour; day after day the sun blazed down with unabated fury on sea and land, while prayers were offered up in churches for the rain that was still withheld. There was something expectant and portentous in the season, and this perhaps awoke a similar feeling in the minds of the two families at the Casa Magni. Shelley himself, though he did not share Mary's vague apprehensions and distrust of Lerici and its wild neighbourhood, was haunted by strange visions which surprised those to whom he told them at the time, and were afterwards recalled with increased interest and attention. On one occasion it was the face of his former child-friend Allegra that looked forth and smiled on him from the waves; on another it was his own wraith that met him, cloaked and hooded, on the terrace of the house; on a third it was the figure of Edward Williams, pale and dying, that appeared to him in a dream, with the tidings that the sea was even then flooding the house in which they were sleeping. Nor was it only the vivid imagination of the poet that was thus disturbed, for Jane Williams was also troubled with the apparition of what she took to be Shelley, at times when Shelley himself was far absent and out of sight; while in addition to these mysterious day-dreams and midnight panics there was always present to the minds of

Shelley's friends the real fear that his life might some day be sacrificed to the element which he loved so well, but which had so often threatened to engulf him.

But still the heaven remained calm, and still Shelley was happy while he basked in the full heat of the Italian summer, writing his poem on "The Triumph of Life" as he cruised in his yacht along the picturesque windings of the coast, or drifted in the little skiff across the land-locked waters of the bay. In "The Triumph of Life," which caught its tone and colour as much from the scenery and season in which it was written as from the transient mood of its author, we have a mystical description of the pomp and pageantry of that triumphal procession in which the spirit of Man is dragged captive behind the chariot of Life. It is no recantation of idealism—as some readers, misled by the despondent spirit of the poem, have been too quick to assume—but rather, like "Alastor," a recognition of the price that even the greatest idealists must pay to reality; it is the cost, not the failure, of the ideal philosophy that is here allegorically represented; and it is probable that if the poem, which was left a fragment, had been completed by Shelley, it would have dealt with the saving influence and regenerating power of Love.

It is scarcely credible that Shelley could have given up his ideal faith without his friends noticing and recording so momentous a change; indeed the evidence of his biographers, so far as it goes, points to exactly the opposite conclusion. Speaking of his writings of the previous autumn, Mary Shelley afterwards recorded that his opinions then remained unchanged.

"By those opinions," she said, "carried even to their utmost extent, he wished to live and die, as being in his conviction not only true, but such as alone would conduce to the moral improvement and happiness of mankind."

But though Shelley's ideal faith in love and liberty was still unshaken, he had learnt by long and bitter experience that it can only be upheld at the cost of much personal error and painful collison with the established system of society. Now, as at previous periods of his life, the ill-will and hostility of his calumniators had wrought a temporary discouragement —a disposition to look on the darker rather than the brighter aspect of his fortunes, to contemplate the loss incurred rather than the success achieved.

Can it be wondered that so sensitive a nature as Shelley's should at times have shrunk instinctively from further contact with this world of men by whom he seemed destined to be for ever misunderstood, even as their motives were to him unintelligible? Some months before the time of which I speak, his eager fancy had pictured the relief of retiring with those he loved to some solitary island—a Greek island, perhaps, and part of a free Hellas redeemed from the Turkish oppressor—and there dwelling in blissful seclusion, far from the miserable jealousies and contagion of the world. Then the dream had taken the still stranger from of a desire to obtain political employment at the court of some Indian potentate, such as those of whom he had heard Williams and Medwin discourse, he would be an Avatar, and dispense his blessings in the

far regions of the East, instead of casting his poems before the cold, ungrateful West, as "jingling food for the hunger of oblivion." And now, at Lerici, when the balance of the season and of his own destiny seemed to be hanging in suspense, the thought even of suicide was not wholly absent from his mind as a dim possibility of the future; at any rate, it comforted him to feel that he might possess this "golden key to the chamber of perpetual rest."

Yet it must not be supposed that these despondent meditations had made Shelley morbid in his habits or less helpful and kindly to those around him; on the contrary, he impressed those who saw him at this time with the belief that he was now physically and intellectually as strong and healthy as at any other period of his life; and the visits and assistance which he rendered to his poverty stricken neighbours in the cottages near the Casa Magni were long gratefully remembered. The gentleness and benevolence of this supposed enemy of mankind were still written very legibly in his features. "If he is not pure and good," said a lady who had met him at Pisa, "then there is no truth and goodness in this world;" and even a hostile reviewer in a London periodical was fain to admit that it was "not in his outer semblance, but in his inner man, that the explicit demon was seen." To his intimate friends no traces of this "explicit demon" were discoverable; but they did feel that there was something in Shelley's nature too subtle and spiritual to be gauged by the ordinary estimate of humanity; and their feelings found expression in such nicknames as "Ariel"

and "The Snake," as he came and went like a spirit, with glittering eyes and noiseless step, an enigma and a mystery even to those who were nearest to him and most dear.

And, indeed, very impressive was the figure of this young man of twenty-nine, who was commonly regarded by those who knew him only through hearsay as a monster of wickedness, while those immediately around him were convinced that he was the gentlest and least selfish of men. His bent and emaciated form, his features which betrayed signs of acute mental suffering, and his hair already interspersed with grey, gave him at times the appearance of premature age; yet the spirit of triumphant energy and indomitable youth which had sustained him, and still sustained him, through all his misfortunes, was never wholly absent from his countenance and demeanour. He was still the unwearied student, the eager controversialist, and the enthusiastic votary of liberty of speech and action; yet he was subject now perhaps, more than in his earlier years, to moods of despondency which his friends regarded as "a melancholy too sacred to notice."

Nor was it surprising that he was thus affected; for he had "run the gauntlet," to quote his own words, "through a hellish society of men." The religious, ethical, and political speculations which he had advanced in "Queen Mab," "Laon and Cythna," "Prometheus Unbound," and his other writings, had brought down on him a foul storm of obloquy and misrepresentation; he who above all men was filled with

love, reverence, and natural piety, was branded as a desperate atheist and wanton blasphemer; while the most wild and ludicrous calumnies respecting the conduct of his life were freely circulated and credited.

In 1819 the *Quarterly Review*, in those days the great organ of religious intolerance and social respectability, had published a criticism of "Laon and Cythna," and the writer had not scrupled to lend himself to the basest and most reckless insinuations on Shelley's private character, assuming the tone of one who was behind the scenes on subjects of which it is now evident that he was almost entirely ignorant. "If we might withdraw the veil of private life," so wrote this pious and conscientious moralist, "and tell what we *now* know about him, it would be indeed a disgusting picture that we should exhibit, but it would be an unanswerable comment on our text; it is not easy for those who read only to conceive how much low pride, how much cold selfishness, how much unmanly cruelty are consistent with the laws of this universal and lawless love."

Ridiculous as such assertions as this were seen to be when the true outlines of Shelley's life were published, they constituted at the time a very grave annoyance and danger, since they were widely disseminated and almost universally believed. It is said that Shelley, during his residence in England, contemplated the possibility of being some day condemned to the public pillory; and who can say that in that age of tyrannical prosecutions such a fear was altogether groundless? In Italy he more than once met with

rudeness, or even violent insult, at the hands of his fellow countrymen, whose minds were vehemently prejudiced against him by the reports published in the press. "The calumnies, the sources of which are probably deeper than we perceive, have ultimately for object the depriving us of the means of security and subsistence." So Shelley wrote to Mary from Ravenna in 1821, with reference to the slander of which he and Claire were the victims; and though we must doubt the existence of any concerted and premeditated attack, he had reason for looking with apprehension on his position and prospects.

In the meantime no calmness of sky or sea could allay Mary Shelley's unaccountable but persistent anxiety. "During the whole of our stay at Lerici," so she afterwards wrote, "an intense presentiment of coming evil brooded over my mind, and covered this beautiful place and genial summer with the shadow of coming misery." Constitutionally prone to fits of despondency and dejection, she had meditated long before on the solemn and pathetic subject of the flight of time, how swiftly the future becomes the present, and the present the past, and how in the last moment of life all is found to be but a dream. Her life with Shelley had now extended over almost eight years—years full of strange vicissitudes and mingled happiness and sorrow, but cheered throughout by the sense of the mutual love and respect that existed between them.

For in spite of the natural dissimilarity in character between the most enthusiastic of idealists and one who in manner and sentiment was above all things the

daughter of William Godwin, that calmest and most passionless of philosophers; in spite of Mary's occasional coldness, and her greater regard for conventionalities and the opinion of society, "that mythical monster, Everybody," as Shelley called it; the union of Shelley and Mary had been a true union of hearts. What if this bond, that had survived the shock and strain of so many troubles and calamities, were now about to be severed?

Such was the dim, unformed thought that darkened Mary's mind when, on the 1st of July, Shelley left Lerici in company with Edward Williams, and sailed in the "*Ariel*" to Leghorn in order to greet Leigh Hunt, who had now arrived in Italy.

Very cordial and affectionate was the meeting between the two friends who had not seen each other for more than four years and had much to talk over and communicate. The next few days were spent by Shelley at Pisa, and were devoted chiefly to arranging Leigh Hunt's affairs and negotiating with Byron on his friend's behalf respecting the forthcoming periodical. On the following Sunday, these affairs being settled, Shelley and Leigh Hunt visited the chief buildings of Pisa, among them the cathedral, where, as they listened to the rolling tones of the organ, Shelley warmly assented to Leigh Hunt's remark that the world might yet see a divine religion, of which the principle would be sought not in faith but in love. The same evening he bid farewell to the Hunts, Mrs. Mason, and other friends in Pisa, and returned to Leghorn, in order to sail homewards with Edward Williams on the following day.

It was the early afternoon of Monday, the 8th of July, when the "*Ariel*" sailed out of Leghorn harbour, on its computed journey of seven or eight hours. On the same afternoon the long tension of the oppressive summer weather was relaxed; the sultry spell was at last broken; and the dull, ominous calm of the preceding weeks found voice and spoke its secret in a single burst of sudden and irresistible storm. That night the thunder played loudly along the Italian coast, and the din of winds and waves and rain carried doubt and terror to several anxious English hearts. In the lonely house by the Gulf of Spezzia, two women were eagerly expecting their husbands' return; at Pisa, Mrs. Mason dreamed that Shelley was dead, and awoke weeping bitterly; while at Leghorn, Trelawny was awaiting the dawn with grave anxiety, for the last that had been seen of Shelley's boat was its entry into the dense sea-fog that preceded the rushing tempest.

> The massy earth and spherèd skies are riven:
> I am borne darkly fearfully afar.

So Shelley had written, as if by some prophetic instinct, in the concluding stanza of his "Adonais"; and who shall say that so swift and mysterious a death was not the fittest ending to a life so full of wonder and mystery? His task on earth was now accomplished; his message of love was delivered; and the pure spirit, purged of the last dross of mortality, was summoned

> Back to the burning fountain whence it came.

