The Diary of
Dr. John William Polidori

INTRODUCTION

A person whose name finds mention in the books about Byron, and to some extent in those about Shelley, was John William Polidori, M.D.; he was Lord Byron's travelling physician in 1816, when his Lordship quitted England soon after the separation from his wife. I, who now act as Editor of his Diary, am a nephew of his, born after his death. Dr. Polidori figures not very advantageously in the books concerning Byron and Shelley. He is exhibited as overweening and petulant, too fond of putting himself forward face to face with those two heroes of our poetical literature, and too touchy when either of them declined to take him at his own estimation. I will allow that this judgment of Polidori is, so far as it goes, substantially just; and that some of the recorded anecdotes of him prove him deficient in self-knowledge, lacking prudence and reserve, and ignoring the dis-
tinction between a dignified and a quarrelsome attitude of mind. He was, in fact, extremely young when he went abroad in April 1816 with Byron, to whom he had been recommended by Sir Henry Halford; he was then only twenty years of age (born on September 7, 1795), Byron being twenty-eight, and Shelley twenty-three. The recommendation given to so very young a man is a little surprising. It would be a mistake, however, to suppose that Polidori was without some solid attainments, and some considerable share of talent. He was the son of Gaetano Polidori, a Tuscan man of letters who, after being secretary to the celebrated dramatist Alfieri, had settled in London as a teacher of Italian, and of his English wife, a Miss Pierce; the parents (my maternal grand-parents) survived to a great age, only dying in 1853. John Polidori, after receiving his education in the Roman Catholic College of Ampleforth (Yorkshire), studied medicine in Edinburgh, and took his doctor's degree at a singularly early age—I believe almost unexampled—the age of nineteen. His ambition was fully as much for literary as for professional distinction; and he published, besides *The Vampyre* to which I shall have to recur, a prose tale named *Ernestus Berchtold*, a volume of verse containing a drama entitled *Ximenes*, and some other writings.
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One of these writings is the text to a volume, published in 1821, entitled Sketches Illustrative of the Manners and Costumes of France, Switzerland, and Italy, by R. Bridgens. The name of Polidori is not indeed recorded in this book, but I know as a certainty that he was the writer. One of the designs in the volume shows the costume of women at Lerici just about the time when Shelley was staying there, in the closing months of his life, and a noticeable costume it was. Polidori himself—though I am not aware that he ever received any instruction in drawing worth speaking of—had some considerable native gift in sketching faces and figures with lifelike expression; I possess a few examples to prove as much. The Diary shows that he took some serious and intelligent interest in works of art, as well as in literature; and he was clearly a rapid and somewhat caustic judge of character—perhaps a correct one. He was a fine, rather romantic-looking young man, as evidenced by his portrait in the National Portrait Gallery, accepted from me by that Institution in 1895.

Dr. Polidori's life was a short one. Not long after quitting Lord Byron in 1816 he returned to London, and in Norwich continued his medical career, but eventually relinquished this, and began studying for the Bar. It is said that Miss Harriett Martineau was
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rather in love with him in Norwich. In August 1821 he committed suicide with poison—having, through losses in gambling, incurred a debt of honour which he had no present means of clearing off. That he did take poison, prussic acid, was a fact perfectly well known in his family; but it is curious to note that the easy-going and good-naturedly disposed coroner's jury were content to return a verdict without eliciting any distinct evidence as to the cause of death, and they simply pronounced that he had "died by the visitation of God."

The matter was reported in two papers, *The Traveller* and *The New Times*. I possess a copy, made by my mother at the time, of the reports; and it may perhaps be as well inserted here.

*Copied from The Traveller.*

Monday Evening [August 27th, 1821].

Melancholy Event.—Mr. Polidori, residing in Great Pulteney Street, retired to rest about his usual time on Thursday night; the servant, not finding him rise at the usual hour yesterday, went to his room between eleven and twelve o'clock, and found him groaning, and apparently in the last agonies of death. An alarm was given and medical aid was immediately called, but before the arrival of Surgeons Copeland
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and Davies, he was no more. His father was at the time on his journey to London to see his son, and arrived about three hours after the event. We understand the deceased was about twenty-six years of age, and had for some time accompanied Lord Byron in Italy. A Coroner's Inquest will sit this day to ascertain the cause of his death.

Copied from The New Times.

Tuesday [September 11th, 1821].

Coroner's Inquest on John Polidori, Esquire.—An Inquisition has been taken before T. Higgs, Esquire, Deputy Coroner, at the residence of the father of the above unfortunate gentleman, in Great Pulteney Street, Golden Square, who was discovered lying on his bed in a state nearly approaching to death, and soon afterwards expired.

