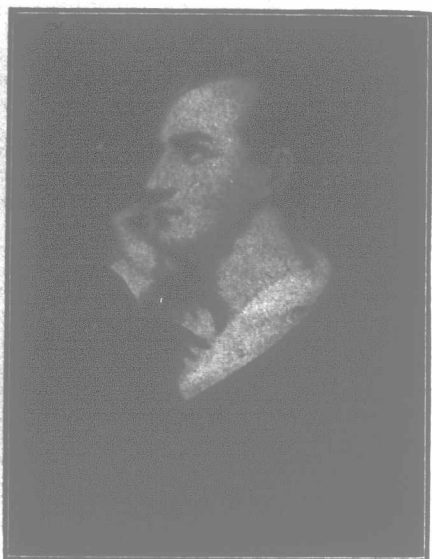




Life, Literature and Education.



Lord Byron.

It is now over eighty years since Byron ended his fevered life at Missolonghi, and, barred out of Westminster Abbey, was buried in the little churchyard at Hucknell. Yet is his memory still surrounded by a halo, albeit a lurid one, which compels a peculiar interest whenever his name is mentioned. Upon the continent, among the scenes which he wrought into such all but Oriental splendor, he is still the best known of the English poets, and has been accounted after Shakespeare, the most famous of them all. Anglo-Saxons have, perhaps, been disposed to regard him with less favor, and yet it has been observed that the least anecdote in regard to him is eagerly read by those to whom the names of Coleridge, Keats, Wordsworth and Shelley are mere names. Possibly the reason underlying this is the same that has induced more than one recent novelist to choose him as the hero of certain melodramatic stories.

To understand this reason, one must know something (for to understand it is impossible) of Byron's life, and one must be sophisticated enough as regards the world to recognize the fascination which the bizarre, and, unfortunately, the scarcely respectable bizarre, has for it. If, however, the revelations made in regard to the poet in a book written by his grandson, Lord Lovelace, who died recently, be taken as true, even interest in Byron must give way to disgust, and his poetry, with all its brilliance and unquestionable genius, lose much in consideration of the character of its author. There will, of course, always be the question as to whether Lord Lovelace, who from his childhood was constantly with his grandmother, the unfortunate woman whom Lord Byron married, was not prejudiced in her favor against the erratic poet. Yet, on the other hand, there is the question as to whether, under such circumstances, he was not in a position to glean many of the real facts of the long-disputed case. The writing of his book was, most certainly, no

matter of preference or glory to Lord Lovelace. He speaks of the work as "painful," and as undertaken for the express purpose of justice in regard to a long-wronged woman.

Byron (George Gordon Byron, sixth Lord Byron of Rochdale) was born in Holles St., London, Eng., on Jan. 22, 1788. His father, who died early, was a man of erratic and altogether unadmirable character; his mother, Catherine Gordon, of Gight, Aberdeen, a virago, brilliant, eccentric, hysterical; and when to this parentage is added a long line of titled ancestry noted for a bar sinister of bad blood that seemed to run throughout it, some light must be thrown upon Byron's own extraordinary vagaries.

When the lad was still quite young his mother took him to the land of her birth, Scotland, where his education began. He was subsequently sent to the famous school at Harrow, and afterwards attended the University at Cambridge, leaving everywhere a somewhat similar record, indifference in scholarship, a genius for accomplishing general reading nothing short of remarkable, and a passion for athletics which he was too often prevented from indulging in by the slight lameness due to a deformed foot, in regard to which, during his whole life, he was keenly, almost ridiculously sensitive. Upon the whole, he seems to have been a favorite among his classmates, his excessive vanity, outbursts of fierce temper and coxcombry in regard to his rank, being all overlooked in consideration of his remarkable social attractiveness, his rollicking gaiety, bubbling wit, and impulsive good-heartedness. Intolerant of criticism in regard to himself, he was ever the friend of the oppressed, and it is told of him that, when at Harrow, he used to say to Harness, a younger schoolmate afflicted with lameness like himself, "Harness, if anyone bullies you, tell me, and I'll thrash him if I can." True, Byron himself did some bullying in his day, but it is significant that he lost his life while in a far country endeavoring to uphold the cause of liberty. Whether personal ambition had anything to do with that venture, is still a mooted question.

It was when at Cambridge, however, while doing most desultory school work, barely managing to take his degree in 1808, that he wrote the most of the poems which afterwards appeared as "Juvenilia," and "Hours of Idleness." Here, too, he began to crystallize those unorthodox religious views which, occasionally, appeared in his poems, calling down upon him the wrath of the orthodox of his day. "I will have nothing to do with your immortality," he exclaimed, in 1811, "we are miserable enough in this life without the absurdity of speculating upon another. Christ came to save men, but a good Pagan will go to heaven, and a bad Nazarene to hell. I am no Platonist. I am nothing."