II.

After ten days of cruel suspense, two bodies were cast up by the sea on the coast between Pisa and Spezzia, and were identified as those of Shelley and Williams. The Italian quarantine laws for the prevention of plague being most strictly enforced, the bodies were at once buried in the sands—in those very sands over which Shelley had but lately ridden in company with Byron and other friends—until arrangements had been made with the authorities at Florence for their disinterment and cremation. This ceremony took place on the 15th and 16th of August, the body of Williams being burned on the former day, and that of Shelley on the latter, in the presence of numerous spectators, among whom were Byron, Trelawny and Leigh Hunt.

It was a scene that impressed itself ineffaceably on the memory of those who witnessed it—the vast expanse of yellow sand, unbroken by sign of human dwelling; the blue and cloudless sky; the sea calm and smiling; the distant outline of marble-crested Appennines; and in the centre of the group of bystanders the fierce flame that rose from the funeral-pile, quivering with extraordinary clearness from the frankincense, oil, and wine that were plentifully poured over it, while close above, in the tremulous and glassy atmosphere, a solitary curlew wheeled and circled with strange pertinacity. "One might have expected," said Leigh Hunt "a sun-bright countenance to look

out of the flame, coming once more before it departed, to thank the friends who had done their duty." There was indeed something in the nature of the wild scene and the pagan ceremony that was appropriate to the obsequies of one who was himself a Greek in his instinctive reverence for the elemental purity of sea and fire.

It was Trelawny who had undertaken and faithfully discharged the duty of conducting the search for the bodies of Shelley and Williams, and of carrying the news to the two widows. It was he too who, at the end of the cremation, snatched Shelley's heart, which remained unconsumed, from the flames, and collected the ashes in a coffer, in order that they might be buried at Rome in the same Protestant burying-place where Shelley's child had been laid, a spot which Shelley had long before described as "the most beautiful and solemn cemetery" he ever beheld. To Leigh Hunt belongs the honour of having suggested the inscription on the tombstone of the words *Cor Cordium* —a perfect tribute of reverence and affection to the memory of that heart of hearts whose overmastering passion, the source of all its strength and all its weakness, had been the love of humankind.

Nor was it only Trelawny and Leigh Hunt who thus gave proof of their affection. A week after the burning of the bodies, the lonely house at Lerici, now unfurnished and deserted by its former inhabitants, was visited by a solitary traveller, who had turned out of his course, as he journeyed from Pisa to Genoa, to perform this last act of melancholy pilgrimage. It

was "poor Tom Medwin," as Shelley had called him, who, poetaster though he was, could yet feel keenly the supreme sadness of gazing on those empty and silent rooms that had so lately been filled with the voices of life and happiness, and of standing on the seaward-facing terrace where Shelley had so often listened with delight to Jane Williams' simple melodies. As he passed through the rude entrance-hall on the ground floor, Medwin noticed oars and fragments of spars lying scattered in confusion, and among them the broken frame of Shelley's favourite skiff, destined never again to find so venturesome a pilot.

And where meantime was the "*Ariel*" herself? She was discovered by some sailors, employed by Trelawny for that purpose, sunk in ten or fifteen fathoms of water, about two miles off the coast, and being raised in the following September, was found to have her gunwale stove in, as if she had been run down by an Italian felucca during the squall; whence arose the suspicion, which has never been satisfactorily proved or disproved, that there was an intent to plunder the vessel of some money which was known to be on board. Having been repaired and rigged afresh, the "*Ariel*" was again sent to sea, but she proved unseaworthy and a second time suffered shipwreck. "Her shattered planks," wrote Mrs. Shelley in 1839, "now lie rotting on the shore of one of the Ionian islands on which she was wrecked." Strange that the "*Ariel's*" existence should have ended on one of these very Greek islands to which Shelley's fancy had so often been attracted

as a possible home and place of refuge from the calamities that beset him!

For a year after her husband's death, Mary Shelley remained in Italy, unable to tear herself away from the land of their adoption, in spite of the many painful memories it awakened. In all the records of fact and fiction it would be difficult to find anything more truly pathetic and heart-rending than the published extracts from the journal she kept during those first dreary months of bereavement and solitude. The thought and image of Shelley were ever present to her mind; now it was the tone of Byron's voice that, by sheer force of old association, would make her listen for *that other* voice which, when Byron spoke, had ever been wont to reply; now, as she mused and read in a fit of deep abstraction, it was Shelley himself who seemed to call her, as a sudden voice cried "Mary!" The sense of utter loneliness was only relieved by the confident hopes of rejoining, in another existence, that swift and gentle soul, who, in this earthly prison-house, had been like a caged spirit, "an elemental being, enshrined in a frail image." But this desire for death was not yet to be gratified; there was first a long course of widowhood to be encountered and lived through, her aged father to be cheered and tended, her child to be educated, and most sacred charge of all, her husband's writings to be collected and given to the world.*

* It would be easy to dwell on the commonplaceness of Mary Shelley's life and character when disunited from

Meanwhile, in stolid contrast to these shifting scenes of life and death, grief and pleasure, rapturous aspiration and heaviest dejection, Sir Timothy Shelley, now an old man of seventy years of age, still lived on as stern and unyielding as ever. Nothing to him were the strangest events of that strange drama of a lifetime, that "miracle of thirty years," of which the secret and motive power were love; Field Place still remained as it had been when its doors were first closed against the youthful offender, who, by his reprehensible thirst for knowledge, had incurred the anger of learned men entrusted with his religious and intellectual education. Eleven years had now passed since Sir Timothy, writing to the father of Shelley's college friend and fellow-culprit, had insisted on the necessity of keeping "my young man and your young man" apart. And now this "young man" had run a desperate and erratic career, in which a few misguided people affected to see a subject for interest and approval, but which had brought down on him the unsparing condemnation of the Lord Chancellor, the *Quarterly Review*, and all that England possessed of wealth, religion and respectability.

The dishonour to Field Place was deep and indelible; there was one thing, however, which was still within Sir Timothy's power, as it was clearly his duty, to contrive. He could take advantage of his control of the

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Shelley's. I prefer not to do so. If she became too "respectable" in her later years, let us remember that she had suffered what might have broken a far stronger spirit than hers.

purse to forbid his son's widow writing a life of the poet, and thus further disgracing the Shelley family by the publication of deeds which it was far wiser to consign to a charitable forgetfulness. Moreover, that an innocent child might not suffer for the offences of guilty parents, Sir Timothy offered to undertake the maintenance of his infant grandson, on condition that he was wholly taken from his mother's charge; but this offer, it is needless to say, was refused by Mary Shelley. "Why, I live only to keep him from their hands," was the entry in her journal.

So Sir Timothy Shelley, by no means breathing reconciliation, lived on till he had completed his ninetieth year, a life three times the length of that of his unnatural son; and when he died, no "*Cor Cordium*," but a flattering inscription of the conventional kind, was set up to blazon his virtues on the walls of Horsham Church. It may be, however, that those who thoughtfully ponder the contrast between these two lives, and the lessons conveyed by each, will see in the contrast a striking instance of the truth of an old poet's words:

> "Circles are praised, not that abound
> In largeness, but the exactly round;
> So life we praise that does excel
> Not in much time, but living well."

III.

Shelley himself, as I have already said, must be regarded as a representative of the future and nobler

social state, a prophet and forerunner of the higher intellectual development, a soul sent on earth before its due season by some strange freak, or rather let us say by some benignant disposition of destiny. The religion which he preached, with love for its faith, and natural piety towards all living things for its commandment, has this supreme advantage over the creed of the theologian, that it can look with confidence instead of suspicion, on the advance of science, and find a friend instead of an enemy in time.

But this religion, being a religion of the future, is for that very reason meaningless and unacceptable to those who by sentiment or circumstance are upholders of the present system, that is to say, the great bulk of society. Many people are naturally incapable of sympathizing with Shelley's creed, perceiving in it nothing but a cold and brilliant display of intellectual subtleties; while others are roused to positive hatred by his revolutionary and aggressive attitude. All this is natural and inevitable enough; for, since the prophet is proverbially without honour among the mass of his own generation, it was not to be expected that the full significance of Shelley's career should be appreciated by that very society whose displacement he heralded. Shelley's good fame, both as regards the rightness of his personal conduct and the soundness of his views, can afford to wait, till the new wave of social evolution has swept away the present barriers of prejudice and intolerance.

In the meanwhile, he will not be unhonoured of the discerning few, who, reading the signs of the time, can already perceive that the great social and ethical ques-

tions, which are gradually being recognised as of primary importance to the welfare of the community, are precisely those on which he instinctively fixed his attention. It is for this reason, and not only because he is our greatest lyric poet, that Shelley's life and doctrines are deserving of more general study than is at present accorded them; and those who love and admire him are not likely to be affected by the idle taunt, so often levelled at them by their opponents, that they are attributing an absurd "infallibility" to his opinions, and an absurd "perfection" to his character. Shelley, the votary of liberty and free-thought, who in spite of his wide reading was so entirely devoid of the academic spirit, was the last person who would have wished to found a "school," or be regarded as a "master"; and the respect that is now felt for his writings is not based on any superstitious or sentimental reverence for the *ipse dixit* of the poet, but simply on the fact that his opinions are being more and more corroborated by experience and time.

In the same way not even the most uncompromising admirers of Shelley's character and conduct need be suspected of the intent to endow him with an unnatural and impossible perfection, merely because they decline to subscribe to that modern fear of hero-worship which makes most of our critics, disbelieving in the existence of any truly heroic figure in this age of mediocrity, so careful to mete out praise and blame in nicely balanced portions, like a grocer dealing out his wares in a succession of sweets and acids. However justifiable our dread of mere sentimental eulogy, we may surely

venture to speak generously and unreservedly in our praise of a man whose great primary qualities of unworldliness and sincerity drew unstinted tributes of admiration from those who knew him personally, even when they chanced to be cynical lawyers, satirical novelists, bluff sailors, retired cavalry officers, or misanthropic poets.

Such homage paid to such a character does not imply that we are blind to the many foibles, eccentricities, and minor blemishes by which even the noblest nature may be crossed and chequered, and from which Shelley was certainly not exempt. We are well aware that his life, except in its one dominant feature, was a strange mixture of contrary tendencies and varying moods. He was hopeful and despondent; strong and weak; graceful and awkward; frugal and lavish; serious and playful; wise and whimsical; forbearing and charitable to a singular degree in his intercourse with friend or foe, yet on rare occasions hasty and unjust in his judgments; by habit candid and trustworthy, yet sometimes led on by a predilection for mystery, and by an extreme dislike of causing pain or disappointment, to be evasive and circuitous in his dealings. But while he was thus, to some extent, the creature of conflicting moods and circumstances, "chased by the spirit of his destiny," as he himself expressed it, "from purpose to purpose, like clouds by the wind," it is important to remember that these contradictions and weaknesses lay on the surface of his nature, and not at its core; for his character in all vital and essential points was strikingly firm and consistent, his innate and solid

virtues standing him in good stead at all the great and fateful crises of his mature life.

