

CHAPTER XX

COLERIDGE

SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE was as much the opposite of Wordsworth in character as any man could be. He was excessively sensitive, imaginative, emotional; he had no force of character whatever, and was incapable even of taking care of himself. Weak and erratic, latterly a prey to the vice of opium, he passed his whole life wandering about from place to place, begging for charity of friends, and finally dying in a state of utter misery.

He was born in 1772, the son of a clergyman. As a child he was petted and perhaps spoiled a little, by the love of his parents, but, under any circumstances, he never could have developed much force of character or of body. He had inherited over-sensibility, and even in the time of boyhood, he could not act like other children, so that at school he was made very unhappy. He showed wonderful ability at study, reading Greek easily and even translating difficult Greek poetry at the age of fifteen. But he had few companions or friends, and gave all his time to reading instead of playing. Yet as an illustration of his eccentric character, it may be remarked that in the middle of his school-course he wanted to give up study, and to become a shoemaker! When he went to the university of Cambridge, he did something just as queer. Although the most promising student of his class, he ran away in the middle of the term, and enlisted as a common soldier in a cavalry regiment in London. Nobody knew at the university what had become of him for more than two months. Then he was discovered, and his friends bought his freedom. There are several curious stories about how he was found. One is that he heard some officers of his regiment talking about the Greek

poet Euripides, and that he corrected a mistake which one of them had made in attempting to quote Euripides from memory. This may or may not be true, but Coleridge was certainly capable of doing it. The university proved very kind to him; he was only reprimanded, and allowed to proceed with his studies. But the studies were never concluded, for reasons which will presently appear.

Among Coleridge's university friends was the poet Robert Southey, a student at Oxford. Both of these young men were under the spell of an idealism which then influenced many minds—the dream of a perfect human society, a perfect communism, in which there was to be a great deal of intellectual and philosophical enjoyment, with very little hard work. It was an era of wild theories. Southey and Coleridge determined to establish what they called a “Pantisocracy” in the solitudes of America. The society was to consist of about thirty gentlemen and thirty ladies; every member was to contribute one hundred and twenty-five pounds; there was to be no government, but a sort of communal regulation only; and all property was to be in common. As for the marriage question, measures might be adopted allowing the members to dissolve their marriages in case the bond proved less pleasant than had been expected—and nobody was to be obliged to work more than three or four hours a day.

Of course such a scheme was not likely to succeed under any circumstances; many such schemes were actually tried in America at a later day by much more capable persons than these two young students, and they failed. But the lads were very earnest, and they made up their minds that in order to prepare for their undertaking, it was necessary to get married as soon as possible. Southey introduced Coleridge to the daughters of a respectable friend in trade; and the result was that the two young men married two of the young ladies. But this naturally ended the university course; both left without taking their degree. Unfortunately, worse things were in store for them. Southey was im-

mediately disinherited by a rich relative, and there was nothing in the world for either of the bridegrooms to do but to get employment at once, so as to support themselves and their families. Southey was really a noble and strong man, in spite of his youthful follies, and marriage sobered him. He was soon able to do very well, and did well all his life. Coleridge, on the other hand, never was able to support either his wife or himself, and always lived upon the kindness of friends.

Now there are thousands of extraordinary stories about Coleridge, but I have said enough to suggest to you what the weak side of his character was. Nevertheless you must not think harshly of him. He had no strong side to his character at all; but he had a beautiful side, and he was always loved even by those who despised his weakness. He had a marvellous capacity for making himself agreeable by mere natural effort, without any hypocrisy; he had a magical tongue, and nobody could resist the charm of his eloquence; and last, but not least, he was intensely amiable, incapable of being unkind or malicious with intention. We might compare him to one who remained all his life in the state of childhood, seeking caresses, seeking love, supremely innocent of practical matters, and totally incapable of helping himself. Indeed, his friends treated him after the manner of a pet child; and if you should ever take the pains to read his letters to them, you will observe that he writes just like a child, just as innocently, as emotionally, and as foolishly.

