

IN MEMORY OF SHELLEY

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O World! O life! O time!
On whose last steps I climb,
Trembling at that where I had stood before,—
When will return the glory of your prime?
No more—oh never more?

Out of the day and night
A joy has taken flight:
Fresh Spring, and Summer, Autumn, and Winter hoar,
Move my faint heart with grief,—but with delight
No more, oh never more!

THIS low-breathing lyric cry of utter sadness, welling up from the depths of a human heart, has been called the most perfect poem of the nineteenth century. It is the timeless utterance of the conscious soul in the memory of life's joy for ever past. All the great lovers of English verse find their meed of truth and beauty in its perfection. And one of them, the late Lafcadio Hearn, sometime professor of English in the University of Tokyo, in his interpretation of Shelley to his Japanese students, has explained to them in language so simple that it is beautiful to read, why these two little stanzas should have been called the most perfect poetry in all English lyrical verse: It is "because the composition is, in the first place, emotionally perfect; and because, in the second place, it is musically perfect."

It may be that the haunting doom of the sea was beckoning the lonely Shelley when he wrote this last *Lament*. In the following year, on the 8th day of July 1822, he and his friend Lieutenant Williams, and Charles Vivian a sailor boy, were speeding in his yacht, the *Ariel*, from Leghorn to his Villa Magni near Lerici. A heavy storm arose, in the wild turmoil the yacht was run down and sunk by an Italian fisherboat, and all were drowned. The bodies were cast up miles apart. Shelley's was found by Trelawney on the shore near the Via Reggio on the 18th of July, but no compass drew it there. On the 16th of August the poet's remains were cremated by Trelawney in the presence of Byron and Leigh Hunt and a guard of soldiers. The scene, sketched by Trelawney's daughter, has formed the subject of celebrated paintings, notably

the one by Louis Edward Fournier. The poet's heart would not burn. Trelawney snatched it from the flames, and at the request of Mrs. Shelley it was given to Hunt, but was afterwards on her urgent entreaties returned to her. The ever faithful and devoted Trelawney purchased a lot in the English cemetery in Rome under the shadow of the pyramid of Caius Cestius, a place beloved by Shelley. There the poet's ashes were buried, and a stone was erected graven, as dictated by Hunt, with his name and the dates of his birth and death and the words *Cor Cordium*, under which Trelawney added the lines from the song of Ariel in *The Tempest*:—

Nothing of him that doth fade,
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange.

There were very few to mourn the poet's untimely death. For Shelley, in the eyes of the British public, had been everything that was bad and hateful:—an avowed atheist, a deserter of his wife and little children contrary to the law and the gospel of humanity, an exile from his country and a nameless alien to his family, a person held up to ridicule and infamy and detestation by the English press, shunned for fear of mortal taint by all English travellers and residents in Italy (save a few freethinkers who were worth knowing and who had the courage of their convictions), a poet whose poetry was not read because it was that of "the Satanic School",—blasphemous, seditious, immoral. Such was the unfortunate and misguided childlike Shelley when his brief tragedy of life ended in shipwreck and death, and nothing remained to the world's gaze but a

—branded and ensanguined brow
Which was like Cain's or Christ's—Oh! that it should be so.

But time has not left the poet's soul in hell. A century of evolution and progress in knowledge and understanding and wisdom and forgiving love has made a heaven of that hell, and Shelley's purged and glorified spirit may go on with its *Triumph of Life*, as a never ending lyric of unsurpassed beauty and sweetness sung by one of the builders of

—a new earth and sea
And a heaven where yet heaven could never be.

On the 8th day of July 1922, one hundred years after Shelley's death, the poet's tomb in Rome was a pyramid of flowers, and

everywhere his busts were garlanded. The world's press acclaimed his memory and honoured his name as one of the great amongst the greatest of England's bards, and Oxford, his venerable *Alma Mater* that had cast him out as a degenerate son, now gathered his fame to her proud bosom as a portion of her own reward of light and life.

Percy Bysshe Shelley was born on the 4th of August, 1792, at Field Place, near Horsham in the County of Sussex,—born and reared in the very “purple of English squirearchy.” His grandfather, Bysshe Shelley, a native of North America, was originally a quack doctor. There was a fortune in sight for a man of imagination and address practising that calling, and Mr. Shelley was not only a very handsome man, but such was “the charm of his address, the dignity of his bearing and the vigour of his will” that he won the hands and fortunes of two English heiresses; “and, having begun the world with nothing, he left it at the age of seventy-four”, a member of parliament and a baronet, “bequeathing £300,000 in the English funds, together with estates worth £20,000 a year to his descendants.” This success may not have equalled the romance of Count Mumford, an American from Maine and a contemporary of Bysshe Shelley; and the splendour of such achievements is pale alongside of the present day genius of Lord Beaverbrook. But it was this rich earth that produced one of England's divinest bards,—and such a sensitive plant could not live and thrive and shed its heavenly bloom and fragrance in artificial air.

