

## CHAPTER XXIV

### SHELLEY

THE second figure of the Satanic School is even more interesting than Byron. He was also still more of a rebel and an enemy of society than was Byron. But he had much higher talents. I mean Percy Bysshe Shelley.

The life of Shelley is one of the saddest and the most eccentric in the whole history of English literature. To characterize him as a man is useless, unless we first state the outlines of his extraordinary history. If we were to judge him only by what he did, we should be obliged to think of him as a brute, a ruffian, a creature without any sense of honour or decency or affection. But this would be wrong. Shelley was at once a very lovable man and a very great fool.

Nevertheless, the peculiar folly of Shelley was a folly, in part, of the age, or perhaps we should be more correct in saying, of the age preceding, which projected itself into the nineteenth century. It consisted in putting into practice the absurd belief that civilized men should live according to nature. This, you know, was the mischievous teaching of Rousseau. We had something to say about the law of nature in speaking of Byron's work. Then I said to you that we are all obliged to obey the law of nature, or to take the terrible consequences. But this is only one side of an enormous question; and the life of Shelley is going to teach us something about the other side. While it is true that we must to some degree obey the law of the universe, it is also true that all human progress has been effected only through fighting against the law of the universe. Nature says, "Kill your enemy." But if murder were allow-

ed in human society, society could not exist. The law against murder is in opposition to nature. Again nature says, "Indulge your lust." But if no check were placed upon lust, there could be no family and no society. Nature again says, "Take from the weak all that you are strong enough to take from them." If there were no laws forbidding theft, there could be no property, and no civilization of any kind. The Naturalists of the eighteenth century never thought of things in this way—not because they were essentially stupid, but because they did not know anything about nature. We know something about nature to-day; we know it is very cruel, and not in the least degree estimable from the standpoint of pure morals. Presently we shall observe what was the result when Shelley tried to live by it.

Now let us talk about the man himself. Shelley was born in 1792, of a good family, and his descendants to-day are people of high rank in England. He was one of those children who, to use a popular expression, "take after" their mother altogether. Shelley's mother was a remarkably beautiful woman, and the boy inherited her peculiar beauty. He grew up very slender, graceful, and girlish in appearance; nobody could see him without being charmed, not only by his face, but by his very graceful motion. He was sent to school at Eton, where his troubles began. In an English school the life is rough, very rough, and a sensitive boy is likely to suffer a great deal before he learns how to submit himself to this strange order of existence. At an English school it is no advantage for a boy to look like a girl; he is rather despised for being pretty—that being taken for a sign of weakness and cowardice, and he is quickly forced to fight in order to show whether he has any courage or not. Shelley had to fight a good deal, and got severely beaten at short intervals. But he had a very strong will, and a pride that pushed him through. He refused to obey the custom according to which the students of the younger classes must act as servants to the students of upper classes

—what is called “fagging.” To refuse to be a fag at Eton means that a boy must have extraordinary courage. Shelley’s courage made him friends—strong boys who took his part; and he was able to pass through Eton without fagging. But they tormented him a great deal, and made him hate the place, and not only the place, but the Christian religion that was taught in it, the morals that were inculcated in it, the advice of the teachers who allowed fagging to exist. Before leaving Eton, Shelley had become practically an enemy of religion and society. He did not see the larger fact of public-school life, that it is a preparation for the struggle with the world. He only saw the injustice and the cruelty, and he hated everything that they represented. All this injustice and cruelty were done in the name of Christian training, moral training, and social training. Therefore Shelley learned to hate Christian teaching and moral teaching and social teaching. You can imagine the effect upon Shelley of reading Rousseau and the French Revolutionary writers—also the effect of reading Voltaire and Diderot, very good writers for mature minds, but very dangerous for a boy whose mind was in such a condition.

Shelley thought it his duty to denounce as well as to hate Christianity. When a young man first discovers, through a higher education, that certain doctrines or dogmas of a religion are unbelievable, he has really discovered a fact of very little importance to anybody except himself. The dogmas and the doctrines of a religion may be as absurd as possible, but that does not mean at all that the religion is absurd. A religion means much more than a theory of the supernatural. It means the whole moral experience of a race. It means one of the forces that keep society together. It means the common principles of right and wrong as understood and practised by millions and millions of ancestors for thousands and thousands of years. Therefore even for those who cannot believe its doctrines, it is, or ought to be, a very respectable fact. But Shelley was much too young to understand this, and to understand

why it was dangerous for him to attack Christianity in an institution founded by Christianity for the teaching of Christian truth as well as of Christian dogma.

