

NOTICES
OF THE
LIFE OF LORD BYRON.

THE circumstances under which Lord Byron now took leave of England were such as, in the case of any ordinary person, could not be considered otherwise than disastrous and humiliating. He had, in the course of one short year, gone through every variety of domestic misery;— had seen his hearth eight or nine times profaned by the visitations of the law, and been only saved from a prison by the privileges of his rank. He had alienated, as far as they had ever been his, the affections of his wife; and now, rejected by her, and condemned by the world, was betaking himself to an exile which had not even the dignity of appearing voluntary, as the excommunicating voice of society seemed to leave him no other resource. Had he been of that class of unfeeling and self-satisfied natures from whose hard surface the reproaches of others fall pointless, he might have found in insensibility a sure refuge against reproach; but, on the contrary, the same sensitiveness that kept him so awake to the applauses of mankind rendered him, in a still more intense degree, alive to their censure. Even the strange, perverse pleasure which he felt in painting himself unamiably to the world did not prevent him from being both startled and pained when the world took him at his word; and, like a child in a mask before a looking-glass, the dark semblance which he had

half in sport, put on, when reflected back upon him from the mirror of public opinion, shocked even himself.

Thus surrounded by vexations, and thus deeply feeling them, it is not too much to say, that any other spirit but his own would have sunk under the struggle, and lost, perhaps irrecoverably, that level of self-esteem which alone affords a stand against the shocks of fortune. But in him,—furnished as was his mind with reserves of strength, waiting to be called out,—the very intensity of the pressure brought relief by the proportionate reaction which it produced. Had his transgressions and frailties been visited with no more than their due portion of punishment, there can be little doubt that a very different result would have ensued. Not only would such an excitement have been insufficient to waken up the new energies still dormant in him, but that consciousness of his own errors, which was for ever lively present in his mind, would, under such circumstances, have been left, undisturbed by any unjust provocation, to work its usual softening and, perhaps, humbling influences on his spirit. But,—luckily, as it proved, for the further triumphs of his genius,—no such moderation was exercised. The storm of invective raised around him, so utterly out of proportion with his offences, and the base calumnies that were every where heaped upon his name, left to his wounded pride no other resource than in the same summoning up of strength, the same instinct of resistance to injustice, which had first forced out the energies of his youthful genius, and was now destined to give a still bolder and loftier range to its powers.

It was, indeed, not without truth, said of him by Goëthe, that he was inspired by the Genius of Pain,—for, from the first to the last of his agitated career, every fresh recruitment of his faculties was imbibed from that bitter source. His chief incentive, when a boy, to distinction was, as we have seen, that mark of deformity on his person, by an acute sense of which he was first stung into the ambition of being great*. As, with an evident reference to his own fate, he himself describes the feeling,—

* In one of his letters to Mr. Hunt, he declares it to be his own opinion that “an addiction to poetry is very generally the result of ‘an uneasy mind in an uneasy body;’ disease or deformity,” he adds, “have been the attendants of many of our best. Collins mad—Chatterton, I think, mad—Cowper mad—Pope crooked—Milton blind,” &c. &c.

“ Deformity is daring.

It is its essence to o’ertake mankind
By heart and soul, and make itself the equal,—
Ay, the superior of the rest. There is
A spur in its halt movements, to become
All that the others cannot, in such things
As still are free to both, to compensate
For stepdame Nature’s avarice at first*.”

Then came the disappointment of his youthful passion,—the lassitude and remorse of premature excess,—the lone friendlessness of his entrance into life, and the ruthless assault upon his first literary efforts,—all links in that chain of trials, errors, and sufferings, by which his great mind was gradually and painfully drawn out;—all bearing their respective shares in accomplishing that destiny which seems to have decreed that the triumphal march of his genius should be over the waste and ruins of his heart. He appeared, indeed, himself to have had an instinctive consciousness that it was out of such ordeals his strength and glory were to arise, as his whole life was passed in courting agitation and difficulties; and whenever the scenes around him were too tame to furnish such excitement, he flew to fancy or memory for “thorns” whereon to “lean his breast.”

