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THE SKYLARK AND ADONAIS.

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BY

PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY.

With Introduction and Explanatory Notes

BY J. W. ABERNETHY, PH.D.,
PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH LITERATURE IN THE ADELPHI ACADEMY, BROOKLYN.

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PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY

SHELLEY.

[From Matthew Arnold's "Essays in Criticism."]

AND so we have come back at last to our original Shelley—to the Shelley of the lovely and well-known picture, to the Shelley with flushed, feminine, artless face, the Shelley "blushing like a girl" of Trelawny. Professor Dowden gives us some further attempts at portraiture. One by a Miss Rose, of Shelley at Marlow. "He was the most interesting figure I ever saw; his eyes like a deer's, bright and rather wild; his white throat unfettered; his slender but, to me, almost faultless shape; his brown long coat with curling lambs' wool collar and cuffs—in fact, his whole appearance—are as fresh in my recollection as an occurrence of yesterday."

Feminine enthusiasm may be deemed suspicious, but a Captain Kennedy must surely be able to keep his head. Captain Kennedy was quartered at Horsham in 1813, and saw Shelley when he was on a stolen visit, in his father's absence, at Field Place: "He received me with frankness and kindliness, as if he had known me from childhood and at once won my heart. I fancy I see him now as he sat by the window, and hear his voice, the tones of which impressed me with his sincerity and simplicity. His resemblance to his sister Elizabeth was as striking as if they had been twins. His eyes were most expressive, his complexion beautifully fair, his features exquisitely fine; his hair was dark, and no peculiar attention to its arrangement was manifest. In person he was slender and gentlemanlike, but inclined to stoop; his gait was decidedly not military. The general appearance indicated great delicacy of constitution. One would at once pronounce of him that he was different from other men. There was an earnestness in his manner and such perfect gentleness of breeding and freedom from everything artificial, as charmed every one. I never met a man who so immediately won upon me." Mrs. Gisborne's son, who knew Shelley well at Leghorn, declared Captain Kennedy's description of him to be "the best and most truthful I have ever seen."

To all these we have to add the charm of the man's writings—of Shelley's poetry. It is his poetry, above everything else, which for many people establish that he is an angel. Of his poetry I have not space now to speak, but let no one suppose that a want of humor and a self-delusion such as Shelley's have no effect upon a man's poetry. The man Shelley, in very truth, is not entirely sane, and Shelley's poetry is not entirely sane either. The Shelley of actual life is a vision of beauty and radiance, indeed, but availing nothing, effecting nothing—and in poetry, no less than in life, he is a beautiful and ineffectual angel, beating, in the void, his luminous wings in vain.

To sum up all in a word, he was a creature of the most singular benevolence. This appeared in the minutest as well as the greatest actions of his life. It was the grace of his manner no less than the virtue of his heart. Lord Byron once said that Shelley was the completest gentleman he ever knew. He was regardful of the happiness of others, not always showing it in the vulgar way, by relieving their distresses, but by consulting all their shades of feeling. At the same time, he was not unmindful of the larger and broader manifestations of good-will. A never-ceasing course of active effort showed that his kindness for his fellows was not a sentiment but a principle. It was both good-wishing and good-doing. It was beneficence as well as benevolence. He who could walk the wards of a hospital filled with dangerous diseases, that he might qualify himself to minister to the diseases of the poor, must have possessed, not the sickly sentimentalism of Rousseau, but the philanthropy of a Howard. He who could give the half of his whole income to a single work of charity (the building a dike to prevent inundations upon the huts of a poor settlement) must have possessed a genuine sympathy. He who, when his funds were exhausted, could pawn his books, or favorite instruments of science, to help a needy scholar, to cover a naked child, or give warmth and plenty to the hearth of a destitute widow, and be more careful to conceal his deeds from the world than others are to publish them, was actuated by no theatrical love of display, but by a sincere and heart-felt fellow-feeling with his race.—THOMAS DE QUINCEY.

Introduction.

Percy Bysshe Shelley was born at Field Place, near Horsham in Sussex, August 4, 1792. He was the eldest of six children and the heir to a baronetcy. His father, Sir Timothy Shelley, was a wealthy country gentleman, proud of his lineage, and unfortunately possessed of a moral austerity that early brought him into disastrous conflict with his wildly-inspired son. The poet's early years were spent at Field Place with his four sisters; when ten years old, he was sent to a private academy, and two years later to Eton. He learned the classic languages "almost by intuition," and astonished his friends with the fluency of his Latin versification; his chief delight, however, was physical science, a taste for which he long retained. He devoured the extravagant romances of the period, and recorded indefinitely the flights of his own imagination in juvenile verses and tales. His desire for knowledge was insatiable; he possessed a remarkable power of memory, and read with astonishing rapidity. "No student ever read more assiduously. He was to be found, book in hand, at all hours; reading in season and out of season; at table, in bed, and especially during a walk; not only in the quiet country, and in retired paths; not only at Oxford, in the public walks, and High Street, but in the most crowded thoroughfares of London."