While he was at Eton, he did not write anything except some foolish stories and poems, but he had scarcely gone to Oxford when he began. He wrote a pamphlet entitled "The Necessity of Atheism," and printed it, and sent a copy to all the heads of the Oxford colleges, and to all the authorities of the University, most of whom, you know, are clergymen. He refused when questioned to give any answers, or any reason for his foolish act. There was nothing to be done except to expel him, as he had not only broken the rules of the University, but had personally insulted every dignitary of the institution. So he was expelled in 1811; and he left Oxford, protesting against the injustice, and resolved to live according to the law of nature. We shall now see whither the law of nature led him, and into what extraordinary company.

He soon found other reasons for disliking all conventions. He had been for some time in love with a beautiful girl, his own cousin, called Harriet Grove. It had been intended by the parents of both parties that Harriet should marry Shelley; but Shelley's conduct brought about a change in this decision. He had not only got himself expelled from the University, and had openly professed to be an atheist; but he had declared that he hoped to make one of his own sisters "a divine little scion of infidelity." If he could make an atheist of his sister, it would certainly have resulted in greatly injuring the young lady's future, not because of the comparative merit of belief or disbelief in itself, but simply because men do not want to marry women who profess atheism. So if Shelley was thus anxious to injure his own sister, how could he be trusted to be a good husband for Harriet Grove? She was given in marriage to another man; and Shelley, after that, hated Christianity more than he had ever hated it before; he would not suffer it to be mentioned in his presence.

Now we can see this beautiful, talented, generous, but very wilful boy wanting to fight the whole world, because he believed the world was all wrong. He was in an unfortunate position. It is true that he had money and social rank, but he was exactly like an innocent child in his knowledge of the world that he was opposing; he had the passions of a man without any experience, and he was astonishingly beautiful. It is dangerous, this gift of beauty. It was especially dangerous in Shelley's case. He could charm almost any woman, and there were plenty anxious to be charmed by a young gentleman of eighteen, who had no more wisdom or malice than an infant. The first mistake that a lad in Shelley's position is likely to make is in regard to women. There was nothing bad in Shelley's heart; he would not deliberately and knowingly have done a great wrong. But he could do wrong by impulse even when believing himself to do right. He ran away with another Harriet — Harriet Westbrook, a schoolgirl of sixteen, and married her in Scotland. If a sensible man had done this in a sensible way, it might have been all right. But why did Shelley do it? Not because he loved the girl, but because he pitied her. This is very foolish, to marry a woman out of pity without knowing anything about her character. He expected to be sorry for it for himself later on, because he actually told her that when they became unhappy together they could separate. English law does not permit this kind of separation, but Shelley detested all law, and said that he would only submit to marriage as a protection for his wife.

This was his first mistake; but it was not a very bad one. The bad ones were to come later on. Shelley next wanted company and sympathy, and he could not expect these among his own class. Society was not inclined to tolerate either his doctrine or his conduct. He looked about him for acquaintances who would; and he found one in the person of William Godwin. Godwin was one of the remarkable figures of the time — an infidel, like Shelley, a

philosopher, a disbeliever in law, and a disbeliever in marriage. He had been a clergyman, and then had become an atheist. He was an excellent man of letters. He had written some novels which are still, even to-day, worth reading; and an extraordinary book entitled "An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice," in which he tried to prove that law was unnecessary and tyrannical, and that marriage ought to be done away with. It was a clever book, and Shelley was delighted with it. He said that it had changed the whole order of his mind.

It is impossible to speak of Godwin without speaking of Godwin's family, who were destined to play an important part in Shelley's life. There was a woman of good family called Mary Wollstonecraft, who has a name in English literature. She was a noble-hearted person, but the world treated her badly, and she learned to hate it in the same irrational way that Shelley did. Mary had a large family to support; and she supported them by teaching and writing. She also wrote a book against marriage, and against many other things. It was called "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman." Then she went to Paris, in the time of the Revolution, and unfortunately made the acquaintance of an American scamp who lived with her for two years, had a child by her, and then deserted her. Thus she was made to understand, in the most painful way possible, that marriage meant something in this world. She wished to kill herself, but Godwin happened to meet her. He was a good-hearted man, in spite of his theories, and he saved her by making her his wife. Thus these two people, both of whom had written books against marriage, disproved their own theory by marrying. Mary died, leaving Godwin a daughter, also called Mary. Her child by the American, called Fanny, was adopted by Godwin, who married again. His second wife also had a daughter by a former husband—a grown-up girl, known in literary history as Miss Clairmont. Miss Clairmont was seduced by Lord Byron, and had a child by him.