Charlotte Reed, the servant to Mr. Gaetano Polidori, the father of the deceased, said her master's son lived in the house, and for some time had been indisposed. On Monday the 20th of August last he returned from Brighton, since which his conduct manifested strong symptoms of incoherence, and he gave his order for dinner in a very strange manner. On the Thursday following the deceased dined with a gentleman residing in the same house, and on that occasion
he appeared very much depressed in his spirits. About nine o'clock the same evening he ordered witness to leave a glass (tumbler) in his room; this was unusual, but one was placed as he desired. Deceased told her he was unwell; if therefore he did not get up by twelve o'clock the next day, not to disturb him. Witness, however, a few minutes before twelve, went into his room to open the shutters, and on her return saw the deceased lying in bed; he was not in any unusual position, but seemed extremely ill. Witness immediately left the room, went up-stairs, and communicated what she had observed to a gentleman, who instantly came down. Witness then went for medical assistance. The deceased was about twenty-six years of age.—Mr. John Deagostini, the gentleman alluded to by the last witness, corroborated her statement on his giving him the invitation to dine, which he accepted in a way quite different from his usual conduct. Witness also observed that, some time since, the deceased had met with an accident—was thrown out of his gig, and seriously hurt in the head. On Thursday at dinner he spoke in half sentences; the conversation was on politics and a future state. The deceased observed rather harshly that witness would see more than him; he appeared to be deranged in his mind, and his countenance was haggard. At dinner he ate very little: soon after left
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the room, but joined again at tea; hardly spoke a word, and retired at nine o'clock. After breakfast next morning, witness inquired of the servant whether Mr. Polidori had gone out. She replied no, and that he had desired her not to disturb him. About twelve o'clock the servant came to him very much alarmed. Witness went immediately to the apartment of the deceased, and observed a tumbler on the chair, which contained nothing but water, and did not perceive any deleterious substance that the deceased might have taken; he was senseless, and apparently in a dying state.—Mr. Thomas Copeland, a surgeon residing in Golden Square, was sent for suddenly to attend the deceased, and attempted to discharge the contents of the stomach without effect. He lingered for about ten minutes, and expired. Another medical gentleman soon after arrived, but his assistance was also unavailing.—There being no further evidence adduced to prove how the deceased came to his death, the jury, under these circumstances, returned a verdict of—Died by the visitation of God.

Medwin, in his Conversations with Lord Byron, gives the following account of how the poet received the news of Dr. Polidori's death. "I was convinced" (said Byron) "something very unpleasant hung over me last night: I expected to hear that somebody I knew was dead. So it turns out—poor Polidori is
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gone. When he was my physician he was always talking of prussic acid, oil of amber, blowing into veins, suffocating by charcoal, and compounding poisons; but for a different purpose to what the Pontic monarch did, for he has prescribed a dose for himself that would have killed fifty Mithridates—a dose whose effect, Murray says, was so instantaneous that he went off without a spasm or struggle. It seems that disappointment was the cause of this rash act.”—The evidence of the servant at the inquest shows that death did not come so very suddenly; and in my own family I always heard the poison spoken of as simply prussic acid.

This is all that I need say at present to explain who Dr. Polidori was; but I must add a few words regarding his Diary.

The day when the young doctor obtained the post of travelling physician to the famous poet and man of fashion, Lord Byron, about to leave England for the Continent, must, no doubt, have been regarded by him and by some of his family as a supremely auspicious one, although in fact it turned out the reverse. The article on Polidori written in The Dictionary of National Biography by my valued friend, the late Dr. Garnett, speaks of him as “physician and secretary to Lord Byron”; but I never heard that he undertook or performed any secretarial work worth speaking of, and
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I decidedly believe that he did not. The same statement occurs in the inscription on his likeness in the National Portrait Gallery. Polidori’s father had foreseen, in the Byronic scheme, disappointment as only too likely, and he opposed the project, but without success. To be the daily companion and intimate of so great a man as Byron, to visit foreign scenes in his society, to travel into his own father’s native land, which he regarded with a feeling of enthusiasm, and with whose language he was naturally well acquainted, to be thus launched upon a career promising the utmost development and satisfaction to his literary as well as professional enterprise—all this may have seemed like the realization of a dream almost too good to be true. To crown all, Mr. Murray, Byron’s publisher, had offered Polidori no less a sum than £500 (or 500 guineas) for an account of his forthcoming tour. Polidori therefore began to keep a Diary, heading it Journal of a Journey through Flanders etc., from April 24, 1816, to ; and the blank was eventually filled in with the date “December 28, 1816”; it should rather stand “December 30.” Portions of the Diary are written with some detail, and a perceptible aim at literary effect—Murray’s £500 being manifestly in view; in other instances the jottings are slight, and merely enough for guiding the memory. On this footing the
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Journal goes on up to June 30, 1816. It was then dropped, as Polidori notes “through neglect and dissipation,” for he saw a great deal of company. On September 5 he wrote up some summarized reminiscences; and from September 16, the day when he parted company with Byron at Cologny, near Geneva, and proceeded to journey through Italy on his own account, he continued with some regularity up to December 30, when he was sojourning in Pisa. That is the latest day of which any record remains; but it is known from other evidence that Dr. Polidori continued in Italy up to April 14, 1817; he then left Venice in company with the new Earl of Guilford and his mother—being their travelling physician. Whether the Journal is in any fair degree interesting or brightly written is a question which the reader will settle for himself; as a document relevant to the life of two illustrious poets, it certainly merits some degree of attention.

My own first acquaintance with the Diary of Dr. Polidori dates back to 1869, when I was preparing the Memoir of Shelley which preludes my edition of his poems, published in 1870; I then availed myself of the Shelleian information contained in the Diary, and even gave two or three verbatim extracts from it. The M.S. book was at that time the property of a sister of his, Miss Charlotte Lydia Polidori, a lady of...