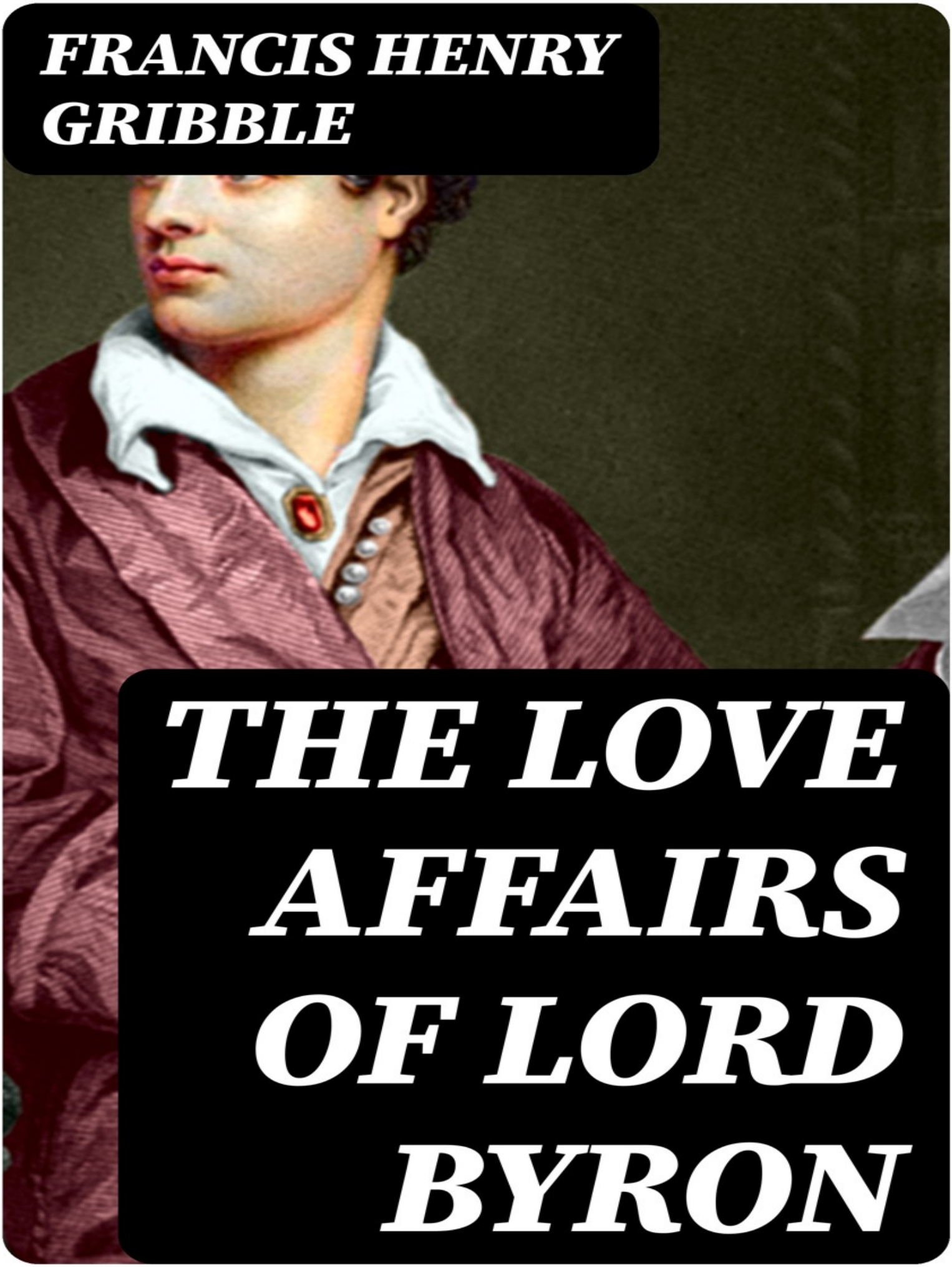
FRANCIS HENRY GRIBBLE



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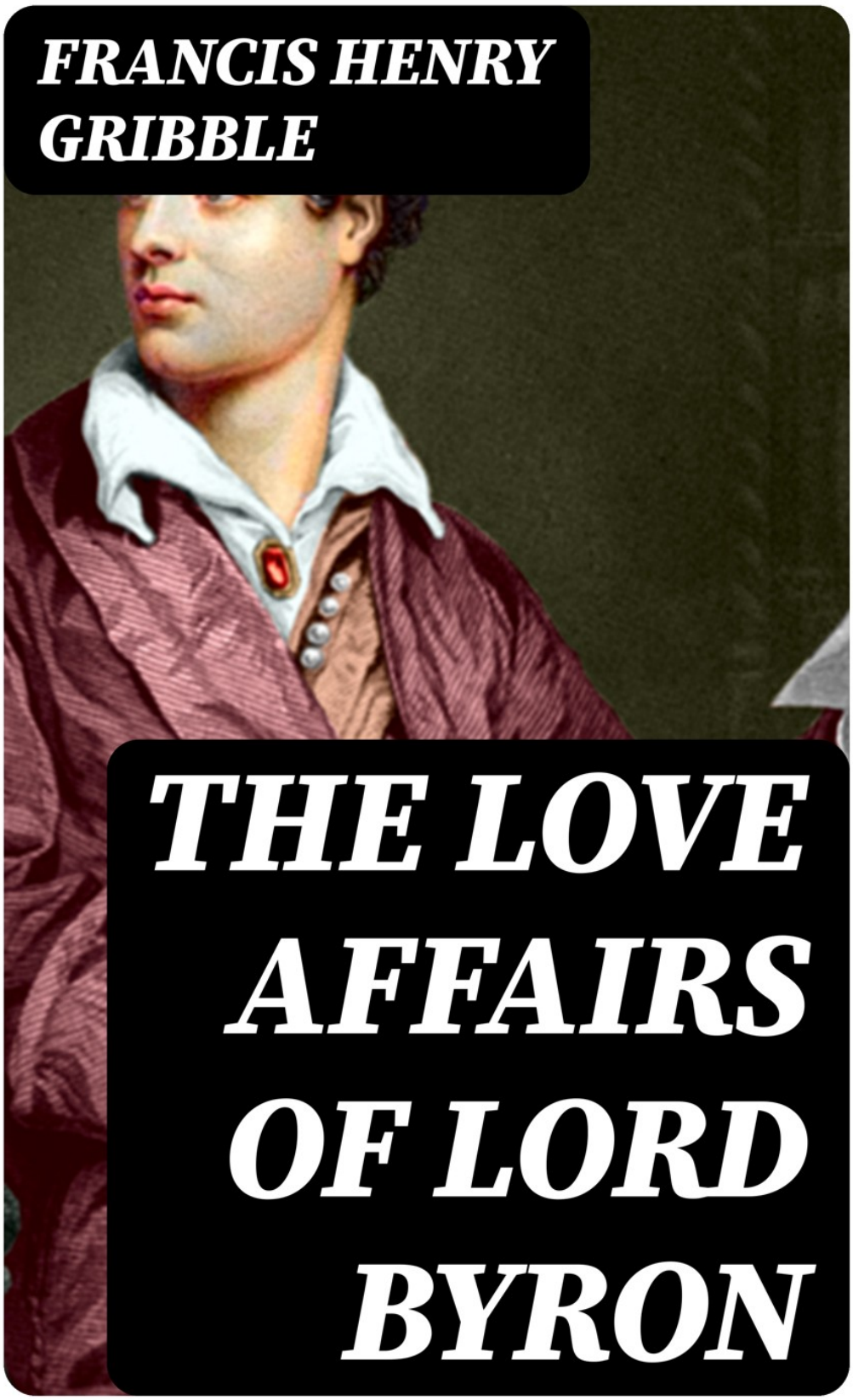

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Francis Henry Gribble

The Love Affairs of Lord Byron

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PREFACE

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Whether a book is called “The Love Affairs of Lord Byron” or “The Life of Lord Byron” can make very little difference to the contents of its pages. Byron’s love affairs were the principal incidents of his life, and almost the only ones. Like Chateaubriand, he might have spoke of “a procession of women” as the great panoramic effect of his career. He differed from Chateaubriand, however, in the first place, in not professing to be very much concerned by the pageant, and, in the second place, in being, in reality, very deeply affected by it. Chateaubriand kept his emotions well in hand, exaggerating them in retrospect for the sake of literary effect, picturing the sensibility of his heart in polished phrases, but never giving the impression of a man who has suffered through his passions, or been swept off his feet by them, or diverted by them from the pursuit of ambition or the serene cult of the all-important ego. In all Chateaubriand’s love affairs, in short, red blood is lacking and self-consciousness prevails. He appears to be equally in love with all the women in the procession; the explanation being that he is more in love with himself than with any of them. In spite of the procession of women, which is admitted to have been magnificent, it may justly be said of Chateaubriand that love was “of his life a thing apart.”

Of Byron, who coined the phrase (though Madame de Staël had coined it before him) it cannot be said. It may appear to be true of sundry of his incidental love affairs, but it cannot stand as a broad generalisation. His whole life was

deflected from its course, and thrown out of gear: first, by his unhappy passion for Mary Chaworth; secondly, by the way in which women of all ranks, flattering his vanity for the gratification of their own, importuned him with the offer of their hearts. Lady Byron herself did so no less than Lady Caroline Lamb, and Jane Clairmont, and the Venetian light o’ loves, though, no doubt, with more delicacy and a better show of maidenly reserve. Fully persuaded in her own mind that he had pined for her for two years, she delicately hinted to him that he need pine no longer. He took the hint and married her, with the catastrophic consequences which we know. Then other women—a long series of other women—did what they could to break his fall and console him. He dallied with them for years, without ever engaging his heart very deeply, until at last he realised that this sort of dalliance was a very futile and enervating occupation, tore himself away from his last entanglement, and crossed the sea to strike a blow for freedom.

