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LORD BYRON IN SWITZERLAND

by

Stanley Mason

On 15th January 1816 Lady Byron, née Anne Isabella Milbanke, left her husband's London home to visit her parents, taking with her their month-old daughter, Augusta Ada. She was never to return.

The marriage had been doomed from the first. Anne Milbanke was an innocent, strait-laced girl from the North. Byron himself was what we should today call a playboy, and one of no mean vintage. His father had been called Mad Jack, he himself had early plunged into youthful excesses and was known to nurture an all too ardent affection for his half-sister. In addition to all this the first cantos of *Childe Harold* had made Byron the romantic idol of educated Europe, turning the sensitive and passionate boy with the club foot into a myth of far more than James Dean proportions. From all this his marriage had been little more than an ill-advised and ill-starred attempt at escape. The legal separation papers were signed in spring 1816. With the drone of the scandal-mongers about his ears, Byron now fled the country, a voluntary exile. Europe, recently delivered from Napoleon's dominion, was open to him. He visited the field of Waterloo, and at once resumed the account of his travels and impressions begun in *Childe Harold*.

Unfortunately we cannot absolve Byron of all shadow of guilty intent even here. Not so much because he used his exile as an outlet for some of his histrionic exhibitionism, to rehearse the "pageant of his bleeding heart"; but because his journey also took him straight down the Rhine to Switzerland, and there to the shores of the Lake of Geneva. Already waiting for him there was one Claire Clairmont, an actress who had insinuated herself into his ready affections at the Royal Theatre in Drury Lane. Whether this amorous encounter was a secret purpose of his journey or not we shall probably never know, but the fact remains that after their Swiss liaison Claire bore Byron a child, the girl Allegra, who later died in an Italian convent where the poet had placed her against her mother's will.

This picture of George Gordon, sixth Lord Byron, would be grossly unfair to him if it were not at once added that his stay in Switzerland from spring to October 1816 also produced some very good poetry and had repercussions not without importance to the cultural life of Europe. While Byron stayed at the Villa Diodati near Geneva he was in regular contact with Shelley, who was then at Sécheron, and their exchanges were mutually fructifying. It was a boat trip with Shelley on Lake Leman that prompted Byron to write his famous poem *The Prisoner of Chillon*. The hero of the piece is the sixteenth-century local patriot Bonivard, who languished in Chillon's dungeons, and although the exiled Byron himself shines through this figure in places, the poem has depth and the love of freedom it expresses is unquestionably genuine.

It was Shelley, too who read to Byron his own translation of the first part of Goethe's *Faust*, the influence of which can be traced in Byron's lyrical drama *Manfred*. They likewise shared an interest in Rousseau which lent an added charm and excitement to the scenes they visited ("Clarens! sweet Clarens, birthplace of deep Love!") on and around the Lake of Geneva.

In the summer of 1816 Byron paid several visits to Madame de Staél at Coppet, a woman as famous and as widely travelled as he was himself, and endowed with a no less indomitable spirit. Madame de Staél even attempted

to effect a reconciliation between the poet and his wife; but Anne would hear nothing of it; and that was no doubt for the best.

While the Shelleys returned to England at the end of the summer, Byron stayed on in Switzerland long enough to tour the Bernese Oberland with his friend Hobhouse, and some of his impressions are contained in his drama *Manfred*. Once more the hero is an incarnation of the *homme fatal*, a role the author was never completely to shake off.

Byron's travels as an exile had a lasting influence in at least two ways. Above all, the eyes of a Europe already chafing under the repression of the Holy Alliance were on him, for Byron had come to be a symbol of liberty. Thus his writings certainly helped to foment the Russian rising of 1825, one of whose leaders carried a volume of Byron's poems with him to the scaffold. Secondly, Byron — though never a lyric poet of the highest order — was perhaps the world's most brilliant tourist. Intelligent, impressionable, well-informed and quick at languages, he was a travel writer of wit and genius who happened to employ the least likely of all forms — the Spenserian stanza.

This does not detract in any way from the authenticity of his work. His lines may sometimes be slipshod or pathetic, but his feeling for nature is genuine, his sense of scene is as powerful as his impatience of oppression and prudery. His fervent descriptions of the Swiss landscape left such a mark on English readers and writers that many of them followed in his footsteps — including Tennyson, Arnold and even Longfellow. It was Arnold who was later to write:

When Byron's eyes were shut in death,
We bow'd our head and held our breath,
He taught us little: but our soul
Had *felt* him like the thunder's roll.

Appropriately enough, Byron had always identified himself with the thunderstorm, and in *Childe Harold* he describes in detail one that occurred in Western Switzerland towards midnight of 13th June 1816. His lines still echo in the memories of thousands of Englishmen who learnt them at school:

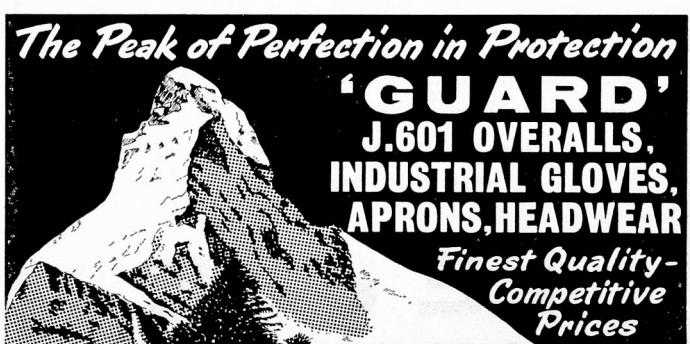
Far along,
From peak to peak, the rattling crags among
Leaps the live thunder! Not from one lone cloud,
But every mountain now hath found a tongue,
And Jura answers from her misty shroud
Back to the joyous Alps, who call to her aloud!

(By courtesy "Switzerland", S.N.T.O.)

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