The poet's father, Mr. Timothy Shelley (afterwards Sir Timothy) followed in his own father's footsteps. He was a typical English gentleman of the period, in address and morality of Chesterfieldian pattern, as witness his advice to his eldest son, the poet. But he was not a vicious minded man—he was a good landlord and naturally a kind father; and he attended church in solemn state, though he had no heart for anything but material success. Assuredly, there must be material wealth and splendour as a part of the substantial support and pleasure of life. A poor nation or a poor man is not an example to copy in this world. But the poet seeks first the kingdom of heaven, and if he does not find it on earth he is apt to become a revolutionary, unless his spirit is lightened with that kind of humour which is called the saving grace. Shelley had no humour, he had hallucinations and dreams instead, and of all his great contemporaries he was the most spiritually minded and childlike—having a child's heart with a man's brain. He was as intensely in earnest as John Wesley over the salvation of the human soul alive. He preached the same doctrine, and was as wild of soul over the contradictions between revealed and practical religion as John the

Baptist; like him he fasted in the wilderness, eating no meat and drinking no wine. In his abstemiousness he very much resembled that "marvellous boy" the ill-fated Chatterton, "the sleepless soul" who said he had work on hand and must not make himself more stupid than God had made him.

Shelley's father was bewildered. He could never understand this youth of ethereal loveliness of countenance and unearthly radiance and charm of manner and piercing intensity of soul, any more than the critics of the day could believe in a poet born in a livery-stable. Hence the father and son soon became estranged. Shelley had a fever when a boy, and his delirium possessed him with the belief that his father wished to put him in a madhouse. He never wholly recovered from strange delusions. Throughout life he suffered and paid the penalty, morally and materially, for his defects of intellect.

At Eton he resisted fagging. He did not think it right, especially for a physically frail nature. The boys bullied and tortured him for his feminine looks. But they found him far from effeminate, and at length let him alone. Such brutality however was a part of the English public school system upheld by Church and State,—religion in such a place being a mere formality. When Shelley entered University College, Oxford, at the age of eighteen, and saw the state of affairs there, and knew the impotence of religion as then practised in England to save the people, the *Necessity of Atheism* seemed a better religion to him. His pamphlet came to the knowledge of the authorities. He was asked to recant and apologize. But the pride of intellect supported him, he was expelled, and his friend Thomas Jefferson Hogg also;—all of which increased his distemper of soul.

So too, his entrance into life was prophetic of even more serious moral and worldly disaster. To rescue Harriet Westbrook, a young girl of sixteen, the daughter of an innkeeper "familiarily known as Jew Westbrook" from the exaggerated tyranny of a boarding school, he, like

a veray parfait gentil knight

being then of the chivalrous age of nineteen years, married her so that they might live happily "for ever." They could agree to separate if happiness waned, and the facts seemed to show such a marriage compact. This was the result of Godwin's writings and Byron's company; both were corrupt.

Shortly after the marriage, Harriet's sister Eliza and Miss Hitchener—guardian angels both—came on Shelley's invitation

to live with the young couple "for ever", and eternity began to be reduced to the tragedy of time. Having no peace in his own home, Shelley took up with Godwin and his miscellaneous family. The result of it all was that he completely lost his heart to Mary Godwin, a beautiful girl of sixteen, of striking appearance and dominant intellect,—still remembered as the author of *Frankenstein*. They ran away together. Godwin was enraged. But it was only the logic of his own teachings, which he himself twice denied by two marriages. Man's logic, however, is often the devil's. It was so this time. Shelley committed an unpardonable sin against the human heart and the sanctity of the home, a ruinous breach of the law of social self-preservation. He did not realize that it was fundamentally evil and primitively cruel, till he was shocked into the sanity and sorrow of manhood. Harriet committed suicide; and though Shelley at once married Mary Godwin, he was treated as an outlaw. His children were taken from him, he was forced to live in a foreign country for the rest of his short life, an avenging nemesis seemed to follow him. And yet, except for this one mortal immorality and cruelty, Shelley was pure-minded and righteous in word and deed; a sublime soul, and one of the most lovable; believing in the goodness of mankind and having a practical, abiding faith in human perfectibility; thoroughly unselfish, always doing good especially to the distressed poor. He would not needlessly set foot upon a worm. "Not everyone that saith unto me Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven."