But the greatest of his trials, as well as triumphs, was yet to come. The last stage of this painful, though glorious, course, in which fresh power was, at every step, wrung from out his soul, was that at which we are now arrived, his marriage and its results,—without which, dear as was the price paid by him in peace and character, his career would have been incomplete, and the world still left in ignorance of the full compass of his genius. It is indeed worthy of remark, that it was not till his domestic circumstances began to darken around him that his fancy, which had long been idle, again rose upon the wing,—both the *Siege of Corinth* and *Parisina* having been produced but a short time before the separation. How conscious he was, too, that the turmoil which followed

* The Deformed Transformed.

was the true element of his restless spirit may be collected from several passages of his letters at that period, in one of which he even mentions that his health had become all the better for the conflict:—"It is odd," he says, "but agitation or contest of any kind gives a rebound to my spirits, and sets me up for the time."

This buoyancy it was,—this irrepressible spring of mind,—that now enabled him to bear up not only against the assaults of others, but what was still more difficult, against his own thoughts and feelings. The muster of all his mental resources to which, in self-defence, he had been driven, but opened to him the yet undreamed extent and capacity of his powers, and inspired him with a proud confidence that he should yet shine down these calumnious mists, convert censure to wonder, and compel even those who could not approve to admire.

The route which he now took, through Flanders and by the Rhine, is best traced in his own matchless verses, which leave a portion of their glory on all that they touch, and lend to scenes, already clothed with immortality by nature and by history, the no less durable associations of undying song. On his leaving Brussels, an incident occurred which would be hardly worth relating, were it not for the proof it affords of the malicious assiduity with which every thing to his disadvantage was now caught up and circulated in England. Mr. Pryce Gordon, a gentleman, who appears to have seen a good deal of him during his short stay at Brussels, thus relates the anecdote.

"Lord Byron travelled in a huge coach, copied from the celebrated one of Napoleon, taken at Genappe, with additions. Besides a *lit de repos*, it contained a library, a plate-chest, and every apparatus for dining in it. It was not, however, found sufficiently capacious for his baggage and suite; and he purchased a calèche at Brussels for his servants. It broke down going to Waterloo, and I advised him to return it, as it seemed to be a crazy machine; but as he had made a deposit of forty Napoleons (certainly double its value), the honest Fleming would not consent to restore the cash, or take back his packing-case, except under a forfeiture of thirty Napoleons. As his lordship was to set out the following day, he begged me to make the best arrangement I could in

A. D. 1816.

LIFE OF LORD BYRON.

5

the affair. He had no sooner taken his departure, than the worthy *sellier* inserted a paragraph in ‘The Brussels Oracle,’ stating ‘that the noble *milor Anglais* had absconded with his calèche, value 1800 francs!’”

In the *Courier* of May 13, the Brussels account of this transaction is thus copied.

“The following is an extract from the Dutch Mail, dated Brussels, May 8th.—In the *Journal de Belgique*, of this date, is a petition from a coachmaker at Brussels to the president of the Tribunal de Premier Instance, stating that he has sold to Lord Byron a carriage, &c. for 1882 francs, of which he has received 847 francs, but that his lordship, who is going away the same day, refuses to pay him the remaining 1035 francs; he begs permission to seize the carriage, &c. This being granted, he put it into the hands of a proper officer, who went to signify the above to Lord Byron, and was informed by the landlord of the hotel, that his lordship was gone without having given him any thing to pay the debt, on which the officer seized a chaise belonging to his lordship as security for the amount.”

It was not till the beginning of the following month that a contradiction of this falsehood, stating the real circumstances of the case, as above related, was communicated to the *Morning Chronicle*, in a letter from Brussels, signed “Pryce L. Gordon.”

Another anecdote, of far more interest, has been furnished from the same respectable source. It appears that the two first stanzas of the verses relating to Waterloo, “Stop, for thy tread is on an empire’s dust*,” were written at Brussels, after a visit to that memorable field, and transcribed by Lord Byron, next morning, in an album belonging to the lady of the gentleman who communicates the anecdote.

“A few weeks after he had written them (says the relater), the well-known artist, R. R. Reinagle, a friend of mine, arrived in Brussels, when I invited him to dine with me and showed him the lines, requesting him to embellish them with an appropriate vignette to the following passage :—

* Childe Harold, Canto 3, stanza 17.