That is Byron’s life in a nutshell. His biographer, it is clear, has no way of escape from his love affairs; while the critic is under an obligation, almost equally compelling, to take note of them. It is not merely that he was continually writing about them, and that the meaning of his enigmatic sentences can, in many cases, only be unravelled by the help of the clue which a knowledge of his love affairs provides. The striking change which we see the tone of his work undergoing as he grows older is the reflection of the history of his heart. Many of his later poems might have been written in mockery of the earlier ones. He had his illusions in his youth. In his middle-age, if he can be said to

have reached middle-age, he had none, but wrote, to the distress of the Countess Guiccioli, as a man who delighted to tear aside, with a rude hand, the striped veil of sentiment and hypocrisy which hid the ugly nakedness of truth. The secret of that transformation is written in the record of his love affairs, and can be read nowhere else. His life lacks all unity and all consistency unless the first place in it is given to that record.

Since the appearance of Moore's Life, and even since the appearance of Cordy Jeaffreson's "Real Lord Byron," a good deal of new information has been made available. The biographer has to take cognisance of the various documents brought together in Mr. Murray's latest edition of Byron's Writings and Letters; of Hobhouse's "Account of the Separation"; of the "Confessions," for whatever they may be worth, elicited from Jane Clairmont and first printed in the *Nineteenth Century*; of Mr. Richard Edgcumbe's "Byron: the Last Phase"; and of the late Lord Lovelace's privately printed work, "Astarte."

The importance of each of these authorities will appear when reference is made to it in the text. It will be seen, then, that some of the Murray MSS. give precision to the narrative of Byron's relations with Lady Caroline Lamb, and that others effectually dispose of Cordy Jeaffreson's theory that Lady Byron's mysterious grievance—the grievance which caused her lawyer to declare reconciliation impossible—was her husband's intimacy with Miss Clairmont. Others of them, again, as effectually confute Cordy Jeaffreson's amazing doctrine that Byron only brought railing accusations against his wife because he loved her, and that

at the time when he denounced her as “the moral Clytemnestra of thy lord,” he was in reality yearning to be recalled to the nuptial bed. Concerning “Astarte” some further remarks may be made.

It is a disgusting and calumnious compilation, designed, apparently, to show that Byron’s descendants accept the worst charges preferred against him by his enemies during his lifetime. Those charges are such that one would have expected a member of the family to hold his tongue about them, even if he were in possession of evidence conclusively demonstrating their truth. That a member of the family should have revived the charges on the strength of evidence which may justly be described as not good enough to hang a dog on almost surpasses belief. Still, the thing has been done, and the biographer’s obligations are affected accordingly. Unpleasant though the subject is, he must examine the so-called evidence for fear lest he should be supposed to feel himself unable to rebut it; and he is under the stronger compulsion to do so because the mud thrown by Lord Lovelace is not thrown at Byron only, but also at Augusta Leigh, a most worthy and womanly woman, and the best of sisters and wives. It is the hope and belief of the present writer that he has succeeded in definitely clearing her character, together with that of her brother, and demonstrated that the legend of the crime, so industriously inculated by Byron’s grandson, has no shadow of foundation in fact.

Francis Gribble

CHAPTER I

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ANCESTORS, PARENTS, AND HEREDITARY INFLUENCES

The Byrons came over with the Conqueror, helped him to conquer, and were rewarded with a grant of landed estates in Lancashire. Hundreds of years elapsed before they distinguished themselves either for good or evil, or emerged from the ruck of the landed gentry. There were Byrons at Crecy, and at the siege of Calais; and there probably were Byrons among the Crusaders. There is even a legend of a Byron Crusader rescuing a Christian maiden from the Saracens; but neither the maiden nor the Crusader can be identified. The authentic history of the family only begins with the grant of Newstead Abbey, at the time of the dissolution of the monasteries, to Sir John Byron of Clayton, in Lancashire—a reward, apparently, for services rendered by his father at the Battle of Bosworth Field.

Even so, however, the Byrons remained comparatively inconspicuous[1]; and their records only begin to be full and interesting at the time of the war between Charles I. and his Parliament. Seven Byrons, all brothers, then fought on the King's side; and the most distinguished of the seven was the eldest, another Sir John Byron of Clayton—a loyal, valiant, and impetuous soldier, with more zeal than discretion. It was his charge that broke Haslerig's cuirassiers at Roundway Down. It was in his regiment that Falkland was fighting when he fell at Newbury. On the other hand he helped to lose the battle of Marston Moor by charging

without orders. “By Lord Byron’s improper charge,” Prince Rupert reported, “much harm hath been done.”