This was the household in which Shelley made his first friend. A nice household! Godwin; Miss Fanny, an illegitimate child; Miss Clairmont, Byron's mistress; and Mary Godwin, a beautiful girl of sixteen. All of these believed what Shelley believed, and offered all possible sympathy. He was not shocked at the stories that he heard about them; they were enemies of society like himself, and he loved them for it. Unfortunately he learned to love one of them a great deal too much—Mary Godwin. Mary was really a wonderfully clever girl; she has left a name in English literature that will last for all time, because she wrote the story "Frankenstein." There was but one wrong thing that we can accuse Mary of doing during her life; and that was allowing Shelley to make love to her when he already had a wife and two children. But we must remember that Mary was then very young, only sixteen; that she was a strong believer in the doctrines of her father against marriage; and that she was naturally a person of great force of character and far-sightedness. Perhaps she said to herself, "If I do not take him away from the woman, somebody else will; therefore it is better that I should do it, because I can tame him." What did Shelley do? He went to his wife, and told her that he could not love her any more, and that he was going to leave her for ever. She was pregnant at the time! Now this shows the astonishing ignorance of Shelley. He could not have done this knowing what he was doing. He was like a child that is cruel without knowing it. He knew nothing about women—we may add that he knew nothing of human physiology. Even a naturally cruel and wicked man would not do such a thing to a pregnant woman—because he would be afraid of the consequences. Shelley was not afraid of the consequences, because he knew nothing about them.

After this unconscious but atrocious cruelty, Shelley secretly ran away with Mary Godwin to Switzerland, thus betraying his friends, as well as outraging his wife. Godwin had preached against marriage; this was his punishment.

Mary Godwin held the opinions of her father; she was quite willing to become Shelley's mistress in spite of the fact that he had left a young wife behind him. Of course Godwin was very angry. He called Shelley a traitor, a scoundrel, and various other names; and Shelley naturally replied that he had only followed Godwin's own teaching. Ultimately they were to become reconciled, but for the time being there was very bitter feeling between them. Mary did not care. She was only sixteen; but she was much the strongest character in the whole crowd. She knew exactly what she was going to do, and she knew how to manage Shelley. If she could not make him absolutely afraid of her, she at least taught him a little self-control, and kept him from doing anything more that was absolutely wicked or foolish. She helped him with his poetry, and made him work. Unfortunately she could not help the fact that he became the friend and companion of Lord Byron, a companion who was not good for him under the circumstances. Miss Clairmont had accompanied Shelley and Mary to Switzerland, because she wanted to see Lord Byron, the father of her child. But Byron had just managed to entice a beautiful Italian lady away from her husband, and he did not care to be burdened with Miss Clairmont. She had to become a teacher in Venice. This, and other incidents of Byron's brutality, helped Mary; for she was working bravely to keep Shelley out of mischief, and she was not sorry to find that Byron's conduct had disgusted him. The pair were quite happy for a time abroad; but now the consequences of Shelley's follies were to show themselves at home. Harriet Shelley, deserted by her husband, went to the lake in Hyde Park, London, and drowned herself. Then for the first time Shelley began to understand what he had been doing.

He understood still better when he returned to England with Mary, whom he was now able to marry, and did marry at once. No person would speak to him. Old friends walked by him without noticing him. More than Byron,

more than any other man of the time, Shelley was suddenly detested by society. He could not live in England. He was regarded as an enemy of everything good and a preacher of everything bad. Shelley himself did not mistake the attitude of society; he called it contempt, and contempt it was, withering contempt. Society thought of him and of Mary as of two animals—nothing more.

Western society is a very curious thing. It forgives some crimes, and never forgives others. Let me try to explain. Western society often forgives a man for running away with another man's wife, provided that the man had no wife or children of his own. But it never forgives the woman in such a case. You may have read in the papers some years ago that the son of a famous statesman ran away with another man's wife, and was afterwards forgiven for it. Now it must seem, from the standpoint of pure morals, that this is very unjust. The purely moral wrong is just as great on the man's side as it is upon the woman's. But the aristocratic code of morals seems to regard the man in such a case as an avenger of society—seems to consider that a woman who cannot be faithful to her husband deserves to become the prey of any one clever enough to trick her. And after all, society is not entirely unjust to the woman; it says to her, "If you do wrong as a wife I shall never forgive you; but I shall protect your rights as a wife by never forgiving the man that openly breaks the marriage bond." That is the one unpardonable sin of the man which is never forgiven; and Shelley had been guilty of it. He had deserted his wife, deserted his children, betrayed his friends, and run away with another woman. Byron was bad; but Byron had never done anything so bad as that. It would have been utterly impossible for Shelley to live in England. So he went to Italy and never returned.