But this is not the whole of Coleridge, who was in some respects one of the most extraordinary men that ever lived. The great German poet and philosopher, Goethe, said of Byron, "When he begins to think, he is a child." Byron was the most manly and aggressive of beings in real literary and social life, but he could not give anything new to philosophy; as a thinker, he was indeed only a child. Now with Coleridge exactly the contrary fact obtained. Coleridge was a child in his life, in his helplessness, in his weaknesses;

but when he sat down to think, he was a very great thinker. He was so much of a thinker that he was able to influence the whole intellect of England in matters of religious feeling. This work does not belong to his poetry; it belongs to his prose, and we cannot give it much attention here. But I can say that, in the opinion of excellent judges, the great religious movement, called the Oxford movement, in which so many great English names were afterwards to figure, was very largely caused by Coleridge. German philosophy, Greek philosophy, and mediæval philosophy equally attracted this extraordinary mind, and were equally absorbed into it. If Coleridge never could give us a philosophical system, he could at least give us astonishing flashes of great thought upon the most difficult subjects, psychological and other; and there are very few deep thinkers of our own age who have not at some time or other made quotations from his work. Now you will perceive better what a strange being he must have been.

Is it not then extraordinary to think of Coleridge as the companion and fellow-worker of Wordsworth, through a period of years? There could only have been two possible consequences of such a partnership. One was that Coleridge should be dominated by the cold strong character of Wordsworth; the other was that Wordsworth should have been bewitched by the eloquence and the sympathetic charm of Coleridge. And both of these things actually happened. Wordsworth was always, as might be expected, the master; and when he gave Coleridge very plainly to understand that he wished certain work to be done in a certain way, or not done at all, Coleridge wrote so like Wordsworth, that you could not tell the poetry of one from the poetry of the other. On the other hand, when Wordsworth told Coleridge, "Do as you please, write in your own way," then Coleridge would produce such novel and beautiful things as "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," or "Christabel." Wordsworth never would have allowed any man really to influence him, but Coleridge was able to charm him, to please him, and to

suggest to him a great number of beautiful thoughts—that was why he endured him.

Many other persons besides Wordsworth would have been glad to endure Coleridge, and to pay him a very handsome salary for writing so much a year. Could he have been made to work steadily, he would have been a fortune to any publisher. But sustained effort was not in his nature at any time, and from about the middle of his life he became a prey to opium, a vice which renders sustained effort almost impossible. All that he ever did was accordingly done by fits and starts, in fragments, in shreds, in patches. Even the poems which had made him famous, are, with one exception, incomplete; and if "The Ancient Mariner" happens to be complete, the fact is possibly due to the power of Wordsworth over Coleridge in the days before Coleridge became an opium-eater.

Let us say a word about the extraordinarily small quantity of this work. If you look at the one volume edition of Coleridge's poems published by Macmillan, you will find that there are more than seven hundred pages in the book, and you might be deceived by the bulk of it into supposing that Coleridge wrote a great deal of poetry. But on examination you would observe that half of the volume is made up of notes, biography, and reprints of the variations in the text of different editions. Of the remaining half, two-thirds at least represents dramas and translations; and of the few pages devoted to poetry proper, there are much less than a hundred having any value. The fact is that Coleridge wrote only about twenty-two hundred lines of good poetry; but those two thousand and two hundred lines are such poetry that there is nothing greater in English past or present, and can scarcely be anything greater in the English of the future.

Fifteen hundred lines of the amount above mentioned represent the great poem—greatest of all Coleridge's work—"The Rime of the Ancient Mariner." Six hundred lines represent the fragment of "Christabel." Then we have the

very short fragment, "Kubla Khan." The rest of the amount is given by the poem "Love," an exquisite ballad. Everybody ought to know these four compositions. But outside of them there is scarcely anything of value in Coleridge as a whole; you must pick out verses here and there in order to find additional beauty. There are, for example, in the ballad of "The Three Graves," in the fragment entitled "The Dark Ladie," etc., beautiful passages; but the work, considered as a whole, is far below the level of the four masterpieces mentioned. I know that you may find a few other wonderful things, but they are not original. The magnificent dithyramb, called "The Visit of the Gods," is not an imitation, but an actual translation from Schiller; the wonderful little verses which teach English students the meaning of the terms of prosody, such as this—

In the hexameter rises the fountain's silvery column;
In the pentameter aye falling in melody back,

are, with one exception, translated from the German. For Coleridge, I am sorry to say, was sometimes a plagiarist. There is no more poetry to speak of; but there is one splendid, matchless, piece of weird prose, "The Wanderings of Cain." This extraordinary production, comparable to nothing else in English literature except the prose poetry of Blake, which it surpasses, is unfortunately a fragment also. Coleridge never finished any composition longer than a ballad. But perhaps this really makes the charm, or adds to the charm, of certain fragments. Imagination is thus excited without being satisfied, and you know that some of the best work of Poe is purposely put into fragmentary form.