He had been given his peerage—with limitations in default of issue male to his six surviving brothers and the issue male of their bodies—in the midst of the war. After Naseby, he went to Paris, and spent the rest of his life in exile. His first wife being dead, he married a second—a lady concerning whom there is a piquant note in Pepys’ Diary. She was, Pepys tells us, one of Charles II.’s mistresses—his “seventeenth mistress aboard,” who, as the diarist proceeds, “did not leave him till she got him to give her an order for £4000 worth of plate; but, by delays, thanks be to God! she died before she got it.”

This first Lord Byron died childless, and the title passed to his brother Richard, who had also distinguished himself in the war on the King’s side. He was one of the colonels whose gallantry at Edgehill the University of Oxford rewarded with honorary degrees; and he was Governor, successively, of Appleby and Newark. He tried to seduce his kinsman, Colonel Hutchinson, from his allegiance to the Parliament, but without avail. “Except,” Colonel Hutchinson told him, “he found his own heart prone to such treachery, he might consider that there was, if nothing else, so much of a Byron’s blood in him that he should very much scorn to betray or quit a trust he had undertaken.”

The third Lord, Richard’s son William, succeeded to the title in 1679. His marriage with Elizabeth, daughter of Viscount Chaworth, brings the name of the heroine of the poet’s first and last love into the story; and he is also notable as the first Byron who had a taste, if not actually a

turn, for literature. Thomas Shipman, the royalist singer whose songs indicate, according to Mr. Thomas Seccombe's criticism in the "Dictionary of National Biography," that "the severe morals of the Roundheads were even less to his taste than their politics," was his intimate friend; and Shipman's "Carolina" contains a set of verses from his pen:

> "*My whole ambition only does extend*
> *To gain the name of Shipman's faithful friend;*
> *And though I cannot amply speak your praise,*
> *I'll wear the myrtle, tho' you wear the bays.*"

That is a fair specimen of the third Lord Byron's poetical style; and it is clear that his descendant did not need to be a great poet in order to improve upon it. Of his son, the fourth Lord, who died in 1736, there is nothing to be said; but his grandson, the fifth Lord, lives in history and tradition as "the wicked Lord Byron." The report of his arraignment before his fellow peers on the charge of murdering his relative, Mr. William Chaworth, in 1765, may be read in the Nineteenth Volume of State Trials, though the most careful reading is likely to leave the rights of the case obscure.

The tragedy, whatever the rights of it, occurred after one of the weekly dinners of the Nottinghamshire County Club, at the Star and Garter Tavern in Pall Mall. The quarrel arose out of a heated discussion on the subject of preserving game—a topic which country gentlemen are particularly liable to discuss with heat. Lord Byron is said to have advocated leniency, and Mr. Chaworth severity, towards poachers. The argument led to a wager; and the two men went upstairs together—apparently for the purpose of

arranging the terms of the wager—and entered a room lighted only by a dull fire and a single candle. As soon as the door was closed, they drew their swords and fought, and Lord Byron ran Mr. Chaworth through the body.

Those are the only points on which all the depositions agree. Lord Byron said that Chaworth, who was the better swordsman of the two, challenged him to fight, and that the fight was conducted fairly. The case for the prosecution was that Chaworth did not mean to fight, and that Lord Byron attacked him unawares. Chaworth, though he lingered for some hours, and was questioned on the subject, said nothing to exonerate his assailant. That, broadly speaking, was the evidence on which the peers had to come to their decision; and they found Lord Byron not guilty of murder but guilty of manslaughter. Pleading his privilege as a peer, he was released on payment of the fees.

Society, however, inclined to the view that he had not fought fairly. Two years before he had been Master of the Stag-hounds. Now he was cut by the county, and relapsed into misanthropic debauchery. He quarrelled with his son, the Honorable William Byron, sometime M.P. for Morpeth, for contracting a marriage of which he disapproved. He drove his wife away from Newstead by his brutality, and consorted with a low-born “Lady Betty.” The stories of his shooting his coachman and trying to drown his wife were untrue, but his neighbours believed them, and behaved accordingly; and an unpleasant picture of his retirement may be found in Horace Walpole’s Letters.

“The present Lord,” Horace Walpole writes, “hath lost large sums, and paid part in old oaks; five thousand pounds

worth have been cut down near the house. *En revanche*, he has built two baby forts to pay his country in castles for the damage done to the Navy, and planted a handful of Scotch firs that look like plough-boys dressed in old family liveries for a public day.”

Playing at naval battles and bombardments, with toy ships, on the little lakes in his park, was, indeed, the favourite, if not the only, recreation of the wicked lord’s old age. It is said that his chief purpose in cutting down the timber was to spite and embarrass his heirs; and he did, at any rate, involve his heir in a law suit almost as long as the famous case of Jarndyce *versus* Jarndyce by means of an improper sale of the Byron property at Rochdale.

His heir, however, was not to be either his son or his grandson. They both predeceased him—the latter dying in Corsica in 1794—and the title and estates passed to the issue of his brother John, known to the Navy List as Admiral Byron, and to the navy as “foul weather Jack.”