At Eton Shelley was unpopular. The qualities that separated him from the world in after life were early manifested—extreme sensitiveness, delicacy of tastes, impulsive and tender feelings, hatred of shams and conventions, intolerance of authority, and uncompromising hostility to tyranny and injustice in every form. "He was all passion," says Mrs. Shelley, "passionate in his resistance to an injury, passionate in his love." He organized a rebellion against the odious fagging system, and the brutal sports of his foot-ball loving companions, so generally deemed essential to manliness, aroused in him only the enthusiasm of disgust. Naturally enough, he was called "Mad Shelley."

At Oxford he was equally singular in his conduct and studies.

He showed a marked distaste for mathematics; was keenly interested in the principles involved in great political questions, but could not endure the trivial newspaper details of party warfare. Poetry and metaphysics mainly occupied his attention, and out of these he was already constructing that ideal, Platonic scheme of society unfolded in his early poems, by which broken humanity should be restored through universal truth, beauty, and love. Locke, Hume, and the French materialists were favorite authors at this time; under their influence, and as a means of indulging his passion for controversy, he issued a two-page pamphlet, entitled "The Necessity of Atheism," containing a series of propositions, so stated as to invite answers, embodying the main arguments of Hume and other rationalists against the existence of a Deity. The publication of this pamphlet led to his summary expulsion from the university, March 25, 1811. His father, with just indignation that the fair fame of his house should be sullied by an atheistical son, but with unjust coldness, closed the doors of Field Place upon the wilding, and the young poet philosopher was forced suddenly to exchange his luxurious Oxford life of reading and dreaming for a struggle with poverty and the "many-headed beast" in London. Neither discomfort nor danger ever taught Shelley wisdom, in the worldly sense; with characteristic rashness he soon married a beautiful girl of sixteen, the daughter of a retired inn keeper, with nothing to depend upon but unwritten poems and a small annual allowance reluctantly granted by his father. Undaunted by the persecution of circumstances, and "resolving to lose no opportunity to disseminate truth and happiness," he at once set up as a reformer by writing and circulating pamphlets on Catholic Emancipation in Ireland, and a "Declaration of Rights," concerning the ends of government and the rights of man.

Shelley was a child of the French Revolution, and the victim of its intellectual excesses. He did not, like Wordsworth, free himself from the baneful influences of that first vision of "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity" that so dazzled the intellect of the new generation throughout Europe. His passionate devotion to liberty and his absorbing faith in a golden age of justice and peace, led him into the propagation of wild and obnoxious theories; and the consequent extravagance of expression often concealed the real man of noble impulse behind it. For this reason some

of his earlier poems, as "Queen Mab" and "The Revolt of Islam," are almost unreadable, and, at publication, aroused only bitter hostility. But the freer utterance of the later lyrics reveals a soul filled with love, faith, and spiritual exaltation. He used the term "atheism," he said, "to express his abhorrence of superstition; he took it up as a knight took up a gauntlet in defiance of injustice." He might well have said with Schiller, "I have no religion, because of my religion." He loved mystery, loved to remain "hidden in the light of thought," and could not restrain his thinking by definition. "Lift not the painted veil," he cries, "which those that live call life." His spirit felt itself to be a part of the illimitable spirit of the universe. "He was not an atheist or a materialist," says Stopford Brooke. "If he may be said to have occupied any theoretical position, it was that of an Ideal Pantheist; a position which, with regard to Nature, a modern poet who cares for the subject, naturally—whatever may be his personal view—adopts in the realm of his art."

Before Shelley was eighteen he had published two novels, "Zastrozzi" and "The Rosicrucian," both incoherent medleys of sentiment, suggesting only remotely the future poet. In 1813 his first important poem, "Queen Mab," was printed. "Alastor," the finest of the long poems, was published in 1816. The best of the longer poems that followed are: "Julian and Maddalo," the transcendental love-poem, "Epipsychidion," and "The Witch of Atlas," "a poem in which he sent his imagination out, like a child into a meadow, without any aim save to enjoy itself." His finest poetry was produced in the last two years of his life, when he was no longer the reformer of mankind, but the isolated poet described in the exquisite allegory of the "Sensitive Plant." His "Prometheus Unbound" is a splendid lyrical drama on the subject of the Æschylean tragedy "Prometheus Bound;" and the "Cenci" is regarded as the most powerful drama written since the age of Elizabeth. The fragmentary prose works contain much that is beautiful; few passages can be found in English prose equal to the essay entitled "A Defense of Poetry."

Soon after the death of his first wife, in 1816, Shelley married Mary Godwin, the gifted daughter of William Godwin, the author of "Caleb Williams." In March, 1818, after an alarming illness, he went to Italy, where the brief remainder of his life was spent. Here in the companionship of a few choice friends,