Few lives have been subjected to such a searching scrutiny as that which Shelley's has undergone, and still fewer have come forth from the ordeal so nearly unscathed. But, as I have insisted all along, his actions must, in common honesty, be interpreted by his own standard of morality, and not by that which it was his special object to discredit and overthrow. This is the only key to a right understanding of his career, and if this rational principle be adopted, it will be found to explain much that has hitherto seemed unaccountable. Difficulties there must always be in estimating so subtle and complex a character; but whatever mystery may still hang over certain isolated episodes, the general effect and leading purpose of Shelley's life will be seen to be singularly harmonious and clear.

CHAPTER VIII.

The Poet.

I.

IF it were true, as we are often assured, that literary criticism is a "science," and if its professors cherished, as their position requires that they should cherish, a sense of historical continuity and editorial succession, one might think that the Shelley centenary of 1892 should have been observed by the recognised guardians of our literature as a season of self-abasement and mortification, in atonement for the monstrous blunders of their intellectual forefathers. For it ought not to be forgotten, in view of the general acceptance of Shelley by present day critics as a great master of song, that this conclusion, so far from being naturally and spontaneously arrived at, was forced on the literary profession by a long and bitter controversy. Seventy years ago it was the almost unanimous opinion of the most eminent and respected *litterateurs*—the Gosses and Andrew Langs and Leslie Stephens of their time—that Shelley was a wretched poetaster of the most worthless kind.* The

* There were, however, a few exceptions to this judgment. "The disappearance of Shelley from the world," wrote Beddoes in 1824, "seems, like the tropical setting of that

two fatal defects pointed out in his writings by the *Quarterly Review* of 1821, were the want of music and the want of meaning, *i.e.* the want of everything that goes to the making of genuine poetry.

"The rhythm of the verse is often harsh and unmusical," was the first complaint of the reviewer; and he proceeded to insist that "the predominating character of Mr. Shelley's poetry is its frequent and total want of meaning." Among instances adduced of this fault were "something that is done by a Cloud," reference being made to the last and most beautiful stanza of the lyric of that name; the "debut of the Spirit of the Earth," in act 3 of "Prometheus Unbound"; the comparison of a poet to a chameleon, which was shewn to have "no more meaning than the jingling of the bells on a fool's cap, and far less music"; and the stanza of the "Sensitive Plant" concerning "the hyacinth purple and white and blue," which was held up to special ridicule. "In short," said the reviewer, summing up the qualities of the most splendid volume of lyrics that Shelley ever published, "it is not too much to affirm, that in the whole volume there is not one original image of nature, one simple expression of human feeling, or

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luminary to which his poetical genius can alone be compared, with reference to the companions of his day, to have been followed by instant darkness and owl-season." Shelley's high poetical gift was freely recognised by Macaulay and a small but brilliant circle of Cambridge students. Moultrie's poem "The Witch of the North," 1824, contains passages which are direct imitations of Shelley's "Witch of Atlas."

one new association of the appearances of the moral with those of the material world," the sole merit that could be allowed the poet being "considerable mental activity." In conclusion, this truly representative critic, chuckling at his own humour, quoted the final passage of Act 3 of "Prometheus Unbound," printing it like prose in continuous sentences, and then gaily informed his readers that it was meant by its author for verse, "since Mr. Shelley's poetry is, in sober sadness, *drivelling prose run mad.*"

This is a fair sample of the sort of appreciation awarded to Shelley by contemporary reviewers, who, as one of their lineal successors has lately pointed out, were nothing worse than "very respectable and rather narrow-minded English gentlemen, devoted to the poetry of Shenstone" * But forty years later a great change had come over the critical verdict, and the *Quarterly Review* was affected by it. The lyrics of "Prometheus Unbound," which in 1821 had less music than the bells of a fool's cap, were praised by the reviewer of 1861 as "moving and exquisite poetry," while the drama as a whole was spoken of as "a grand conception" and a "great work." Twenty-six years more, and the conversion of the *Quarterly* was complete. The reviewer of 1887 found he had no course open to him but to follow still further the path on which his forerunner had entered, and to entirely disavow the earlier critic who had sought to destroy Shelley's poetical reputation. The "drivelling prose run mad" is now

* Mr. Edmund Gosse's Shelley-Centenary Address.

transfigured into "the statuesqueand radiant beauty" of "Prometheus Unbound," which drama is further described as "a dizzy summit of lyric inspiration, where no foot but Shelley's ever trod before." Even the "Cloud," whose metamorphoses so severely puzzled the wiseacre of 1821, is declared to be inspired by "the essential spirit of classic poets"; and we learn with a satisfaction enhanced by the source of the confession that "there are but two or three poets at the most, whom literature could less afford to lose than this solitary master of ethereal verse." After such praise from such a quarter, the question of Shelley's poetical genius may well be considered to be settled.

Truly in this case time has proved to be a signal avenger, since less than a century has witnessed the ignominious reversal of the most approved critical judgments! The *Quarterly Review* claimed to be able to instruct the general public on points of literary taste; and we have seen that in its estimate of Shelley's poems it has been compelled entirely to recant its earlier opinions. The attempt now made to excuse the former unjust depreciation of Shelley's literary genius, because of his social heresies, is singularly feeble; for though an ordinary reader might be pardoned for not discovering the poetical value of writings which for other reasons he disliked, this could be no valid excuse for the blindness of a professed reviewer, whose special duty it was to separate the good from the bad. Yet we find the latest *Quarterly* reviewer complacently remarking that "the attitude in which Shelley stands towards the past, the present, and the future, explains

the unreasoning neglect of his poetic genius during his life."

True, it explains; but it is very far from being a justification. On the contrary it suggests the remark that the highest literary verdicts, on any new and original poetry, are almost invariably wrong. This may seem a hard saying, but facts show it to be a just one, nor is the reason far to seek. For as each age has its own ideal of what is "correct" in literature, so has it a body of cultured and accomplished critics—on their own lines, and within their own limits, the "best judges" of their generation—who apply the standard of the current ideal to every literary production. In a large number of instances, to wit in every case where the subject of the criticism is an attempt to conform to the ideal of the day, the judgment may be a sound one; but the moment a great original writer appears on the scene, with new ideas, new faith, new art, and new manner of expression, the old standard of criticism becomes hopelessly irrelevant and inapplicable. None the less it is so applied, with great confidence and dignity, by its accredited professors, and the result, though in fact a quite ludicrous fiasco, is respectfully received by the public. Hence the pompous balderdash that was written about Shelley by his contemporary critics whose successors now smilingly refer to the blunders of seventy years ago, serenely unconscious that they are themselves writing similar balderdash in a new direction—let us say about Whitman or Ibsen.

Every literary period has its Pope or its Tennyson, a great master of some fashionable contemporary style,

which is powerful enough to afford a model and standard for the critics to work with, but not so uncomfortably powerful as to raise the bogey of "social ideas," or to put any severe strain on the intellectual capacity of its worshippers. The Pope of Shelley's period was none other than Thomas Campbell, the best of good fellows and the pleasantest of second-rate poets, who, from the publication of "Gertrude of Wyoming" in 1809 to his death in 1844, was regarded in literary circles and by the general public as the greatest English poet of the nineteenth century, with the possible exception of Lord Byron. "You did not do all this to Burns," wrote Campbell (who, to do him justice, was more aware of the absurdity of his position than some of our other Popes have been), "you neglected *him*, a real genius, a wonder; and you bestow all this on me, who am nothing, compared to him." This is exactly what our eminent critics are doing, and cannot help doing, in each era of literature; they neglect the vital genius, and reverence the respectable figure-head.

It was therefore perfectly inevitable, and in that sense, perfectly satisfactory, that Shelley's poetical pretensions should be ridiculed by a generation which detested Wordsworth, and never discovered Blake, and in so far as it recognised the greatness of Lord Byron, was attracted by his most superficial qualities rather than his most enduring ones—by his sentimentalism and egoism and misanthropy, rather than by his scathing hatred of hypocrisy and oppression. It was equally inevitable as years went on, and the new literary and social ideals began to assert themselves, that a new

criterion of poetry should mould itself on those forms, and the old anti-Shelleyan verdicts should be gradually rescinded. All this, I say, is satisfactory enough; but when we hear some cultured professor of the present time enlarging on Shelley's proud position among the poets (and perhaps in the same breath denouncing his religious and social views as visionary or immoral), be it remembered that such partial acceptance of Shelley is based on no real insight or genuine appreciation, but is merely a testimony that a great poetical genius has triumphed over a hostile criticism, and that the very persons who, like their forefathers, would have condemned him, seventy years ago, as a meaningless poetaster, are now content to sing his praises as a great lyrical poet.

II.

How deeply rooted is the dislike which the literary profession has at heart felt for Shelley, though now constrained by force of circumstances to yield him effusive lip-homage, is shown by the remarkable utterances of Mr. Matthew Arnold, a critic whose privileged position and dogmatic temperament impelled him at times to give free vent to opinions which his faithful henchmen of the press have found to be a rather embarrassing legacy. The *Saturday Review*, for example, has surmised that "when Mr. Arnold spoke as if Shelley's prose might survive his poetry, we may presume that this was merely his fun, though the humour be rather

subterranean."* There is not, of course, the very slightest ground for such a presumption; for Arnold, in his refusal to accept Shelley as a great poet, was not only unmistakably in earnest, but was courageously reverting to a critical judgment which is far more in accord with the *real* sentiments of the cultured classes than the vapid eulogies of which Shelley is now-a-day the recipient. Mr. Arnold could see nothing in Shelley's poetry, and Mr. Arnold is the reputed master-critic, the Superior Person *par excellence*, of modern English literature—that is a fact which ought not to be lightly evaded by those whom it concerns, and I therefore offer no apology for enforcing it at some length.

Shelley is the typical revolutionary poet of the nineteenth century; Arnold the typical *litterateur*. Therefore it is that Arnold's stubborn inability to see what far less clever men had everywhere recognised, and the smug satisfaction with which he launched his fatuous criticism, have a general no less than personal significance, and may serve to explain a good many academic misunderstandings of the ideals of democracy and freedom.

That Matthew Arnold, excellent critic though he was in a large number of instances, should have entirely failed to comprehend the spirit which animated Shelley's poetry, is no cause for surprise, since the poet and the critic were representatives of two strikingly diverse types of character, and it would be difficult to find a personality more unlike Shelley than

* Sept. 14th, 1889.