‘ Here his last flight the haughty eagle flew,
 Then tore, with bloody beak, the fatal plain;
 Pierced with the shafts of banded nations through,
 Ambition’s life, and labours, all were vain—
 He wears the shatter’d links of the world’s broken chain.’

Mr. Reinagle sketched with a pencil a spirited chained eagle, grasping the earth with his talons.

“ I had occasion to write to his lordship, and mentioned having got this clever artist to draw a vignette to his beautiful lines, and the liberty he had taken by altering the action of the eagle. In reply to this, he wrote to me—‘ Reinagle is a better poet and a better ornithologist than I am; eagles, and all birds of prey, attack with their talons, and not with their beaks, and I have altered the line thus—

‘ Then tore, with bloody talon, the rent plain.

This is, I think, a better line, besides its poetical justice.’ I need hardly add, when I communicated this flattering compliment to the painter, that he was highly gratified.”

From Brussels the noble traveller pursued his course along the Rhine,—a line of road which he has strewed over with all the riches of poesy; and, arriving at Geneva, took up his abode at the well-known hotel, Sécheron. After a stay of a few weeks at this place, he removed to a villa, in the neighbourhood, called Diodati, very beautifully situated on the high banks of the Lake, where he established his residence for the remainder of the summer.

I shall now give the few letters in my possession written by him at this time, and then subjoin to them such anecdotes as I have been able to collect relative to the same period.

LETTER CCXLII.

TO MR. MURRAY.

“ Ouchy, near Lausanne, June 27th, 1816.

“ I am thus far (kept by stress of weather) on my way back to Diodati (near Geneva) from a voyage in my boat round the Lake; and

A. D. 1816.

LIFE OF LORD BYRON.

7

I enclose you a sprig of *Gibbon's acacia* and some rose-leaves from his garden, which, with part of his house, I have just seen. You will find honourable mention, in his Life, made of this 'acacia,' when he walked out on the night of concluding his history. The garden and *summer-house*, where he composed, are neglected, and the last utterly decayed; but they still show it as his 'cabinet,' and seem perfectly aware of his memory.

"My route, through Flanders, and by the Rhine, to Switzerland, was all I expected and more.

"I have traversed all Rousseau's ground with the Heloise before me, and am struck to a degree that I cannot express with the force and accuracy of his descriptions, and the beauty of their reality. Meillerie, Clarens, and Vevay, and the Chateau de Chillon, are places of which I shall say little, because all I could say must fall short of the impressions they stamp.

"Three days ago, we were most nearly wrecked in a squall off Meillerie, and driven to shore. I ran no risk, being so near the rocks, and a good swimmer; but our party were wet, and incommoded a good deal. The wind was strong enough to blow down some trees, as we found at landing: however, all is righted and right, and we are thus far on our return.

"Dr. Polidori is not here, but at Diodati, left behind in hospital with a sprained ankle, which he acquired in tumbling from a wall—he can't jump.

"I shall be glad to hear you are well, and have received for me certain helms and swords, sent from Waterloo, which I rode over with pain and pleasure.

"I have finished a third Canto of Childe Harold (consisting of one hundred and seventeen stanzas), longer than either of the two former, and in some parts, it may be, better; but of course on that I cannot determine. I shall send it by the first safe-looking opportunity.

"Ever, &c."

LETTER CCXLIII.

TO MR. MURRAY.

“Diodati, near Geneva, July 22d, 1816.

“I wrote to you a few weeks ago, and Dr. Polidori received your letter; but the packet has not made its appearance, nor the epistle, of which you gave notice therein. I enclose you an advertisement*, which was copied by Dr. Polidori, and which appears to be about the most impudent imposition that ever issued from Grub-street. I need hardly say that I know nothing of all this trash, nor whence it may spring,—‘Odes to St. Helena,’—‘Farewells to England,’ &c. &c.—and if it can be disavowed, or is worth disavowing, you have full authority to do so. I never wrote, nor conceived, a line on any thing of the kind, any more than of two other things with which I was saddled—something about ‘Gaul,’ and another about ‘Mrs. La Valette;’ and as to the ‘Lily of France,’ I should as soon think of celebrating a turnip. ‘On the morning of my daughter’s birth,’ I had other things to think of than verses; and should never have dreamed of such an invention, till Mr. Johnston and his pamphlet’s advertisement broke in upon me with a new light on the crafts and subtleties of the demon of printing,—or rather publishing.