The Admiral had been round the world with Anson, had been wrecked on the coast of Chili, and had published a narrative—“my granddad’s narrative”—of his hardships and adventures. He had later been sent round the world on a voyage of discovery on his own account, but had discovered nothing in particular. Finally he had fought, not too successfully, against d’Estaing in the West Indies, and had withdrawn to misanthropic isolation. His son, Captain Byron, of the Guards, known to his contemporaries as “Mad Jack Byron,” was a handsome youth of worthless character, but very fascinating to women. His elopement, while still a

minor, with the Marchioness of Carmarthen, was one of the sensational events of a London season.

Lady Carmarthen’s husband having divorced her, Mad Jack married her in 1778. They lived together in Paris and at Chantilly—prosperously, for the bride had £4000 a year in her own right. A child was born—Augusta, who subsequently married Colonel Leigh; but, in 1784, his wife died, and Captain Byron, heavily in debt, was once more thrown on his own resources. He returned to England to look for an heiress, and he found one in the person of Miss Gordon of Gight, whom he met and married at Bath in 1786.

The fortune, when the landed estates had been realised, amounted to about £23,000; and Captain Byron’s clamorous creditors took most of it. A considerable portion of what was left was quickly squandered in riotous living on the Continent. The ultimate income consisted of the interest (subject to an annuity to Mrs. Byron’s grandmother) on the sum of £4200; and that lamentable financial position had already been reached when Captain and Mrs. Byron came back to England and took a furnished house in Holles Street, where George Noel Gordon, sixth Lord Byron, was born on January 22, 1788.

There we have, in brief outline, all that is essential of the little that is known of Byron’s heredity. If it is not precisely common-place, it is at least undistinguished. No one can ever have generalised from it and said that the Byrons were brilliant, or even—in spite of the third Lord’s conscientious attempts at versification—that they were “literary.” A far more likely generalisation would have been that the Byrons were mad.

They were not quite that, of course, though some of them were eccentric; and those who were eccentric had the courage of their eccentricity. But they were, at least so far as we know them, impetuous and reckless men—men who went through life in the spirit of a bull charging a gate, doing what they chose to do because they chose to do it, with a defiant air of “damn the consequences.” We find that note alike in the first Lord’s “improper charge” on Marston Moor, and the fifth Lord’s improvised duel in the dark room of the Pall Mall tavern, and in Captain Byron’s dashing elopement with a noble neighbour’s wife. We shall catch it again, and more than once, in our survey of the career of the one Byron who has been famous; and we shall see how much his fame owed to his pride, his determined indifference, in spite of his prickly sensitiveness, to public opinion, and his clear-cut, haughty character.

Legh Richmond, the popular evangelical preacher, once said that, if Byron had been as bad a poet as he was a man, his poetry would have done but little harm, but that criticism is almost an inversion of the truth. Byron, in fact, imposed himself far less because his poetry was good than because his personality was strong. He never saw as far into the heart of things as Wordsworth. When he tried to do so, at Shelley’s instigation, he only saw what Wordsworth had already shown; and there are many passages in his work which might fairly be described as being “like Wordsworth only less so.” None of his shorter pieces are fit to stand beside “The world is too much with us,” and he never wrote a line so wonderfully inspired as Wordsworth’s “still, sad music of humanity.”

But he had one advantage over Wordsworth. He spoke out; he was not afraid of saying things. His genius had all the hard riding, neck-or-nothing temper of the earlier, undistinguished Byrons behind it. He was “dowered with the hate of hate, the scorn of scorn,”—and he damned the consequences with the haphazard blasphemy of an aristocrat who feels sure of himself, and has no need to pick his words. He was quite ready to damn them in the presence of ladies, and in the face of kings; and he damned them as one having authority, and not as the democratic upstarts; so that the world listened attentively, wondering what he would say next, and even Shelley, observing how easily he compelled a hearing, was fully persuaded that Byron was a greater poet than himself.

That, in the main, it would seem, was how heredity affected him. The hereditary influences, however, were, in their turn modified by the strange circumstances of his upbringing; and it is time to glance at them, and see how far they help to account for the loneliness and aloofness of Byron’s temperament, for the sensitiveness already referred to, and for the ultimate attitude known as the Byronic pose.

CHAPTER II

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CHILDHOOD AND SCHOOLDAYS AT ABERDEEN, DULWICH, AND HARROW

Captain and Mrs. Byron, finding themselves impoverished, left Holles Street, and retired to Aberdeen, to live on an income of £150 a year. Augusta having been taken off their hands by her grandmother, Lady Holderness, they were alone together, with the baby and the nurse, in cheap and gloomy lodgings; and they soon began to wrangle. It was the old story, no doubt, of poverty coming in at the door and love flying out of the window, leaving only incompatibility of temper behind.