But Byron was continually meriting the wrath of someone over something. At an age when the "fashionable" young man was, above all things, the "fast" young man, he chose to be fashionable. To be a Beau Brummel, a very wicked Beau Brummel at that, was his ambition;

and, although he led a life by no means moral, those of his biographers who have admired him aver that he pretended to much more vice than he ever practiced. This boasting tendency was shown in the very first of his publications, "Fugitive Pieces," which was suppressed after a few volumes had been issued. In January, 1807, his second collection of poems, "Juvenilia," appeared, and in March those known as "Hours of Idleness."

In the latter, along with many passages of true poetical genius, there was, undoubtedly, much bathos; but, in an indirect way, these poems proved the means of enabling Byron to find himself. Too good to fall beneath the notice of the critics, they were attacked on all sides, and the onslaught roused the poet as nothing else would have done. Stung to the maddening point, he immediately retorted by his "English Bards and Scotch Reviewers," and, although he recanted at a later date, and acknowledged the retaliation, especially in regard to some of his contemporary poets, as the outburst of a very young and very angry man, the poems proved that a master of satire had arisen. Moreover, the public likes a good war on paper, and the public of 1808 was delighted to see Brougham and Jeffrey, who had so long been lancing at will, met on their own ground. The first edition was exhausted in a month, and Byron found himself famous.

A young nobleman who could write wonderful poetry, who had been sorely attacked and had held his own, who was possessed of a marvellously attractive personality, above all one who could make people laugh by the brilliance of his repartee, and who yet preserved a mien mysterious enough to make him interesting, must, as a matter of course, become speedily a social lion. The salons of London were thrown open to Byron, and even thus early in his career, as observed later by Lady Caroline Lamb, he was "suffocated by women." But he was not contented to settle down to tame social life. A mania for travelling was on him. The ocean and the mountains, those two powerful magnets of his life, were calling him, and in the spring of 1808 he borrowed money at an exorbitant rate of interest that he might gratify his desire. Before setting out he retired to his estate, the already heavily-encumbered Newstead, for a final revel, the story of which has been told by Matthews, one of the friends invited to partake in it; of how the party entered the mansion between a bear and a wolf, and amid a salvo of pistol shots; of how the time was spent in reading, fencing, cricketing, sailing, teasing the wolf, and sitting up till all hours of the morning drinking wine from a skull rimmed with silver, and talking politics, philosophy and poetry.

In June Byron set out upon a tour which included Spain, Italy, Switzerland and Greece, and so gathered material for the first cantos of "Childe Harold," which were written on the Continent. Of his conduct at this time, many wild stories, possibly not all true, have been told. As has been observed, debauches and strenuous work do not go hand in hand,

and, during a great part of his life, the amount of poetry turned off by Byron showed at least strenuous work.

His adventures by sea, among the mountains, the women he met, the adventures he heard of or took part in, were all elaborated into poetry; and through that poetry, with an egotism unique in the history of literature, but one hero ran—Childe Harold, The Giaour, The Corsair, Don Juan, Lara—all the same, the Childe Burun (as Childe Harold was at first called), Byron himself.

In November he reached Missolonghi, the town in Greece at which he died 15 years later. Here he remained for some time, living, as far as he could, like an Oriental prince, blazing in scarlet and gold, and often making himself ridiculous by parade of his rank, as when he tried to take precedence of the English ambassador in an interview with the Sultan.

In 1811 he returned to London, to find his mother in her coffin. In the following year he took his seat in the House of Lords, but evidently was not marked for political success. In the meantime, however, the "Cantos of Childe Harold," then published, with a dedication to his half-sister, Mrs. Leigh, was meeting with great success, the first seven editions having been exhausted in four weeks. Byronism had become the rage, and, in the sudden blaze of its popularity, Wordsworth, Shelley, Scott and Moore were thrown into the shade. Once more Byron became the idol of the society which, with all his professed love for solitude, he seemed unable to do without; and he was still further gratified by the magnanimous praise of such men as Shelley and Scott. "I gave over writing romances," Scott acknowledges, frankly, "because Byron beat me."

In 1815 Byron married Miss Milbanke, from whom, very soon, he was separated. Of the whole unfortunate affair much has been written, some throwing the blame wholly on Byron, and asserting, as has Lord Lovelace, that Lady Byron was a noble and much-wronged woman; others declaring that she was priggish, self-righteous, self-conscious, no mate for the fiery, impulsive poet, nor he for her. Whatever be the truth of the matter—for Lady Byron made no direct charge against her husband—the wildest stories flew, and the scandal became such that Byron fled again to the Adriatic, "bankrupt in purse and heart." Of his life there, and his remarkable and discreditable connection with La Guiccioli, enough has been written. More pleasant memories of the poet's career at this time are of his close friendship with Shelley, and of the emoluments which he now received for his writings. The English public might disapprove of Byron, but it was eager to read his biography, as embodied, so it is believed, in his writings; hence his books "sold." He now went on with his more important works, the finest, "Cantos (III and IV.) of Childe Harold"; "Don Juan," the strongest, if the most open to criticism; "Cain," over whose "sacrilegious" all England went into an uproar; "Beppo," "Mazeppa," and other poems, some ridiculed, some extolled to the skies, even by the same reviewers who had