Arnold's, or an ethical system more remote from the Shelleyan religion of Nature than the "Culture" on which Arnold laid such stress. This contrast is the more piquant, because the ultimate aims of the two men were by no means dissimilar, their wide diversity of temperament appearing rather in the application of their principles than in the principles themselves. Shelley might have heartily concurred in Arnold's admirably clear-sighted description of the condition of society: "We have an upper class materialised, a middle class vulgarised, a lower class brutalised; and this we owe to our inequality." "The men of culture," says Arnold, "are the true apostles of equality;" and culture, as defined by him to be "a study of perfection," which is not merely intellectual, but includes "the noble aspiration to leave the world better and happier than we found it," seems, in theory at any rate, to have much in common with Shelley's benevolent unselfishness and "passion for reforming the world." But with the definition of general principles the resemblance ceases, and the moment an approach is made to the practical question of procedure the vital difference between Shelley's "Nature" and Arnold's "Culture" is brought into strong relief. The one relies on natural instincts, the other on authority and tradition; the one inculcates action, the other thought; the one extols humaneness, the other humanism; the one enlarges on the superiority of freedom to tyranny, the other on the horrors of anarchy as compared with the blessings of "order;" the one goes heart and soul with the cause of the

people, the other is possessed by a constant fear of being "vulgarised" by contact with "Philistine" or "Populace."

It is, however, in their respective treatment of our national deity, "Mrs. Grundy," that the contrast between Shelley and his critic may be most profitably noted. Both were in theory sworn enemies of that inveterate "lack of ideas" of which Mrs Grundy is the personification, and both came into some sort of collision with this great fetish of orthodox and respectable society. But how different their modes of warfare, and how significant the discrimination shown by Mrs. Grundy in the measure of her retribution! On Shelley, who, with enthusiasm of passionate conviction, attacked custom and prejudice with considerably more zeal than discretion, she has not yet ceased to pour the vials of her wrath; whereas the champion of Culture not only consented to make peace with his irascible opponent, but even to receive comfort and favour from her hand. The maternal anxiety of Mrs. Grundy, when she saw so brilliant a protégé as Arnold straying to the edge of the precipice of unconventionality, and the pathetic device by which she secured his reclamation, may be illustrated by some lines of Rogers':—

> While on the cliff with calm delight she kneels,
> And the blue vales a thousand joys recall,
> See, to the last, last verge her infant steals!
> O fly—yet stir not, speak not, lest it fall.
> Far better taught, she lays her bosom bare,
> And the fond boy springs back to nestle there.

For the above-mentioned reasons, Matthew Arnold was, perhaps, better qualified than any other distinguished man of his time (not even Charles Kingsley being excepted), for the complete misunderstanding of the author of "Laon and Cythna" and "Prometheus Unbound," and, accordingly, with that fatuity which is usual in such cases, he was firmly convinced that Shelley, who, as he truly remarks, was "so mere a monster unto many," was to *him* as clear and intelligible as the daylight. In his preface to the select *Poetry of Byron* (1881) he states his reasons for the low estimate which he formed of the value of Shelley's poetical writings. "All the personal charm of Shelley annot hinder us from at last discovering in his poetry the incurable want, in general, of a sound subject-matter and the incurable fault, in consequence, of unsubstantiality. . . Except for a few short things and single stanzas, his original poetry is less satisfactory than his translations, for in these the subject-matter was found for him. Nay, I doubt whether his delightful essays and letters, which deserve to be far more read than they are now, will not resist the wear and tear of time better, and finally come to stand higher than his poetry."

A school usher, writing his periodic report of the progress of a fourth-form boy of moderate ability, could not possibly have delivered his professional dictum with more imperturable assurance. Not for one single moment does the thought occur to the serene mind of the critic, that in expressing his dissatisfaction with Shelley's "original poetry"—that is to say,

with "Prometheus Unbound," and "The Cenci," and "Adonais," and the "Ode to Liberty," and a host of other poems, long and short, of equal literary merit—he may possibly be chronicling his own deficiencies rather than those of the poet; or that, in lamenting Shelley's want of a sound "subject-matter," he may be merely giving an additional proof of his own total lack of sympathy with the great revolutionary movement of the past century. That the "subject-matter" of Shelley's poems should be exceedingly distasteful to many readers is, by the very nature of the case, inevitable; but to accuse a writer of "unsubstantiality," because one happens to dislike or to misunderstand the substance of his teaching, is scarcely characteristic of a wise reviewer. When Matthew Arnold describes Shelley as being "so incoherent," the sense of humour on which he prided himself must have been temporarily dormant; else surely he would have remembered that suggestive story of the unreasonable Scotchman, who, having borrowed *Bailey's Dictionary* from a neighbour, returned it with the remark: "I have read it all through, but canna say that I understand it; it is the most confused book I ever saw in my life."

Matthew Arnold's contention that Byron and Wordsworth are the only poets of the earlier part of the century who can furnish sufficient first-class material for a volume of selections (these being the two poets whom he himself edited in this way) is characteristic but by no means convincing. In laying stress on Shelley's statement of his own sense of inferiority to Lord Byron, the critic is on very unsafe ground, for

Shelley's modesty was always conspicuously in excess of his judgment on such personal matters, and he even expressed himself "proud to acknowledge" his inferiority to Tom Moore! Moreover, it should be remembered that while Shelley confessed that he "despaired of rivalling" Byron, the elder poet, on his part, made the significant remark (already quoted) that "if people only appreciated Shelley, where should I be?" an utterance to which no allusion is vouchsafed by Matthew Arnold in the passage in question. It would, however, be extremely rash and uncritical to attribute much weight to the remarks made by the one poet or the other in these amenities of social intercourse, for the best criterion of the relative value of the poetry of Byron and Shelley lies in the fact, studiously ignored by Arnold, that whereas Byron's poems, starting with all the advantages of an unparalleled notoriety, have steadily declined in popular estimation, Shelley on the other hand, has risen through every sort of depreciation and abuse, until he has taken his place among the great poets of English literature.

The publication of Dowden's "Life of Shelley" brought Matthew Arnold into the field with an essay of some length, from which it appeared that the "ineffectual angel" had been dearer to the heart of his critic than could have been supposed from the tone of his previous utterances; for he now avowed a strong affection for the first collected edition of the poems published by Mrs. Shelley in 1839. "The charm of the poems," he wrote, "flowed in upon us from that edition, and the charm of the character"; whereas the later

editions of Rossetti and Forman were dismissed with the remark that "the text of the poems has in some places been mended since, but Shelley is not a classic, whose various readings are to be noted with earnest attention." He expressed regret that the biography should ever have been given to the world, on the ground that the new and fuller information had destroyed the ideal charm of the earlier picture *—a picture which would never again have "the same pureness and beauty which it had formerly," but at the same time he cherished the consolatory hope that the ideal Shelley did still, in some measure, "subsist." And, as Mr. Pecksniff, when "deceived in the tenderest point, cruelly deceived in that quarter in which he had placed the most unbounded confidence," determined, nevertheless, to discharge the duty which he owed to society by an unsparing denunciation of the offender, so did Matthew Arnold propose "to mark firmly what is ridiculous and odious in the Shelley brought to our knowledge by the new materials." "I will not say," cried Mr. Pecksniff, in words which precisely anticipated the tone of Mr. Arnold's remarks, "what a blow this is. I do not care for that; I can endure as well as another man. But what I have to hope is that this deception may not alter my ideas of humanity, that it may not impair my freshness, or contract, if I may use the expression, my Pinions. I hope it will not; I don't think it will."

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* A common practice of critics—to depreciate the new by discovering a sudden admiration for the old!

"What a set! What a world! is the exclamation that breaks from us," wrote Matthew Arnold, "as we come to an end of this history of the occurrences of Shelley's private life. I used the French word *bête* for a letter of Shelley's; for the world in which we find him I can only use another French word, *sale*"; and he proceeds with unaffected horror and consternation to remark on the vulgarities for which Godwin, Mrs. Godwin, Hogg, Hunt, Sir Timothy Shelley, and Lord Byron were severally responsible, once more indulging in the heartfelt exclamation—"What a set!" The bitterest enemies of "Culture" could hardly have hoped to see it displayed to greater disadvantage than in this deplorable attitude of Pharisaic superiority, like the Lamb in Blake's poem—

> "Wiping his mild and meekin mouth from all contagious taint,"—

"What a set! What a world!" In this characteristic exclamation we have an insight into the essential weakness of Arnold's philosophy—that priggish superciliousness and prim sense of respectability from which Shelley was so absolutely and refreshingly free. It was impossible that such a critic as Arnold could sympathise with such a poet as Shelley, and whatever value attaches to his criticism is therefore almost entirely of the subjective kind. As a piece of self-revelation, exposing with unusual and unintended frankness the limitations of his own sympathies as a typical man of letters, his remarks on Shelley are at once interesting and suggestive. It

would be well if other academic gentlemen would take note.

Says Culture, shaking slow its head,
And sniffing high with smug propriety,
"Poor Shelley! what a life he led,
And moved in what a *sale* society!"
Take comfort, Culture. Hard his fate,
And yet perchance he 'scaped a worse one:
He felt the bigot's vulgar hate—
But knew not the Superior Person.

III.

I have advisedly headed this chapter "The Poet," because, though I do not intend to compose an elaborate essay on Shelley's poetical qualities, that service having already been amply performed by other writers, I wish to guard myself against the absurd charge which is often brought against those who lay stress on the importance of the Shelleyan principles—that, in their zeal to represent the poet as a revolutionary propagandist, they are depreciating the imaginative element which is the true glory of his genius. It is amusing to find that the very persons who have blamed Shelley for "incoherence" are the first to resent an exposition of the clear message that runs through the whole body of his writings, on the plea that the ethereal sublimities of the lyrist would be wronged by any mundane association with the mere philosopher or politician! Now, of course, a genuine liking for lyric poetry is a gift that is innate in a man, and cannot be

acquired by study—it is either there or not there, from the beginning, and it is either there or not there, to the end ; so that there are doubtless many students of Shelley, among all classes of his readers, whether revolutionists or conservatives, who miss much of what is most subtle and impalpable in his verse. But I will assert that where this lyrical sense is present, the man who understands Shelley as a pioneer will understand him the better, not the worse, as a poet. The reader who most fully sympathises with the ideas that underlie the polemical rhetoric of "Queen Mab," will also most fully sympathise with the soaring raptures of "Prometheus Unbound."