The husband, though inclined to be amiable as long as things went well, was, in modern phrase, a “waster.” The wife, though shrewd and possessed of some domestic virtues, was, in the language of all time, a scold. He wanted to run into debt in order to keep up appearances; she to disregard appearances in order to live within her income. Dinners of many courses and wines of approved vintages seemed to her the superfluities but to him the necessaries of life. He probably did not mince words in expressing his view of the matter; she certainly minced none in expressing hers. There is a strong presumption, too, that she complained of him to her neighbours; for it is well attested in her son’s letters to his sister that she was that sort of woman. So the day came when Captain Byron walked out of the house, vowing that he would live with his wife no longer.

For a time he lived in a separate lodging in the same street. Presently, scraping some money together—borrowing it, that is to say, without any intention of repaying it—he went to France to amuse himself; and in January 1791, at the age of thirty-five, he died at Valenciennes. It has been suggested that he committed suicide, but nothing is known for certain. One of Byron's earliest recollections was of his mother's weeping at the news of her husband's death, and of his own astonishment at her tears. She had continually nagged at him, and heaped abuse on him, while he lived; yet now her distracted shrieks filled the house and disturbed the neighbourhood. That was the child's earliest lesson in the unaccountable ways of women. He was only three at the time—yet old enough to wonder, though not to understand.

His stay at Aberdeen was to last for seven more years. He was to go to school there, and to be accounted a dunce, though not a fool. He was to learn religion there from his nurse, who taught him the dark, alarming Calvinistic doctrine; and he was to develop some of the traits and characteristics which were afterwards to be pronounced. On the whole, indeed, in spite of alleviations, he had a gloomy childhood, by a sense, however imperfectly comprehended, of the contrast between life as it was and life as it ought to have been.

He had been born proud, inheriting quite as much pride from his mother's as from his father's family. He soon came to know that there were such things as old families, and that the Byron family was one of the oldest of them. It was borne in upon him by what he saw and heard that the proper place for a baron was a baronial hall; and he could see that the

apartment in which he was growing up was neither a hall nor baronial. The first apartment occupied by his mother was, in fact, as has already been said, a lodging, and the second was an “upper part,” the furniture of which, when it ultimately came to be sold, fetched exactly £74 17s. 7d.

The boy must have felt—we may depend upon it that his mother told him—that there was something wrong about that; that his school companions were make-shift associates, not really worthy of him; that he was, as it were, a child born in exile, and unjustly kept out of his rights. The feeling must have grown stronger—we may be quite sure that his mother stimulated it—when the unexpected death of his cousin made him the direct heir to the title and estates; and, indeed, it was a feeling to some extent justified by the facts. His great-uncle, the wicked Lord Byron, ought then, as everybody said, to have shown signs of recognition, and to have offered an allowance.

He made no sign, however, and he offered no allowance. Instead of doing so, he went on felling timber, and effected the illegal sale of the Rochdale property already referred too; and for four more years—from the age of six, roughly speaking, to the age of ten—the heir apparent to the barony was living poorly in an Aberdeen “upper part,” while the actual baron was living in luxury and state at Newstead. There were good grounds for bitterness and resentment there; and Mrs. Byron, with her unruly tongue, was the woman to make the most of them. Family pride grew apace under her influence; and there was no other influence to check or counteract it. The boy learnt to be as proud of his

birth as a *parvenu* would like to be—a characteristic of which we shall presently note some examples.

If he was proud, however, he was also sensitive: and it may well have been that his pride was, to some extent, a shield of protection which his sensitiveness threw up. He was sensitive, not only because he was poor when he ought to be rich and insignificant when he ought to be important, but also because he was lame. An injury done at birth to his Achilles tendons prevented him from planting his heels firmly on the ground. He had to trot on the ball of his foot instead of walking; he could not even trot for more than a mile or so at a time. A physical defect of that sort is always a haunting grief to a child—especially so, perhaps, to a child with a dawning consciousness of great mental gifts. It appears to such a child as an irreparable wrong done—a wrong which can never be either righted or avenged—an irremovable mark of inferiority, inviting taunts and gibes.

Byron was sensitive on the subject, fearing that it made him ridiculous, throughout his life, alike when he was the darling and when he was the outcast of society; and various stories show how the deformity embittered his childhood.

“What a pretty boy Byron is! What a pity he has such a leg!” he, one day, heard a lady say to his nurse.

“Dinna speak of it,” he screamed, stamping his foot, and slashing at her with his toy whip.

And then there is the story of his mother who, in one of her fits of passion, called him “a lame brat.”

He drew himself up, and, with a restraint and a concentrated scorn beyond his years, replied in the word which he afterwards put into “The Hunchback”:

“I was born so, mother.”

That was one of the passionate scenes that passed between them—but only one among many; and it was only in the case of this one affront which cut him to the quick, that the child displayed such precocious self-control. More often he answered rage with rage and violence with violence. In one fit of fury he tore his new frock to shreds; in another he tried to stab himself, at table, with a dinner knife. Exactly why he did it, or what he resented, he probably did not know either at the time, or afterwards; but he vaguely felt, no doubt, that something was wrong with the world, and instinct impelled him to kick against the pricks and damn the whole nature of things.