He did not have long to stay in Italy. In the summer of 1821, he and a friend went out in a boat—their own boat, which they had called *Don Juan*, in honour of Byron's poem. A sudden storm overtook the young men at sea, and

the boat went down. A few days after, both bodies were washed up by the sea, and were burned on the shore by the friends who recognized them. Byron helped at the cremation, and almost went mad with grief. So ended this poor passionate life, full of blunders and full of brilliancies. You will see that Shelley scarcely lived to be a man. He was little more than a boy at the time of his death, and his genius was quite immature.

If I have taken rather long to tell the story of Shelley, I think I am quite justified by the confession of Shelley's greatest admirer to-day, Professor Dowden, who says that it is impossible to understand a great deal of Shelley's poetry without understanding the facts of his life. This is not true of the shorter pieces, but it is certainly the case in regard to the longer poems. There remains now to explain the change of public feeling toward Shelley after his death. Over his tombstone were placed two Latin words signifying "Heart of Hearts"; and the English world now thinks that this epitaph is just. Yet you know now, yourselves, what cruel and foolish things Shelley did. Why is he excused to-day? Well, simply because the evidence collected in regard to his life and character proves that he was really what his epitaph calls him. He was foolish in his generosity, just as he was foolish in other things, but nobly foolish. He made little or no use of money for himself, but gave away what he had, right and left, whenever he saw suffering or pain. He never deliberately—that is, knowingly—acted unkindly to those about him. His whole soul was supremely generous. But his mind had been unbalanced by false doctrines regarding society, and often in doing what he believed to be right, he stumbled into doing what was sadly wrong. Even in his cruelty to Harriet, it is tolerably certain that he did not know he was cruel, did not know that he was unjust. There is a Japanese proverb to the effect that the gods do not punish those who do not know. And to-day the English world forgives the wrong that Shelley did, though it could not have forgiven him while he

lived; it thinks of him as a foolish handsome boy, more to be pitied than blamed, and it is even proud of him because, although only a boy, he bequeathed to literature the finest lyrical work, in some respects, of the nineteenth century. There has been only one other lyrical poet to compare with Shelley—that is Swinburne. Swinburne is the direct follower, the only direct follower, of Shelley that we have.

Shelley's direct influence was slight, except in the case of Swinburne. But that is because of the supreme difficulty of imitating him. Shelley has less solid matter in him than any other English poet who has reached the first rank. When I say solid matter, I refer especially to thought, which is the solid matter of literature, whether it takes the form of emotional expression or descriptive narration. Shelley is almost what he called his own skylark, "an unbodied spirit." There is no body; there is nothing warm and firm to touch; there is only a voice, and even what that voice is saying we cannot always understand. But it is very sweet,—very sweet indeed; and as we listen, even without understanding it, the voice touches the heart, and makes the fine thrill which only great poets make. It is not possible to define the methods of this ghostliest of singers; we must be content to feel them. What he did for English poetry was to create a new emotional utterance, not to be imitated; and to show lyrical possibilities that had never been dreamed of before his time, not even by Coleridge.

Yet there is very little of Shelley that is truly great. His first long poem, "Queen Mab," with its famous attack on Christianity, is very light and vague and unsatisfactory. His "Revolt of Islam" is much superior; but we cannot say of it, "No other poet could have written this." We feel that other poets might have done even better. And besides the comparative weakness of the longer poems, there is a drawback that the text has in many cases never been properly finished. Shelley's poems are full of gaps—lines with words left out, beginnings that have no ending, and endings that have no beginning. I should not advise you to waste any

time with the longer poems; they do not show Shelley at his best. It is different when we come to drama. There are two grand dramas—"Prometheus Unbound," based upon Greek studies, and the marvellous and horrible drama of "The Cenci." The story of Beatrice Cenci, you know, is a story of incest and murder, a frightful episode of Italian history. Here Shelley is very great; this is the greatest tragedy written by an Englishman since the days of Webster and Ford, but it is not actable—no English audience of to-day would endure it. I advise you to read it, however, because it is the only one of Shelley's large efforts in which we have a display of force. The Greek tragedy, or drama, is ethereal, supersensuous, utterly extramundane—and by so much below the Greek idea of what a drama should be. For music and beauty of words, it is indeed very wonderful, but it has a number of shortcomings, and only part of it represents Shelley's highest. In spite of the dramas, we must confess that Shelley's greatness is to be sought for—especially by the student—in his lyrical poems.