No whole-hearted admirer of Shelley would ever question that it is as Poet that he holds the surest claim to immortality. His poetry was the supreme expression, the crowning flower, of a singularly beautiful temperament, and the unspeakable magic of his verse will doubtless outlast even the far fulfilment of the prophecies which that verse conveys. By none will this truth be more freely recognised than by those who, like myself, are thorough believers in the essential rightness of his principles; for assuredly we love his poems with a love exceeding that of any intellectual creed. To us there has been a joy unfailing in each well-remembered cadence—in the lines that haunt the memory like the notes of aerial music—in the words that appear, as has been well said of them, "to throb with living lustres"; to us one single spirit-song from amid the tumultuous harmonies of his lyrical masterpiece, is more precious than all the "systems" that

the mind of democrat can devise. And if we do not *talk*, as the *litterateurs* do, about such poetical achievements, it is because there are some feelings which are more appropriately expressed by silence than by words.

Life of Life! thy lips enkindle
With their love the breath between them;
And thy smiles before they dwindle
Make the cold air fire; then screen them
In those looks, where whoso gazes
Faints, entangled in their mazes.

Child of Light! thy limbs are burning
Thro' the vest which seems to hide them,
As the radiant lines of morning
Thro' the clouds ere they divide them:
And this atmosphere divinest
Shrouds thee wheresoe'er thou shinest.

Fair are others; none beholds thee,
But thy voice sounds low and tender
Like the fairest, for it folds thee
From the sight, that liquid splendour,
And all feel, yet see thee never,
As I feel now, lost for ever!

Lamp of Earth! where'er thou movest
Its dim shapes are clad with brightness,
And the souls of whom thou lovest
Walk upon the winds with lightness,
Till they fail, as I am failing,
Dizzy, lost, yet unbewailing.

But though Shelley's spirituality of imagination was the supreme element of his genius, let us not forget

that it was but a part, though the most glorious part, of his whole mental condition. There is no more disastrous error than to suppose that a good poet can be a bad thinker. It is as impossible for a lofty imagination to be independent of a sound intellectual basis, as for a rose tree to have blossom without root; and if Shelley's ideals had been the pernicious nonsense which contemporary moralists imagined, his poetry must perforce have been nonsensical also. Right thought, true feeling, must underlie the most ethereal structures of the fancy; though of course there need be no didactic or obstrusive expression of what can best be indirectly conveyed. The modern academic theory —sedulously fostered by men who, with regard to all the vital issues of the age, live in a fools' paradise of indifference—the theory that great literature must be kept "pure" of all association with ethics or religion, is one which found no favour with Shelley. From his "Defence of Poetry" I take the following characteristic passage on the poetical function.

But poets, or those who imagine and express this indestructible order, are not only authors of language and of music, of the dance, and architecture, and statuary, and painting; they are the institutors of laws and the founders of civil society, and the inventors of the arts of life, and the teachers who draw into a certain propinquity with the beautiful and the true that partial apprehension of the agencies of the invisible world which is called religion. Poets, according to the circumstances of the age and nation in which they appeared, were called, in the earlier epochs of the world, legislators or prophets: a poet essentially comprises and unites both these characters. For he not only

beholds intensely the present as it is, and discovers those laws according to which present things ought to be ordered, but he beholds the future in the present, and his thoughts are the germs of the flower and the fruit of latest time.

The last sentence in the above passage is an exact description of Shelley's own work as poet. And for this reason those readers who would understand the full significance of his poetry—even in such nominally technical matters as rhythm and rhyme—must also understand the great ideas by which all his poetry is inspired. To assert that a sympathy with Shelley the pioneer is an obstacle to a right appreciation of Shelley the poet, is the *ne-plus-ultra* of critical ineptitude.

If we seek for a terse and comprehensive title for Shelley's poetical contribution to the literature and thought of his age, we shall call it the Poetry of Love. It is not merely that Shelley was animated and heartened by this spirit of love. His language everywhere *speaks* love; and it is this that gives his style that distinctive tone of passionate tenderness which his predecessors had never imagined and his followers have never been able to repeat. The correspondence between language and character was perfect in Shelley; and it was inevitable that both should be misapprehended by contemporary readers. "I know not the internal constitution of other men," he wrote in his essay "On Love." "I see that in some external attributes they resemble me, but when, misled by that appearance, I have thought to appeal to something in common, and unburthen my inmost soul to them, I have found my language misunderstood, like one in a

distant and savage land." And elsewhere, "Even in modern times, no living poet ever arrived at the fulness of his fame; the jury which sits in judgment upon a poet, belonging as he does to all time, must be composed of his peers: it must be impannelled by Time from the selectest of the wise of many generations."

As we have seen, this posthumous recognition of Shelley's greatness as a poet has gone on apace, and his influence on succeeding literature, though he did not, like Wordsworth, leave a direct school of followers, has indirectly been very great. His triumph over the banded tyranny of orthodox reviewers has been unmistakable and complete, and above all other writers he has shown how absolutely the true singer can transcend what Macaulay termed "the irrational laws which bad critics have framed for the government of poets." So exemplary an overthrow of an all-powerful dogmatism could not fail to have important consequences; and it is no exaggeration to say that all later English poetry is largely indebted to Shelley for greater spirituality of thought, richer melody of tone, and fuller freedom of utterance. In an age of literary decadence, his star at least has suffered no obscurity or eclipse.

I say an age of decadence, because (though I know this opinion will be scouted in literary circles) I believe there has been no upward progress in English poetry since the culmination of a great epoch at the end of the first quarter of the century. The fervid revolutionary era in which Shelley lived brought with it a corresponding enthusiasm of song. In Shelley's own words, "The most unfailing herald, companion, and

follower of the awakening of a great people to work a beneficial change in opinion or institution, is poetry. At such periods there is an accumulation of the power of communicating and receiving intense and impassioned conceptions respecting man and nature. It is impossible to read the compositions of the most celebrated writers of the present day without being startled by the electric life which burns within their words." By the year 1825, or thereabouts, this "electric life," which was most conspicuously manifested in the poetry of Wordsworth, Shelley, and Byron, had spent its strength and brilliancy. The vanguard of social and political idealists, who in the early years of the century were traversing a mountain height of sanguine speculation, and thence eagerly scanning the remoter vistas of the future, had now to descend into an intervening valley of temporary failure and disappointment, a humbler but not less necessary period of toilsome effort and reconstruction. In such a period there could be no great poetical outburst as in the time of the Revolution.

For the past seventy years English poetry has thus been thrown back, as it were, on itself; and has been busied rather in perfecting and polishing the standard set by the great masters of 1775-1825 than in originating any new conception of its own. The age of Tennyson stands to the age of Burns and Wordsworth and Shelley, as did that of Theocritus to the great singers of Greece; it is an aftermath, of rich fulfilment indeed, and of consummate technical art, but devoid of the energising vitality of a new spirit. Take for

example the relation of Swinburne to Shelley. It is sometimes the fashion to speak of "Shelley's mantle" as having descended on Mr. Swinburne, or even to eulogise the later poet for having carried to a still greater excellence the work which Shelley had begun; and as far as metrical *technique* and exuberance of language are concerned, the truth of the comparison is obvious. But where, in Mr. Swinburne's rhapsodies, however fluent and melodious, is a trace of the *cor cordium*—that divine spirit of Love, which broods like a benediction over Shelley's unrivalled lyrics, and renders them, alike for melody and meaning, the supreme achievement of modern English song?

Indeed the succession to the genius of a great poet lies not in the inheritance of his "mantle"—the outer garb of poetic diction and style—but in the reawakening, under altered circumstances, of the same inner spirit, which can once again move men's hearts to a new faith and enthusiasm. It is to America that we owe the fresh impulse for which our literature has long been in expectation; and it is in Walt Whitman that we find the true successor of Shelley—the originator of a new democratic ideal, and of a new manner of expressing it. That Whitman should have been as little recognised by present-day reviewers as was Shelley by their forerunners, is no cause for surprise, for literary history, like all other history, repeats itself in these matters; but that he should have been ruled out of the company of poets on the ground that poetry must be *metrical* will certainly be remembered among the curiosities of academical criticism. It is worth remark

that Shelley (by the admission of the *Quarterly*, "the unrivalled lord and master of lyric song") himself answered by anticipation this most futile objection. "It is by no means essential," he wrote, "that a poet should accommodate his language to this traditional form [metre], so that the harmony, which is its spirit, be observed. . . . Every great poet must inevitably innovate upon the example of his predecessors in the exact structure of his peculiar versification. The distinction between poets and prose-writers is a vulgar error."

The "vulgar errors" of the learned are powerful and long-lived. But it is of good omen that they have not been able to prevent the gradual recognition of Shelley as poet.

CHAPTER IX.

The Pioneer.

I.

HERE are pioneers and pioneers. *Post hoc ergo propter hoc*, is the least reliable of maxims, for antecedence does not necessarily imply causation, and many of the so-called "forerunners" of great social movements are little more than the spray blown before the wave, or perhaps the mere possessors of a purely fortuitous renown, like that of "Madam Blaize" in Goldsmith's poem:—

> The King himself has followed her,
> When she has walked before.

On the other hand there are the far less numerous instances of men and women who are pioneers in deed as well as in name—whose life and example have a real and direct influence in quickening the march of thought, and in opening out new fields for spiritual and intellectual conquest. In claiming for Shelley the title of pioneer, it is necessary to show that his deliberately adopted principles have in very fact anticipated and influenced the opinions of succeeding generations, and

that so far from being a purblind visionary who occasionally stumbled on a truth, he was a genuine and clear-eyed prophet of religious and political freedom. Let us now proceed to consider his chief principles in detail.

The enormous progress made by free-thought during the seventy years that have passed since Shelley's death would in itself be sufficient refutation, if any were needed, of the assertion that he wrecked his judgment and good fame by his deliberate adoption of "atheistic" principles. He was from first to last an "atheist" in the sense that he denied the existence of the *personal* deity of the theologians; though it is important to note, that as he himself says in the preface to "Laon and Cythna," the object of his attack was the erroneous and degrading idea which men have conceived of a Supreme Being, but not the Supreme Being itself"—it was not the presence, but the absence of spirituality in the established creed that made Shelley an unbeliever.

I regard Shelley's early "atheism" and later "pantheism" as simply the negative and the affirmative sides of the same progressive but unchanging life-creed. In his earlier years, his disposition was towards a vehement denial of a theology which he never ceased to detest; in his maturer years he made more frequent reference to the great World Spirit whom he had from the first believed in. He grew wiser in the exercise of his religious faith, but the faith was the same throughout; there was progression but no essential change.

For holding and publishing these views, he was

ostracised and insulted; and now the same views are held as a matter of couse by a vast number, probably a majority, of earnest and thoughtful men, the only difference being that the colourless title "agnosticism" has been substituted for the more expressive word which Shelley with characteristic ardour "took up and wore as a gauntlet."