Then, in 1798, came the sudden change of fortune. The wicked Lord Byron was dead at last; and the child of ten was a peer of the realm and the heir to great, though heavily mortgaged estates. He could not take possession of them yet—the embarrassed property needed to be delicately nursed—but still, subject to the charges, they were his. He was taken to look at them, and then, a tenant having been found for Newstead, Mrs. Byron settled, first at Nottingham, and then in London, and her son was sent to school—first to a preparatory school at Dulwich, and then to Harrow.

Even so, however, there remained something strange, abnormal, and uncomfortable about his position. On the one hand, Mrs. Byron, not understanding, or trying to understand, him, nagged and scolded until he lost almost all his natural affection for her. On the other hand, his father’s relatives, whether because they felt that “Mad Jack” had disgraced the family, or because they objected to Mrs.

Byron—who, in truth, in spite of her good birth, was extremely provincial in her style, and of loquacious, mischief-making propensities—were very far from cordial. They had not even troubled to communicate with her when the death of her son's cousin made him the direct heir, but had left her to learn the news accidentally from strangers. Lord Carlisle, the son of his grandfather's sister, Isabella Byron, consented to act as his guardian, but abstained from making friendly overtures.

The fault in that case, however, was almost entirely Mrs. Byron's. There was some dispute between her and Dr. Glennie, her son's Dulwich headmaster—a dispute which culminated in a fit of hysterics in Dr. Glennie's study. Lord Carlisle was appealed to, and the result of his attempt at mediation was that Mrs. Byron practically ordered him out of the house. Byron, of course, could not help that; but, equally of course, he suffered from it. He was neglected, and he was sensible of the neglect. He had come into a world in which he had every right to move, only to be made to feel that he was not wanted there. Born in exile, and having returned from exile, he was cold-shouldered by kinsmen who seemed to think that he would have done better to remain in exile.

Very likely he was, at that age, somewhat of a lout, shy, ill at ease, and unprepossessing. Genius does not necessarily reflect itself in polished behaviour. Aberdeen is not as good a school of manners as Eton, and Mrs. Byron was but an indifferent teacher of deportment. But his pride, it seems clear, was not the less but the greater because of his inability to express it in strict accordance with the rules of the best society. He was a Byron—a peer of the realm—

the senior representative of an ancient house. He knew that respect, and even homage, were due to him; and he felt that he must assert himself—if not in one way, then in another. So, when the Earl of Portsmouth—a peer of comparatively recent creation—presumed to give his ear a friendly pinch, he asserted himself by picking up a sea-shell and throwing it at the Earl of Portsmouth's head. That would teach the Earl, he said, not to take liberties with other members of the aristocracy.

At this date, too, when writing to his mother, he addressed her as "the Honorable Mrs. Byron," a designation to which, of course, she had no shadow of a right; and he earned the nickname of "the old English Baron" by his habit of boasting to his schoolfellows of the amazing antiquity of his lineage. Lord Carlisle may well have thought that it was high time for his ward to go to Harrow to be licked or kicked into shape. He went there in 1803, at the age of thirteen and a half.

Dr. Drury, of Harrow, was the first man who saw in Byron the promise of future distinction. "He has talents, my lord," he soon assured his guardian, "which will add lustre to his rank." Whereat Lord Carlisle merely shrugged his shoulders and said, "Indeed!"—whether because his ward's talents were a matter of indifference to him, or because he considered that rank could dispense with the lustre which talents bestow.

According to his own recollections, Byron was quick but indolent. He could run level in the class-room with Sir Robert Peel, who afterwards took a sensational double-first at Oxford, when he chose; but, as a rule, he did not choose. He

absorbed a good deal of scholarship, without ever becoming a good scholar in the technical sense, and his declamations on the speech-days were much applauded. There are records to the effect that he was bullied. A specially offensive insult directed at him in later life drew from him the retort that he had not passed through a public school without learning that he was deformed; and Leigh Hunt has related that sometimes “he would wake and find his leg in a tub of water.” But he was not an easy boy to bully, for he was ready to fight on small provocation; and he won all his fights except one. He did credit to his religious training by punching Lord Calthorpe’s head for calling him an atheist, though it is possible that his objections to the obnoxious epithet were as much social as theological, for an atheist, among schoolboys is, by implication, an “outsider.”

“I was a most unpopular boy,” he told Moore, “but *led* latterly.” The latter statement has been generally accepted by his biographers; but not all the stories told in support of it stand the test of inquiry. There is the story, for instance, accepted even by Cordy Jeaffreson, that he led the revolt against Butler’s appointment to the headmastership, but prevented his followers from burning down one of the class-rooms by reminding them that the names of their ancestors were carved upon the desks. “I can certify,” wrote the late Dean Merivale of Ely, “that just such a story was told in my early days of Sir John Richardson;” so that Byron seems here to have got the credit for another hero’s exploits.