“I did hope that some succeeding lie would have superseded the thousand and one which were accumulated during last winter. I can forgive whatever may be said of or against me, but not what they make me say or sing for myself. It is enough to answer for what I have written; but it were too much for Job himself to bear what one has not. I suspect that when the Arab Patriarch wished that his ‘enemy had written a book,’ he did not anticipate his own name on the title-page. I

* The following was the advertisement enclosed:

“Neatly printed and hot-pressed, 2s. 6d.

“Lord Byron’s Farewell to England, with Three other Poems—Ode to St. Helena, to My Daughter on her Birthday, and To the Lily of France.

“Printed by J. Johnston, Cheapside, 335; Oxford, 9.

“The above beautiful Poems will be read with the most lively interest, as it is probable they will be the last of the author’s that will appear in England.”

A. D. 1816.

LIFE OF LORD BYRON.

9

feel quite as much bored with this foolery as it deserves, and more than I should be if I had not a headache.

“Of Glenarvon, Madame de Staël told me (ten days ago, at Copet) marvellous and grievous things; but I have seen nothing of it but the motto, which promises amiably ‘for us and for our tragedy.’ If such be the posy, what should the ring be?—‘a name to all succeeding*,’ &c. The generous moment selected for the publication is probably its kindest accompaniment, and—truth to say—the time *was* well chosen. I have not even a guess at the contents, except from the very vague accounts I have heard.

* * * * * *

* * * * * *

“I ought to be ashamed of the egotism of this letter. It is not my fault altogether, and I shall be but too happy to drop the subject when others will allow me.

“I am in tolerable plight, and in my last letter told you what I had done in the way of all rhyme. I trust that you prosper, and that your authors are in good condition. I should suppose your stud has received some increase by what I hear. Bertram must be a good horse; does he run next meeting? I hope you will beat the Row.

“Yours always, &c.”

LETTER CCXLIV.

TO MR. ROGERS.

“Diodati, near Geneva, July 29th, 1816.

“Do you recollect a book, Mathieson’s Letters, which you lent me, which I have still, and yet hope to return to your library? Well, I have encountered at Copet and elsewhere Gray’s correspondent, that same Bonstetten, to whom I lent the translation of his correspondent’s epistles for a few days; but all he could remember of Gray amounts to little,

* The motto is—

“He left a name to all succeeding times,
Link’d with one virtue and a thousand crimes.”

VOL. II.

C

except that he was the most ‘melancholy and gentlemanlike’ of all possible poets. Bonstetten himself is a fine and very lively old man, and much esteemed by his compatriots; he is also a *littérateur* of good repute, and all his friends have a mania of addressing to him volumes of letters—Mathieson, Muller the historian, &c. &c. He is a good deal at Copet, where I have met him a few times. All there are well, except Rocca, who, I am sorry to say, looks in a very bad state of health. Schlegel is in high force, and Madame as brilliant as ever.

“ I came here by the Netherlands and the Rhine route, and Basle, Berne, Morat, and Lausanne. I have circumnavigated the Lake, and go to Chamouni with the first fair weather; but really we have had lately such stupid mists, fogs, and perpetual density, that one would think Castlereagh had the Foreign Affairs of the kingdom of Heaven also on his hands. I need say nothing to you of these parts, you having traversed them already. I do not think of Italy before September. I have read Glenarvon, and have also seen Ben. Constant’s *Adolphe*, and his preface, denying the real people. It is a work which leaves an unpleasant impression, but very consistent with the consequences of not being in love, which is perhaps as disagreeable as any thing, except being so. I doubt, however, whether all such *liens* (as he calls them) terminate so wretchedly as his hero and heroine’s.

“ There is a third Canto (a longer than either of the former) of *Childe Harold* finished, and some smaller things,—among them a story on the Chateau de Chillon; I only wait a good opportunity to transmit them to the grand Murray, who, I hope, flourishes. Where is Moore? Why is he not out? My love to him, and my perfect consideration and remembrances to all, particularly to Lord and Lady Holland, and to your Duchess of Somerset.

“ Ever, &c.

“ P.S. I send you a *fac simile*, a note of Bonstetten’s, thinking you might like to see the hand of Gray’s correspondent.”