It is the habit of Shelley's apologetic admirers to minimise the fact of his departure from the orthodox faith, and to suggest that, had he lived longer, he might even, by some unexplained process of reasoning, have found himself at one with Christianity, perhaps according to Nathaniel Hawthorne's ironical suggestion, to the extent of taking holy orders and being "inducted to a small country living in the gift of the lord chancellor." I believe this notion rests on a serious misconception of Shelley's character and mental abilities. It is the more necessary it should be controverted, since otherwise, having been held and advanced by men who were in the main sincere admirers of Shelley's genius, it is likely to be accepted as an undeniable estimate of what his position would have been had he lived the full term of life; whereas it is really nothing more than a pious supposition in which the wish is obviously father to the thought.*

* The idea originated in a remark made by Coleridge, and was repeated by Gilfillan and other writers. It reached its climax perhaps, in Mr. H. B. Cotterill's "Introduction to the Study of Poetry," 1882, where it is gravely stated that Shelley "saw the beauty of true Christianity, and accepted the gospel of Christ as the one true Gospel."

Frederick Robertson's remark that Shelley knew nothing of Christianity, but as "a system of exclusion and bitterness" was far from correct. It may be that Shelley had not carefully studied the historical development of Christianity; but he was by no means the bigoted opponent for which Robertson mistook him. The Bible was one of the books that were most often in his hands, and his intimate love and knowledge of the Old and New Testaments might have put to shame many of those "religious" persons who regarded him as a scoffing "infidel" But the most important point of all to notice, in the consideration of this question, is that Shelley drew a strong line of distinction between the character of Christ and the character of Christianity; so that those who claim him as a possible convert to Christianity are laying stress on what tells against their own theory, when they point out his affinity to the spirit of Christ.

Shelley's views on this subject may be seen in various passages of his writings, especially in the "Letter to Lord Ellenborough," the "Essay on Christianity," and the "Notes to Hellas." In the last-mentioned work, written in the full maturity of his powers, he thus states his opinion of the contrast between Christ and Christian. "The sublime human character of Jesus Christ was deformed by an imputed identification with a power who tempted, betrayed, and punished the innocent beings who were called into existence by his sole will; and for the period of a thousand years the spirit of this most just, wise and benevolent of men has been propitiated with myriads of hecatombs of

those who approached the nearest to his innocence and wisdom, sacrificed under every aggravation of atrocity and variety of torture." When we are told that Shelley holding these views, would have ultimately embraced the Christian religion because of his sympathy with its founder, we can only reply that such an argument (to quote Shelley's own words) "presupposes that he who rejects Christianity must be utterly divested of reason and feeling."

It may be said that the gospel preached by Shelley was, like that of Christianity, a gospel of love. But here again the distinction between the teaching of Christ and the teaching of his followers is a vital one. And it must be noted that the love which Shelley inculcates is represented by him as resulting from the innate goodness, the natural benevolence of mankind, and not from any sense of religious obligation. Free-thought and liberty are the very basis of the Shelleyan morality, it being Shelley's contention that virtue results from the intuitive desire to promote the happiness of others, and that morality must languish in proportion as freedom of thought and action is withdrawn. Whatever may be the merits or demerits of this code of morals, it can scarcely be held to be compatible with the doctrines of Christianity. If Shelley had been merely sceptical and irreligious, if his character had in the slightest degree resembled that of Byron, there would have been some colour for the notion that he would not have always remained a recusant; but so far was he from being simply an "honest doubter," on the look-out for a religious creed, that he must be regarded

as an enthusiast of the strongest type, with a mission to perform and a message to deliver to the world; above all, with a firm faith in the truth of what he was preaching.*

But the religious question, it may be said, no longer occupies its former dominant position; it is round sociology, no less than theology, that the battle of freedom has now to be fought and won. It is generally recognised that two of the most momentous social problems which will press for solution in the coming century are the condition of the working classes and the emancipation of women; and the supreme proof of the shrewdness of Shelley's instinct is that he, alone among the poets of his era, strongly emphasised these two questions, anticipating in his conclusions the general principles, if not the particular methods, of the policy to which modern reformers incline.

It is true that like Godwin, and indeed like all contemporary thinkers, with the possible exception of Robert Owen, he was unable to grasp the full significance, in its bearing on social questions, of the great industrial development which the introduction of machinery brought about; we cannot expect from Shelley an accurate knowledge of an economic change which in his time could be only very imperfectly understood. But that he had a singularly clear perception of the cardinal fact by which the relations of labour and capital are characterised—the fact that the

* For a full statement of the preceding arguments, I may refer the reader to my article on "Shelley's Religious Opinions," *Progress*, April, 1887, here reprinted in part.

poor workers support the lazy rich, and that industry is taxed for the maintenance of idleness—is obvious from many passages in his writings.

Here for example is a reference to the land-question, which states the case with admirable incisiveness and vigour. "English reformers exclaim against sinecures, but the true pension-list is the rent-roll of the landed proprietors." And again, of the extortions of the fund-holders, those *nouveaux riches* whose heartless vulgarity Shelley more than once condemns: "I put the thing in its simplest and most intelligible shape. The labourer, he that tills the ground and manufactures cloth, is the man who has to provide, out of what he would bring home to his wife and children, for the luxuries and comforts of those whose claims are represented by an annuity of forty-four millions a year levied upon the English nation."

Nor, while thus pointing out the actual dependence of the so-called independent classes, did Shelley evade the consideration that he too, the scion of a wealthy house, was a debtor in like manner; he "shuddered to think" that the roof which covered him and the bed on which he slept were provided from the same source.

We see, therefore, that Shelley was well aware that pauperism is no sporadic, unaccountable phenomenon, but the necessary and logical counterpart of wealth, and that the footsteps of luxury are for ever dogged by the grim nemesis of destitution. Never perhaps has this terrible truth been more powerfully stated than in the description of the court masque in "*Charles the First*":

"Ay, there they are—
Nobles, and sons of nobles, patentees,
Monopolists, and stewards of this poor farm,
On whose lean sheep sit the prophetic crows.
Here is the pomp that strips the houseless orphan,
Here is the pride that breaks the desolate heart.
These are the lilies glorious as Solomon,
Who toil not neither do they spin—unless
It be the webs they catch poor rogues withal.
Here is the surfeit which to them who earn
The niggard wages of the earth, scarce leaves
The tithe that will support them till they crawl
Back to its cold hard bosom. Here is health
Followed by grim disease, glory by shame,
Waste by lank famine, wealth by squalid want,
And England's sin by England's punishment."

The question whether Shelley was, or was not, a "socialist," is one that scarcely admits of any definite conclusion, since there is no universally accepted definition of what socialism means. It may be urged, on the one hand, that he cannot be given a title which did not come into use till some years after his death, and which is now commonly restricted to the acceptance of a purely economic formula of which he knew nothing. Shelley, like Godwin, was a communist rather than socialist; and though he by no means shared Godwin's extreme repugnance to legislative action, he still laid far more stress on moral and intellectual improvement than on the intervention of the State. On the other hand, if the term socialism be interpreted in a wider sense, it may fairly be made to include such a pioneer as Shelley, who was certainly a socialist in spirit, if not in the letter.

An interesting saying of Karl Marx's—true of Shelley, though, I think, unjust to Byron—has been recorded in this connection. "The real difference between Byron and Shelley is this: Those who understand them and love them rejoice that Byron died at thirty-six, because if he had lived he would have become a reactionary bourgeois; they grieve that Shelley died at twenty-nine, because he was essentially a revolutionist, and he would always have been one of the advanced guard of socialism."*

Shelley's views on the sex question are too well known to need more than a brief reference; it is sufficient for my purpose to point out that they are practically identical with those now held by the body of advanced thinkers. There is plenty of evidence in "Laon and Cythna" that he recognised and deplored the social subjection of woman, and the evil consequences that result therefrom to the other sex and to humanity in general. "Can man be free," he asks, "If woman be a slave?" And again:

> Woman!—She is his slave, she has become
> A thing I weep to speak—the child of scorn,
> The outcast of a desolated home.
> Falsehood and fear and toil, like waves, have worn
> Channels upon her cheek, which smiles adorn
> As calm decks the false ocean; well ye know
> What woman is, for none of woman born
> Can choose but drain the bitter dregs of woe,
> Which ever from the oppressed to the oppressor flow.

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* "Shelley and Socialism," by Edward and Eleanor Marx Aveling. *To-Day*, April, 1888.

The compulsion of the marriage-bond, which, in Shelley's opinion, militates against that free and natural relation of the sexes which he so strongly approved, is explicitly condemned in the well-known "Notes to Queen Mab," on the ground that, as the very essence of love is freedom of choice, society is not justified in imposing this restriction on the individual. That Shelley's views remained unchanged to the end may be gathered from the kindred, but maturer, passage of "Epipsychidion."

As it is, the Shelleyan advocacy of free love has been much misrepresented, being often absurdly identified, whether through ignorance or prejudice, with a heartless libertinism to which it is utterly alien. The essence of Shelley's belief was that, unless human passion is to be brutalised and debased, the spiritual and higher elements of love must always be present; for this reason he condemned the stereotyped and loveless institution of marriage, but he did not stultify his own contention by sanctioning an equally dull and loveless sensuality.

On this point it is worth while to note what he says in a short prose essay, written soon after "Queen Mab," the review of his friend Hogg's novel, "Prince Alexy Haimatoff." "The author," says Shelley, "appears to deem the loveless intercourse of brutal appetite a venial offence against delicacy and virtue! He asserts that a transient connection with a cultivated female may contribute to form the heart without essentially vitiating the sensibilities. It is our duty to protest against so pernicious and disgusting an opinion. No man can rise pure from the poisonous embraces of a

prostitute, or sinless from the desolated hopes of a confiding heart."

Shelley's socialistic sympathies have already been mentioned; a word must now be said of his not less remarkable insight into those matters where, to quote his own expression, "every man possesses the power to legislate for himself." His communism, like that of Godwin and other anarchist writers, was mingled with a very strong measure of intellectual individualism*; he believed that self-reform must precede, or at any rate accompany, all legislative enactments. "Reform yourselves" is the chief lesson enforced in the "Address to the Irish People," and in the "Essay on Christianity" the failure of the early Christian communism is attributed to the lack of a sufficient moral improvement.

The modes of self-reform which Shelley most persistently advocated may be summed up in the word *simplicity;* his natural instincts were strong in the direction of the simple and the frugal; "genius joined to simplicity" was Byron's epitome of his character. Every reader of his life is aware how this tendency showed itself in his appearance, his dress, his diet, his conduct, his distinctive manner of action and thought; he detested, with his whole soul the exceeding discomfort of those so-called "comforts" of civilisation, which first impose a grievous burden on the drudges who produce them, and then turn out to be a curse, instead of a

* I advisedly write *intellectual* to distinguish it from the other, the commercial "individualism," which consists in sacrificing all true individuality of character in the dead level of competition.

blessing, to those for whom they are produced. Here, in the appeal from a depraved habit to a natural liking, is the true "Return to Nature."

> Our simple life wants little, and true taste
> Hires not the pale drudge Luxury to waste
> The scene it would adorn, and therefore still,
> Nature, with all her children, haunts the hill.