Now let us see what Coleridge did for English literature, with only two thousand odd lines of verse. No other modern poet, not one, has had so great and so lasting an influence. That you may judge the extent of the influence, listen to the following facts. First of all, Scott, having heard "Christabel" recited to him before it was published, adopted

the metre, wrote his "Lay of the Last Minstrel" in imitation, and founded all the mass of his narrative poetry upon the same basis. Byron did the very same thing—and, mind you, before "Christabel" had been published at all! Indeed, it was Byron who induced Murray to publish it. Shelley, Keats, and after them nearly every other great poet of our time, have shown to some extent the influence of Coleridge. There is a great deal of Coleridge in the early work even of Tennyson. There are traces of this influence in Browning. And, as for Rossetti, who hated the poetry of Wordsworth, he represents the very highest possible expression of Coleridge's teaching and inspiration.

Now what did Coleridge do? He invented a new form of verse, which everybody adopted after him. When I say invented, I mean in the ordinary and true sense of invention. As a matter of scientific fact, there is no such thing possible as invention in the vulgar understanding of that word. All invention is but a recombination of what has already been. The elements of Coleridge's invention existed, scattered through English poetry, long before he was born. But he was the first to weld them together so as to make an entirely new form of narrative poetry.

He invented a verse which is the most flexible and the most musical in which a story can possibly be told. The body of the verse is mostly lines of eight syllables; but these sometimes shrink up to four syllables only, and sometimes lengthen out to twelve syllables. Thus there is a range of from four to twelve. In rhyme the form is equally flexible. Rhymes may change places; they may double at will in the same line. Finally cadences change, and verse that is iambic for, say, half a page may then suddenly become trochaic. Thus every possible liberty which a poet could wish for exists in this measure. Nothing is wanting. Alliteration and double rhymes give a particular richness to the verse, as in these examples—

In mist or *cloud*, on mast or *shroud*
 It perched for vespers nine;
 Whiles all the *night*, through fog-smoke *white*,
 Glimmered the white Moon-shine.

.
 The *fair breeze blew*, the white foam *flew*,
 The furrow followed *free*,
 We were the *first* that ever *burst*
 Into that silent sea.

.
 And ice mast-*high* came floating *by*,
 As green as emerald.

.
 'Tis the middle of night by the *castle-clock*,
 And the owls have awakened the *crowing cock*;
 Tu—whit!—Tu—whoo!
 And hark, again! the *crowing cock*.
 How drowsily it crew.

The last example, from "Christabel," especially shows the elasticity of the verse.

Now we see the immense advantage that such a measure as this affords to narrative poetry. In the first place, monotony is avoided; and monotony is one of the main obstacles to most forms of narrative verse. Rhyme in narrative verse when copious is unbearable, except in short pieces; and even the Spenserian stanza has become intolerable to modern ears. But in the form imagined by Coleridge one has the opportunity of using rhyme, alliteration or different kinds of feet at will. To use rhymes constantly alternating in the same way would be tiresome; therefore the rhymes are made to alternate in a great variety of ways. At moments they are doubled, to give more musical effect; at other times they are reduced. The line may lengthen or shorten according to the tone of the emotion to be expressed; the cadences can change according to change of feeling. No wonder that Scott and Byron availed themselves immediately of the new discovery. Yet neither of them

could obtain the same effects with it as Coleridge did. Coleridge is always exquisite in this kind of verse; Byron never, and Scott only at occasional moments. You will observe also that nearly everything of value written by Coleridge is in this form, except the ballads. In "The Ancient Mariner" the form is least varied; in "Kubla Khan" the variation is most striking.

So much for the influence of Coleridge on prosody. But he had another influence also, of an even more far-reaching kind. He infused into poetry something new in tone, in feeling, in emotional expression. It is very hard to define this something precisely; you must be able to feel it. It is something ghostly. The feeling of the supernatural was expressed by Coleridge in a much finer way than it had been ever expressed by any one before. And it is the sentiment of the supernatural in Coleridge which afterwards so beautifully affected the imaginative work of Rossetti in directions that Coleridge never dreamed of.