Shelley wrote the first part of *Queen Mab* when he was eighteen, and the rest of it in his twentieth year. It is a strange and wonderful performance for a boy, showing his wide range of reading and high ideality. The woes of the age are all recited there, and the millennium is pictured. It is full of higher criticism, of invocations and denials of the orthodox God, and of impassioned beliefs in the universal Spirit of Goodness:—

God omnipotent,
Is there no mercy? Must our punishment
Be endless? Will long ages roll away
And see no term? Oh! wherefore hast thou made
In mockery and wrath this evil earth?
Mercy becomes the powerful—be but just
O God! repent and save.

This is a repudiation of the doctrine of eternal punishment. The modern pulpit would not be desecrated by such an appeal today. And certainly Matthew Arnold is not to be regarded as an

atheist because he records that "Religion springing out of an experience of the power, the grandeur, the necessity of righteousness is revealed religion, whether we find it in Sophocles or in Isaiah."

Man has lost
His terrible prerogative, and stands
An equal amid equals.

O Happy Earth! Reality of Heaven!
To which those restless souls that ceaselessly
Throng through the human universe aspire.

O human spirit, Thy will
Is destined an eternal war to wage
With tyranny and falsehood, and uproot
The germs of misery from the human heart.

This is ample to prove not only Shelley's early title to seer and prophet, but that he was one of the Seekers after God, as Dean Farrar wrote of them. Notice also Francis Thompson's recognition of Shelley's spiritual worth:—

With few exceptions, whatsoever in our best poets is great and good to the non-Catholic, is great and good also to the Catholic; and though Faber threw his edition of Shelley into the fire and never regretted the act; though, moreover, Shelley is so little read among us that we can still tolerate in our Churches the religious parody which Faber should have thrown after his three-volumed Shelley; in spite of this, we are not disposed to number among such exceptions that straying spirit of light.

In the spring of the year 1812 Shelley issued an address to the Irish people, and with Harriet and her sister Eliza he went over to Ireland for the purpose of forwarding the cause. He spoke at a public meeting in Dublin, and busied himself in distributing this address, and in writing another advocating an association of all the Catholic patriots of Ireland for the recovery of their rights. In a letter to a friend, he says concerning the first address:—

I have already sent 400 of my Irish pamphlets into the world, and they have excited a sensation of wonder in Dublin. Eleven hundred yet remain for distribution. Copies have been sent to sixty public houses. Expectation is on the tip-toe. I send a man out every day to distribute copies. I stand at the balcony of our window and watch till I see a man *who looks likely*. I throw a book at him.

Harriet adds a postscript: "For, myself, I am ready to die of laughter when it is done, and Percy looks so grave. Yesterday

he put one into a woman's hood of a cloak". And Eliza looked after the housekeeping. "Eliza"—Shelley writes to Godwin—"keeps our common stock of money for safety in some nook or corner of her dress, but we are not dependent on her, although she gives it out as we want it." All this shows the poet and the child in Shelley. We cannot doubt that his heart overflowed with sympathy for the wretched, oppressed people of Ireland. Those who charged him with promulgating doctrines subversive of true religion and destructive to the moral government of mankind made the wish father to the thought.

Because of the ignorance of his intended audience, Shelley put his arguments in such simple words and propositions that even the wayfaring man, though a fool, ought not to have mistaken their meaning:—

"All religions," he said, "are good which make men good; and the way that a person ought to prove that his method of worshipping God is best, is for himself to be better than all other men. A Protestant is my brother. And a Catholic is my brother. Do not inquire if a man be a heretic, if he be a Quaker, a Jew, or a heathen; but if he be a virtuous man, if he loves liberty and truth, if he wishes the happiness and peace of mankind. If a man be ever so much a believer and love not these things, he is a heartless hypocrite, a rascal, and a knave. It is not a merit to tolerate, but it is a crime to be intolerant. Anything short of unlimited toleration and complete charity with all men, on which you will recollect that Jesus Christ insisted, is wrong. Be calm, mild, deliberate, patient. Think and talk and discuss."

He condemns secret and violent societies. Referring to the English Government he said: "It wants altering and mending. It will be mended, and a reform of English Government will produce good to the Irish." And in a pamphlet of the year 1817, entitled *A proposal for putting Reform to the Vote throughout the Kingdom*, the wisdom of his views on the subject of the franchise is the statesmanship of to-day.

But these are only the breathings of peace,—the stirring of the wind before the day has dawned, when the poet clad in the whole armour of truth and beauty shall stand upon the hill tops of imagination and, filled with the mighty rushing spirit of freedom, the clear notes of his trumpet call shall awaken the people throughout the land:—

Men of England, heirs of glory,
 Heroes of unwritten story,
 Nurslings of one mighty mother,
 Hopes of her, and one another!