The connection between simplicity and freedom, between naturalness and equality, is a most vital and significant one, and no better exemplification of this union can be found than in the genius of Shelley. "All men," he says, "are called to participate in the community of Nature's gifts. The man who has the fewest bodily wants approaches nearest to the Divine Nature. Satisfy these wants at the cheapest rate, and expend the remaining energies of your nature in the attainment of virtue and knowledge. . . . In proportion as mankind becomes wise—yes, in exact proportion to that wisdom—shall be the extinction of the unequal system under which they now subsist."

Liberty is in fact the final goal and outcome of simplicity; and such liberty—natural, equal, universal—is the very inspiration and keynote of Shelley's song. His ideal is the communist ideal of a society where free spontaneous beneficence shall take the place of authority and government, where the reign of law shall be succeeded by the reign of love, where the simple kindly instincts of the human heart shall be holier than any hard-and-fast code of religion or ethics.

Last but not least among these Shelleyan principles which may claim to have been confirmed and not

negatived by time, are his humanitarian views, which include and underlie the rest. The crowning word both of his communism and individualism is Love, which is again and again inculcated in his writings as the one supreme remedy for human suffering, the charm without which all else is unavailing and unprofitable.

> To feel the peace of self-contentment's lot,
> To own all sympathies and outrage none,
> And in the inmost bowers of sense and thought,
> Until life's sunny day is quite gone down,
> To sit and smile with joy, or, not alone,
> To kiss salt tears from the worn cheek of woe ;
> To live as if to love and live were one—
> This is not faith or law, nor those who bow
> To thrones on heaven or earth such destiny may know.

"To live as if to love and live were one"—that is a true summary of Shelley's ethics. In accordance with this spirit of unremitting gentleness, he deplored the many acts of ferocious barbarism which disgraced, and in great measure still disgrace, our boasted civilisation —the savagery of modern warfare, the scarcely less savage competition of commerce, the inhumanities of our penal code, and the legalised murder known as "capital punishment." He also followed Godwin in deprecating all insurrectionary violence, and repeatedly inveighed against the wickedness of revenge. "In recommending a great and important change in the spirit which animates the social institutions of mankind," thus he writes in the preface to "Laon and Cythna," "I have avoided all flattery to those violent and malig-

nant passions which are ever on the watch to mingle with and to alloy the most beneficial innovations. There is no quarter given to Revenge, or Envy, or Prejudice. Love is celebrated everywhere as the sole law which should govern the moral world."

Now other poets have sung, before and after, of humanity and brotherhood; but there is just this peculiarity about Shelley's method of handling these great themes. He does not, as so many writers have done, sentimentally eulogise these virtues in the abstract, while shutting his eyes to the iniquities perpetrated on "the lower classes," which, albeit sanctioned by respectability and custom, render real brotherhood impossible—on the contrary, he goes to the heart of the matter, and denounces those evils which are the most deadly sources of cruelty and oppression. The true ruffian was to him (I quote his own words) "the respectable man—the smooth, smiling, polished villain whom all the city honours, whose very trade is lies and murder; who buys his daily bread with the blood and tears of men."

In similar manner, when touching on our relations with "the lower animals," he did not, like a certain school of sentimentalists, prate of men's benevolent feelings towards the objects of their gluttony, and preach peace under conditions where peace does not exist; but boldly and consistently arraigned the prime cause of animal suffering, the removal of which must precede the establishment of a genuine human sympathy with the lower races. Those who have knowledge of the recent progress of vegetarianism are aware

that here too, in his condemnation of flesh-eating, Shelley was a precursor of a vital and growing reform.

The importance of a man's dietetic tastes and habits in their bearing on his intellectual development and moral character is too often overlooked or underestimated by critics and biographers. We hear much interesting speculation on the hereditary characteristics of men of genius, and on the influence of events contemporary with their birth and education; but the significance of the fact that the most ethereal of English lyrists and one of the most unselfish of English reformers was a bread-eater and a water-drinker is allowed to pass unnoticed, or at any rate unemphasised, Shelley's humanitarian instincts and consequent inclination to extreme simplicity of diet being regarded as a mere crotchet and harmless eccentricity—and this, too, by those very writers who praise his gospel of gentleness and universal love! On this point some of Shelley's detractors have done him more justice than his admirers; for the former have at least been consistent in arguing that his vegetarian proclivities were all of a piece with his "pernicious" views on social and religious subjects, and with his "utopian" belief in the ultimate perfectibility of man. We may surely assert that Shelley's dietetic tastes must have had *some* influence both on the doctrines advanced in his longer poems and on that spirituality of lyrical tone which makes him unique among singers. "What one *eats*, that one *is*," says a German writer, and it cannot be without interest, and even importance, to those who would read Shelley's

character aright, to note to what extent he adopted and advocated a vegetarian diet.*

Shelley's principles, as has now been sufficiently shown, were those of a thorough revolutionist, and it is by principles that a man's character is best understood; immediate politics are necessarily of less permanent interest, relating as they do to ephemeral matters which are sooner superseded and forgotten. It is worth noting, however, that in his practical politics Shelley was very far from being swayed by that irreconcilable fanaticism which is often supposed to be an unfailing characteristic of enthusiasts, for while always maintaining that "politics are only sound when conducted on principles of morality," he was shrewd enough to see that half a loaf is better than no bread. "Nothing is more idle," he says in the "Philosophical View of Reform," "than to reject a limited benefit because we cannot without great sacrifices obtain an unlimited one." "You know," he wrote to Leigh Hunt in 1819, "my principles incite me to take all the good I can get in politics, for ever aspiring to something more. I am one of those whom nothing will fully satisfy, but who are ready to be partially satisfied in all that is practicable."

That Shelley should, on some subjects, have been over cautious and moderate, may seem surprising; yet it is a fact that he pleaded for slowness and deliberation in cases where the advanced radical opinion of

* See "Shelley's Vegetarianism," by W. E. A. Axon, F.R.S.L. (Vegetarian Society, Manchester.)

to-day would hardly be so long-suffering. He deprecated the abolition of the crown and aristocracy until "the public mind, through many gradations of improvement, shall have arrived at the maturity which can disregard these symbols of its childhood." He objected to the ballot as being too mechanical a process of voting. He disapproved of universal suffrage and of female suffrage as "somewhat immature," though he intimated that he was open to conviction on these points.

Nevertheless, the temporary expedients which Shelley suggested were sufficiently drastic, when regarded from a purely political standpoint. "To abolish the national debt; to disband the standing army; to abolish tithes, due regard being had to vested interests; to grant complete freedom to thought and its expression; to render justice cheap, speedy, and secure," these measures, Shelley believed, would together constitute a reform which we might accept as sufficient for a time.

On national questions Shelley's sympathies were altogether with the party of freedom, and this not only when the struggle was located abroad (most poets and men of letters are enthusiastic over insurrections which are comfortably remote), but also when it was nearer home—let us say in Ireland—which is sometimes found to be a more searching test of a true passion for freedom. "Hellas," the preface and notes of which are scarcely less remarkable for political insight than the poem itself for lyrical splendour, is a proof of Shelley's ardour in the Greek cause. "The wise and generous policy of England," he wrote, "would have consisted in

establishing the independence of Greece, and in maintaining it both against Russia and the Turks; but when was the oppressor generous or just?"

The Dublin pamphlets, immature and almost boyish though they are in some respects, contain some wise forecasts; and it is noticeable, as Mr. J. A. Symonds wrote, that "Catholic Emancipation has since Shelley's day been brought about by the very measure he proposed and under the conditions he foresaw." The Union, again, was declared by Shelley to be a worse evil for Ireland than even the disqualification of Catholics; "the latter," he said, "affects few, the former affects thousands: the one disqualifies the rich from power, the other impoverishes the peasant and adds beggary to the city."

Here, too, is Shelley's opinion on the subject of political "criminals." "Though the Parliament of England were to pass a thousand bills to inflict upon those who determined to utter their thoughts a thousand penalties, it could not render that criminal which was in its nature innocent before the passing of such a bill." After nearly a century of compulsory union and coercive legislation, the wisdom of the view which Shelley intuitively adopted is being slowly and painfully recognised by English politicians.

II.

I have now mentioned certain of Shelley's revolutionary principles which seem to be already on the road to fulfilment, distant though the goal may still be;

and I have shown that, judged simply by the hard test of history and experience, such principles can no longer be contemptuously dismissed as visionary and unsubstantial. But what of those more prophetic yearnings and aspirations, those mystic glimpses into the equal and glorified humanity of the future, which, to those who can understand and sympathise with Shelley, are the very soul of his creed? A learned and cultured critic has dogmatically asserted that Shelley s "abstract imagination set up arbitrary monstrosities of 'equality' and 'love,' which never will be realised among the children of men." But then, by the very nature of the case, it is not to the learned and cultured classes that Shelley's gospel will appeal, but rather to those whose conditions and surroundings have not incapacitated them for that most vital learning and only true culture—a conception of the essential equality and brotherhood of mankind.

The ideal anarchism of which Shelley is the herald is a state of equality founded not on the competitive or baser element of human nature, but on the higher and ultimately more powerful element, which is love. "If there be no love among men," he says, "whatever institutions they may frame must be subservient to the same purpose—to the continuance of inequality. The only perfect and genuine republic is that which comprehends every living being. Nor is this beatified republic of Shelley's prophecy to be confined exclusively to the human race; it is all gentle and loving life, not human life only, that is the theme of his song:

> No longer now the winged inhabitants
> That in the woods their sweet lives sing away,
> Flee from the form of man; but gather round,
> And prune their sunny feathers on the hands
> Which little children stretch in friendly sport
> Towards these dreadless partners of their play.
> All things are void of terror; man hast lost
> His terrible prerogative, and stands
> An equal amidst equals.

The fact that this distant vision of a golden age, of man "equal, unclassed, tribeless and nationless," takes little account of the intervening obstacles between the actual state and the ideal, is by no means a valid proof that the vision is a deceptive one. The traveller who discerns from afar the mountain top which is the object of his pilgrimage, cannot correctly calculate the many minor ridges, which, though at the moment they make but little show in the landscape, must be laboriously and patiently surmounted before his ambition can be satisfied; he knows that these difficulties are real, but he knows that the summit is real also.

It was inevitable that Godwin and Shelley, living before the age of evolutionary science, should underestimate the vast scope and tenacity of hereditary forces, in the moral, as well as in the physical world, and should be over-sanguine as to the power of individual self-regeneration. But it is an absurd error to suppose that Shelley expected a sudden miraculous change in the nature of man—a sort of cosmic transformation scene, which should usher in the final harlequinade of humanity. It is true that in "Laon and Cythna" and "Prometheus Unbound" he used, as

he was quite entitled to use, the license of a poet, by concentrating into brief compass a revolution which must have demanded a long period for its accomplishment, little suspecting that his critics would attribute to him the almost incredible folly of a literal belief in the sudden extirpation of evil; a misconception which is the more astonishing because his utterances on this point are sufficiently numerous and conclusive.