There are the stories, too, of his connection with the first Eton and Harrow cricket match. Cordy Jeaffreson goes so far as to express doubt whether he took part in the match at

all; but that is exaggerated scepticism, which research would have confuted. The score is printed in Lillywhite’s “Cricket Scores and Biographies of celebrated Cricketers;” and it appears therefrom that Byron scored seven runs in the first innings and two in the second, and also bowled one wicket; but even on that subject the Dean of Ely, who went to Harrow in 1818, has something to say.

“It is clear,” the Dean writes, “that he was never a leader.... On the contrary, awkward, sentimental, and addicted to dreaming and tombstones, he seems to have been held in little estimation among our spirited athletes. The remark was once made to me by Mr. John Arthur Lloyd (of Salop), a well-known Harrovian, who had been captain of the school in the year of the first match with Eton (1805): ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘Byron played in the match, and very badly too. He should never have been in the eleven if my counsel had been taken.’”

And the Dean goes on, picturing Byron’s awkwardness:

“Mrs. Drury was once heard to say of him: ‘There goes Byron’ (Birron she called him) ‘straggling up the hill, like a ship in a storm without rudder or compass.’”

Byron’s influence at Harrow, in short, was exercised over his juniors rather than his contemporaries. It pleased him, when he was big enough, to protect small boys from school tyrants. One catches his feudal spirit again in his appeal to a bully not to lick Lord Delawarr “because he is a fellow peer”; but he was also ready to intervene in other cases in which that plea could not be urged; and he had the reward that might be expected. He once offered to take a licking for one of the Peels; and he became a hero with hero-worshippers—titled hero-worshippers for the most part—sitting at his feet. Lord Delawarr, Lord Clare, the Duke of Dorset, the Honorable John Wingfield, were the most conspicuous among them. It was from their adulation that he got his first taste of the incense which was, in later years, to be burnt to him so lavishly.

He described his school friendships, when he looked back on them, as “passions”; and there is no denying that the language of the letters which he wrote to his friends was inordinately passionate for a schoolboy addressing schoolfellows. “Dearest” is a more frequent introduction to them than “dear,” and the word “sweet” also occurs. It is not the happiest of signs to find a schoolboy writing such letters; and it is not altogether impossible that unfounded apprehensions caused by them account for the suggestion made by Drury—though the fact is not mentioned in the biographies—that Byron should be quietly removed from the school on the ground that his conduct was causing “much trouble and uneasiness.”

That, however, is uncertain, and one must not insist. All that the so-called “passions”—occasionally detrimental though they may have been to school discipline—demonstrate is Byron’s enjoyment of flattery, and his proneness to sentiment and gush. He liked, as he grew older, to accept flattery, while professing to be superior to it; to enjoy sentiment, and then to laugh at it; to gush with the most gushing, and then suddenly to turn round and “say ‘damn’ instead.” But the cynicism which was afterwards to alternate with the sentimentalism had not developed yet. He did not yet say “damn”—at all events in that connection.

One must think of him as a boy with a great capacity for passionate affection, and a precocious tendency to gush, deprived of the most natural outlets for his emotions. He could not love his mother because she was a virago; he hardly ever saw his sister; his guardian kept him coldly at a distance. Consequently his feelings, dammed in one

direction, broke out with almost ludicrous intensity in another; and his friendships were sentimental to a degree unusual, though not, of course, unknown or unprecedented, among schoolboys. He wrote sentimental verses to his friends.

But not to them alone. “Hours of Idleness,” first published when he was a Cambridge undergraduate, is the idealised record of his school friendships; but it is also the idealised record of other, and very different, excursions into sentiment. It introduces us to Mary Duff, to Margaret Parker, to Mary Chaworth,—and also to some other Maries of less importance; and we will turn back and glance, in quick succession at their stories before following Byron to Cambridge.

CHAPTER III

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A SCHOOLBOY’S LOVE AFFAIRS—MARY DUFF, MARGARET PARKER, AND MARY CHAWORTH

First on the list of early loves comes little Mary Duff of Aberdeen. She was one of Byron’s Scotch cousins, though a very distant one; and there is hardly anything else to be said, except that he was a child and she was a child in their kingdom by the sea. Only no wind blew out of a cloud chilling her. Her mother made a second marriage—described by Byron as a “faux pas” because it was socially disadvantageous—and left the city; and the two children never met again.

It was of no importance, of course. They were only a little more than seven when they were separated. But Byron was proud of his precocity, and liked to recall it, and to wonder if any other lover had ever been equally precocious. “I have been thinking lately a good deal of Mary Duff,” he wrote in a fragment of a diary at the age of twenty-five; and he reminded himself how he used to lie awake, picturing her, and how he urged his nurse to write her a love letter on his behalf, and how they sat together—“gravely making love in our way”—while Mary expressed pity for her younger sister Helen, for not having an admirer too. Above all, he reminded himself of the shock which he felt, years afterwards, when the sudden communication of a piece of news revived the recollection of the idyll.