Rise, like lions after slumber,
In unvanquishable number,
Shake your chains to earth, like dew,
Which in sleep had fallen on you!

Let a vast assembly be,
And with great solemnity
Declare with ne'er-said words that ye
Are, as God has made ye, free!

Let the laws of your own land,
Good or ill, between ye stand,
Hand to hand, and foot to foot,
Arbiters of the dispute.

And on those who first should violate
Such sacred heralds in their state
Rest the blood that must ensue;
And it will not rest on you.

The time spirit was gathering for mighty efforts of reformation. The rulers of the land were to be moved as they felt the foundations of their power swaying under the agitation of the thinking minds of the nation for larger political, social, moral and religious liberty. But it was a slow process to awaken the people from the sleep of stupid indifference to their woes—their lion-like spirit was not yet a moral quality. Nevertheless they were aroused, and with the sense of their strength came the noble urge of desire to show themselves fit for freedom. There was a revolution, yet not a sudden and violent destruction of the old order of things. The people grew out of the old conservatism in which they were long encased, bursting at last the dead tissues with much labour and pain, and emerging as revitalized beings filled with such intensity of life and fecundity of imagination that the world appeared to them altogether in a new light. Thus was the Modern Renaissance, the new birth, or more correctly speaking, the spiritual re-creating of the nation understood. "Having fought with beasts, what advantageth it if the soul perish?" It was the voice of Faith that uttered that prophetic fiat:—

Let a vast assembly be!

The reign of personal government expired with the last of the Georges and thenceforth "government of the people, by the people, and for the people" began its career of beneficent growth.

The great works of the greatest poets and artists are truly the expressions of heroic times, and surely we may call the nineteenth century heroic. The student of Shelley therefore, as he ponders

To suffer woes which hope thinks infinite;
 To forgive wrongs darker than death or night;
 To defy Power which seems omnipotent;
 To love and bear; to hope till hope creates
 From its own wreck the thing it contemplates;
 This is alone Life, Joy, Empire, and Victory.

Shelley was a strange, elusive mortal; restless and solitary in his manner of life; flitting hither and thither by himself, or in the company of one or two intimate friends:—

A pard-like spirit beautiful and swift
 A love in desolation masked—a power
 Girt round with weakness.

All his great works were composed in the open air, the fierce rays of the Italian sun beating down upon his uncovered head; as if the poet (Prometheus-like) literally made fire from the heavens the source of his own poetic ardour. *Prometheus Unbound* and *The Cenci* were written in one and the same year. Marvellous products of an intellect sustained by its own powers of conception in the highest altitudes of ideality! Rare example of the strength and versatility of the human mind! It is another confirmation of the revealed law that “man is only a little lower than the angels.”

When was ever anything nearer the secret of beauty's truth, and the rapture of Heaven unveiled, and the elemental life of the air, than Shelley's *Skylark* and his *Cloud* and the *Ode to the West Wind*? The words in these are so alive with an exquisite, satisfying sense of expression that our fancy is robbed of effort. But only a fragment of the Ode must suffice. Wind and spirit are convertible terms, and Shelley's passionate invocation may truly be understood as a prayer to the all-powerful Spirit of the times to enter and possess his soul with its purifying life-inspiring influence:—

O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being,
 Thou from whose unseen presence the leaves dead
 Are driven like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing;

Wild spirit which art moving everywhere;
 Destroyer and preserver; hear, oh hear!

Drive my dead thoughts over the universe,
 Like withered leaves, to quicken a new birth;
 And by the incantation of this verse

Scatter, as from an unextinguished hearth
 Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!
 Be through my lips to unawakened earth

The trumpet of a prophecy! O Wind,
If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?"

When Shelley heard of the death of Keats, his deeply sympathetic spirit was mightily moved with the music of love in sadness, and in a most perfect union of poetry with the art of expression he poured out heart and soul, and gave immortal song to the Earth's sorrow for such a universal loss. In that matchless dirge he was also a seer pre figuring his own hastening, tragic fate, a poet singing his last farewell to the world where he was wont, for a brief dream of joy and sorrow, to live and grieve. And here let us part from him. His "spirit's bark" was

Far from the shore, far from the trembling throng driven
Whose sails were never to the tempest given.

He went beyond the ken of our earthly gaze, beyond our shortsighted and blurred, mortal judgment, beyond the murk and gloom and the oblivion of time.

Shelley—the poet's poet and heart of hearts—is with Adonais. Full surely, he also

Beacons from the abode where the eternal are.