In the Preface to "Laon and Cythna" itself, he notes as one of the errors of the French Revolution which should henceforth be avoided, an expectation of "such a degree of unmingled good as it was impossible to realise." "Can he," says Shelley, "who the day before was a trampled slave, suddenly become liberal minded, forbearing and independent? . . . But mankind appear to be emerging from their trance. I am aware methinks, of a slow, gradual silent change. In that belief I have composed the following poem." And again, in the Irish pamphlet; "we can expect little amendment in our own time and we must be content to lay the foundation of liberty and happiness by virtue and wisdom," and yet again, in the "Philosophical View of Reform," "it is no matter how slow, gradual and cautious be the change."

There are one or two other prevalent misunderstandings of the Shelleyan ideals which could never have existed if his prose works had been read with any sort of attention, and if critics had taken ordinary trouble to distinguish Shelley the lyric poet and myth-maker from Shelley the philosopher and essayist. It has been assumed on the strength of passages in "Queen Mab"

and elsewhere that he believed literally in a past golden age, from which Man, the one outcast of Nature had miserably fallen. But though Shelley, writing as a poet, and with the just freedom of a poet, as in the great nature-myth of the "Prometheus Unbound," speaks of a past Golden Age from which man has fallen, it is mere misrepresentation to accuse him of a literal belief in any such state of primeval happiness. So far from being shattered by the theory of evolution, the Shelleyan creed, as far as it goes, is distinctly in accordance therewith, as may be seen from the following passage of his "Essay on Christianity." "The wisest and most sublime of the ancient poets . . . represented equality as the reign of Saturn, and taught that mankind had gradually degenerated from the virtue which had enabled them to enjoy or maintain this happy state. Their doctrine was philosophically false. . . . Man was once as a wild beast; he has become a moralist, a metaphysician, a poet, and an astronomer."

In his advocacy of natural habits, therefore, it is evident that Shelley was not thinking of a relapse from civilisation to barbarism—that bugbear which, strange to say, is found anywhere rather than in the writings of those who are supposed to be the authors of it. What he *did* mean can fortunately be placed equally beyond dispute by the quotation of his own words. "Nothing is more obviously false," he says, "than that the remedy for the inequality among men consists in their return to the condition of savages and beasts. Rousseau certainly did not mean to persuade the

immense population of his country to abandon all the arts of life, destroy their habitations and their temples, and become the inhabitants of the woods. He addressed the most enlightened of his compatriots, and endeavoured to persuade them to set the example of a pure and simple life by placing in the strongest point of view his conceptions of the calamitous and diseased aspect which, overgrown as it is with the vices of sensuality and selfishness, is exhibited by civilised society."* The problem is further expressed by Shelley with admirable clearness in the following sentence: "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?" †

Again, as regards the external origin of evil, we must guard against a too literal interpretation of passages which are by their very nature poetical. Shelley delights to personify the Manichæan doctrine of a good and an evil spirit, under the forms of the serpent and the eagle, of Prometheus and Jupiter; but we shall do him gross injustice if we suppose him ignorant of the subtle mixture of the two elements in the human mind. He knew well that the sources of evil lie far back beyond the reach of scientific discovery; indeed, he has himself remarked on "that intertexture of good and evil with

* "Essay on Christianity."

† "Vindication of Natural Diet."

which Nature seems to have clothed every form of individual existence." But he believed that the good was more essential and organic, and in that sense more "natural" than the evil, and that in spite of temporary defeat it was destined to be in the end victorious. Thus, in his personification of these rival powers, under the Manichæan imagery of two warring spirits, it is the liberty of Nature which is typified on the one hand, on the other the tyranny of Custom. This primal innocence, vitiated but not extirpated, by the corruption of society, is the leading topic of "Queen Mab."

> Ah, to the stranger soul, when first it peeps
> From its new tenement, and looks abroad
> For happiness and sympathy, how stern
> And desolate a tract is this wide world!
> How withered all the buds of natural good!
> No shade, no shelter from the sweeping storms
> Of pitiless power! On its wretched frame,
> Poisoned perchance by the disease and woe
> Heaped on the wretched parent whence it sprung,
> By morals, law and custom, the pure winds
> Of heaven, that renovate the insect tribes,
> May breathe not. The untainting light of day
> May visit not its longings. It is bound
> Ere it has life; yea, all the chains are forged
> Long ere its being; all liberty and love
> And peace is torn from its defencelessness;
> Cursed from its birth, even from its cradle doomed
> To abjectness and bondage."

It has been urged that Shelley's blissful view of wild nature is altogether too rose-coloured, and in conflict with the stern Darwinian discoveries of an internecine war-

fare; and it has been the fashion of late years to quote Tennyson's description of "Nature red in tooth and claw" as far truer and more "scientific" than Shelley's. But what say the great modern naturalists themselves? "The poet's picture of nature red in tooth and claw," says Dr. Alfred R. Wallace, "is a picture the evil of which is read into it by our imaginations, the reality being made up of full and happy lives, usually terminated by the quickest and least painful of deaths."* And Darwin himself remarks that "When we reflect on this struggle, we may console ourselves with the full belief that the war of nature is not incessant, that no fear is felt, that death is generally prompt, and that the vigorous and the happy survive and multiply." It seems then that Shelley was fully justified in contrasting the calm instinctive happiness of Nature, a happiness which is tried but not destroyed by the struggle for existence, with the restless, self-conscious, introspective miseries of Man. He did not, of course, overlook the obvious fact —as obvious before Darwin as after—that there is a competition in nature as well as in human society.

Still less is it the case, that he regarded kings and priests as the originators of human wretchedness, however much he might charge them with fostering and perpetuating it. "Government," he distinctly says, "is in fact the mere badge of men's depravity. They are so little aware of the inestimable benefits of mutual love as to indulge, without thought and almost without motive, in the worst excesses of selfishness and

* "Darwinism," ch. ii.

malice. Hence, without graduating human society into a scale of empire and subjection, its very existence has become impossible." * That Shelley had a hearty hatred of priestcraft and kingship, as types of intellectual and temporal despotism, is beyond doubt; but he was not moved against them by any such unreasoning antipathy as that with which he is often accredited.

The truth is that so far from being, as his apologists have represented him, at once the advocate and the victim of certain benevolent but illusory ideas, which fall to pieces the moment they are brought into contact with the facts of science, Shelley was well in accord with the most advanced knowledge of his age. The doctrine of Perfectibility is an assertion not of a future sudden perfection, but of the unlimited progressive tendency of mankind, and, as such, is distinctly a scientific doctrine. It has been excellently said † that "by instinct, intuition, whatever we have to call that fine faculty that feels truths before they are put into definite shape, Shelley was an evolutionist. He translated into his own pantheistic language the doctrine of the eternity of matter and the eternity of motion, of the infinite transformation of the different forms of matter into each other, without any creation or destruction of either matter or motion." It is certain that the same testimony could not be paid, with equal truth, to the writings of any other poet of the first twenty years of this century.

* "Essay on Christianity."

† "Shelley and Socialism," by Edward and Eleanor Marx Aveling, *To-day*, April, 1888.

III.

We have now seen what were in fact Shelley's principles and ideals, as contrasted with the imaginary absurdities which critics have invented for him, to the utter distortion of his views and to their own exceeding bewilderment; we have seen also how marked has been the progress made by these Shelleyan opinions since the time when a contemporary reviewer pronounced "Prometheus Unbound," the poem which we now begin to recognise as the great modern epic of humanity, to be the "stupid trash of a delirious dreamer," and accounted for the severity of this judgment by remarking that it was "for the advantage of sterling productions to discourage counterfeits."

Shelley was heart and soul a free-thinker; and free-thought is now in the ascendant wherever men think at all. He was an advocate of free love; and the failure of marriage has become so notorious as to be a commonplace of modern novel-writers. He was a pioneer of communism; and the vast spread of socialist doctrines is the every-day complaint of a capitalist press. He was a humanitarian; and humanitarianism, having survived the phase of ridicule and misrepresentation, is taking its place among the chief motive-powers of civilised society.

Of Shelley's personal character I have already spoken, and only this much need now be said—that the increasing influence which it has exercised on successive generations of readers tells its own tale. If certain critics cannot understand the unspeakable charm

which others have felt so keenly, a charm which for some of us has sweetened life and strengthened all our hopes for mankind, they will perhaps do wisely not to proclaim their own deficiencies by declaring Shelley to be unintelligible. To the sympathetic reader, Shelley's moral nature is as little an enigma as his writings; to the unsympathetic it is very enigmatical indeed; but it does not follow that Shelley is the party to be commiserated on that account—there is an alternative which the hostile critic should introspectively ponder before pronouncing adverse judgment on the accused poet.

Once more let me disclaim any idea of suggesting that Shelley was a faultless being (to mention one obvious reason to the contrary, he was unfortunate enough to be brought up in affluence and saved the necessity of earning his own living), or that it is desirable that anybody should pay him unwilling homage. I merely point out that his character is a typical one—typical of certain revolutionary conceptions, by the rightness or wrongness of which it will ultimately stand or fall. The present course of events seems to point to the probability of the former conclusion.

For all which reasons, is it not about time that we finally divested ourselves of the notion of that weak, amiable, unscientific Shelley; that brilliant but eccentric visionary, with an exalted enthusiasm, a genius for lyric poetry, and a foolish aversion to priests and kings? The view each generation takes of a revolutionary writer is inevitably formed and coloured in great measure by the ethical and religious convictions pre-

valent for the time being. By the old-fashioned, uncompromising, brutal Toryism of seventy years back, a poet like Shelley could hardly have been regarded otherwise than as the foe of all that is respectable, the "fiend-writer" to whom contemporary critics ascribed a super-human malignity.

To the milder-mannered, but somewhat inconsistent and invertebrate "Liberalism" of the succeeding transitional period, he became a grotesque mixture of good and evil qualities, no longer a demon downright, but a semi-celestial nondescript, "a beautiful and ineffectual angel, beating in the void his luminous wings in vain."

By the full-fledged social democracy on whose threshold we now stand, he will at length be seen in his true human character, as the inspired prophet of a larger and saner morality, which will bring with it the realisation of the equality and freedom to which his whole life was so faithfully and ungrudgingly devoted.

And as for the years, or may be the centuries, innumerable but not illimitable, that must still elapse, before the world shall see the fulfilment of those remoter Shelleyan ideals, of that splendid vision of the ultimate regeneration of mankind—does it behove us to be despondent? Must we not rather say of them, in the words of Prometheus himself,

> Perchance no thought can count them, yet they pass.

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