Shelley
WE love to read Shelley, and yet it makes us sad. His was a mind singularly gifted with poetic talent, sadly united with much that is corrupt in principle and morality. The grandeur of his conceptions and the perfection of poetical expression everywhere abounding in his works, attract the mind by an irresistible force; while the simplicity of his life, the kindness of his heart, and his unyielding devotion to what he believed to be the truth, arouse our deepest sympathy. We honor his genius; we admire his ardent—though false—philanthropy, which compelled him to be ever active in battling against those institutions of society which to him seemed the cause of all human suffering. He beheld and lamented over the wretchedness of his fellows. He set himself up as a reformer, vehement and fanatical, indeed, but eminently sincere. He saw the evil and thought he had found the remedy. He acted up to his belief; and for this we admire him, remembering

—"how easier far,
Devout enthusiasm is than a good action."

With the confidence of fanaticism he obtruded upon the public the startling principles of his morality, and very naturally met the fate of those who boldly array themselves against opinions which mankind believe and venerate, and principles which are intimately connected with the safety of society. He has accordingly been decried as an infidel—a blasphemer. He has been accused of developing theories of loose morality, as an excuse for his own vices. But we cannot join those who take pleasure in heaping calumnies upon his defenceless head. His errors, indeed, were great, but we believe they were errors of the head, not of the heart. And that we may form a just estimate of Shelley, it is necessary to know something of the man, as well as of his writings.

Percy Bysshe Shelley, eldest son of Sir Timothy Shelley, was born at Field Place, on the 4th of August, 1792. He was brought up under the paternal roof, and with his sisters, was there taught the elements of Greek and Latin. He subsequently spent some time at Sion House, Brentford, and at Eton School, and entered University College, Oxford, at the age of sixteen. He was soon expelled from Oxford, for publishing a syllabus of Hume's Essays, with inferences of his own, called the "Necessity of Atheism." He soon after greatly displeased his father and friends by marrying a girl much younger than himself. This marriage, as might have been expected, was a very unhappy one. Their union was of short duration; for in the spring of 1813, they separated, and his wife went to reside with her father. Her death, by suicide, occurred about two years afterwards. He subsequently married a Miss Godman, with whom he appears to have lived very happily until the end of his life. He left England in 1817, and hence-
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forth resided partly at Venice and partly at Pisa. During a temporary residence at Lerici, in 1822, he visited his friend, Leigh Hunt, at Leghorn, and when returning, the boat in which he sailed was lost in a violent storm, and all on board perished. Such is a brief sketch of the life of one who experienced the poet's blighted hopes and the world's ingratitude.

His life was short and unhappy, and his death melancholy in the extreme. And when we look at those gems of surpassing beauty that adorn even the wildest of his poetical imaginings, we cannot but regret that a mind so highly gifted—so fruitful of good as well as of evil—should have been stilled in death, before experience had taught it wisdom, and more mature thought purified the fountain which poisoned all its streams. His motives may have been pure, and we believe they were. His errors sprang, not from a settled determination to teach what was unsound in morality, but from the wrong bent given to his mind by the neglect of those who had the care of his early education. Neither his parents nor teachers seem to have thought of any training but that of the mind. The heart was left to take care of itself. And any one who has a just idea of the susceptibility of the mind, at an early age, to demoralizing influences will not wonder that Shelley, thus left to himself, imbibed principles so essentially wrong. It has been well said that, "the highest of the parent's obligations finds its sphere in the moral and religious training of his offspring. The superior importance of this department of education is sufficiently apparent, from the consideration that whilst both the mind and the body, left to themselves, and wholly neglected by parent and teacher, spontaneously acquire from their own activity, and from the business and conflicts of the world, the discipline as well as the knowledge and skill, most valuable in the pursuits of after life; the moral susceptibilities, if neglected, are always perverted and corrupted. The most careful and unremitted culture is requisite to preserve them from the most irremediable deterioration. They come to no good by any spontaneous, unguided efforts or essays of their own—they will not remain in a state of embryo or torpor, till genial influences and a plastic hand woo and guide them with kindly manifestations. To let the child alone, is to insure both precocity and proficiency in evil." This is the position in which Shelley was unfortunately placed by those who should have been the guardians of his early life, who should have attended both to the training of his mind and the education of his heart.

While at school he seems to have read with avidity all the novels and romances the circulating libraries threw in his way, and at Oxford his constant companion was Hume's Essays. As a very natural result of such reading we find him becoming skeptical in his opinions, and producing Queen Mab, in which he denies the existence of the Creator of the world, and speaks of a spirit of the Universe, and a co-eternal fairy of the earth. This is the first fruit of his lessons in skepticism.

There is, indeed, no surer way of poisoning the youthful mind than to make it familiar with objections against the doctrines of religion. The
answers may accompany the objections—the bane and the antidote may go together—the effect will nevertheless be pernicious. The inquisitive mind will set itself to start new objections for the glory of finding a solution to them. "Next to making a child an infidel, is the letting him know there are infidels at all. Credulity is the man’s weakness, but the child’s strength. O, how ugly sound scriptural doubts from the mouth of a babe and a suckling!"

We see no reason to affirm, as some have done, that in his later years he changed his views of Christianity, but we think he did somewhat modify them. In his early productions he treats Christianity with the utmost hatred and malignity, and speaks of its author with the greatest contempt; but in the Revolt of Islam, he states that "the erroneous and degrading idea, which men have conceived of a Supreme Being, is spoken against, but not the Supreme Being himself.” And had he lived longer he would probably have seen fit to change entirely his views of religion.

There is a marked difference between Shelley and some others of the same school. However corrupt the tendency of his theories, his life was comparatively blameless. He hazarded theories which his life contradicted; for his domestic habits were widely different from those which, in the dreams of his distempered fancy, he dwelt upon with so much delight. The following passage, written with the natural partiality of a wife, while it passes over in silence many dangerous opinions, bears noble testimony to his moral worth, and inclines us to look upon the wanderings of his erring spirit more in sorrow than in anger.

"The comparative solitude in which Mr. Shelley lived was the occasion that he was personally known to few; and his fearless enthusiasm in the cause, which he considered the most sacred upon earth, the improvement of the moral and physical state of mankind, was the chief reason why he, like other illustrious reformers, was pursued by hatred and calumny. No man was ever more devoted than he to the endeavor of making those around him happy; no man ever possessed friends more unfeignedly attached to him. The ungrateful world did not feel his loss, and the gap it made seemed to close as quickly over his memory as the murderous sea above his living frame. Hereafter men will lament that his transcendent powers of intellect were extinguished before they had bestowed on them their choicest treasures. To his friends his loss is irremediable; the wise, the brave, the gentle, is gone forever! He is to them as a bright vision, whose radiant track, left behind in the memory, is worth all the realities that society can afford. Before the critics contradict me, let them appeal to any one who had ever known him: to see him was to love him; and his presence, like Ithuriel’s spear, was alone sufficient to disclose the falsehood of the tale which his enemies whispered in the ears of the ignorant world.”

* Charles Lamb.