

BYRON MAY GILLINGTON

A DAY WITH SAMUEL
TAYLOR COLERIDGE

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May Byron

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THE CREW OF THE SKELETON SHIP

"Are those *her* ribs through which the Sun
Did peer, as through a grate?
And is that Woman all her crew?
Is that a Death? and are there two?
Is Death that woman's mate?

"*Her* lips were red, *her* looks were free,
Her locks were yellow as gold:
Her skin was as white as leprosy...

The naked hulk alongside came,
And the twain were casting dice."

(*The Ancient Mariner*).

A DAY WITH COLERIDGE

IN a beautiful part of beautiful Somerset, where the "soft orchard and cottage scenery" is dimpled between blue hillslopes, where meadows and woods and translucent streams compete with each other in charm, – in the lovely region of the Quantock hills, lies the quiet little market-village of Nether Stowey. About sunrise on a May morning of 1790, a young man awoke in a little wayside cottage there: and, resolutely thrusting back his natural inclination to indolence, rose and dressed, and set himself to the performance of such humble duties as devolve upon a very poor householder with a wife and child.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge was in his twenty-sixth year: pale, stoutish, black-haired: not an immediately attractive man. His face, according to himself, bore evidence of "great sloth and great, indeed almost idiotic, good nature: ... a mere carcase of a face; fat, flabby, and expressive chiefly of inexpressions," with a wide, thick-lipped, always-open mouth, and small feeble nose. Yet it was capable of being roused, on occasion, to something akin to nobility and beauty, and redeemed by the animation of his full, grey eyes. It was a face, in short, to match his general appearance, which he dismissed as that of "indolence capable of energies," and Carlyle characterised as "weakness under possibility of strength."

For this was a man who was consistent in his faults as in

his virtues: "always conscious of power, but also conscious of want of will to use his power." And it was therefore with redoubled vigour, this particular morning, that he put on a spurt, and threw unusual force into his chopping of firewood, – his somewhat clumsy attempts to clean up the cottage, with its poor accommodation and few utensils, – and his valiant if ineffectual endeavours to have the fire lighted and the modest meal *en route*, whilst his wife, up the ladder stairs, attended to herself and the baby.

Between-whiles he cast admiring glances of the most ardent delight at his garden of an acre and a half, and its glowing mass of apple-bloom, – and at all the luscious greeneries of the May world without. These glimpses into "opening Paradise" went far to compensate him for his determination to keep no servant, but to be maid-of-all-work, and nurse if need be, himself. They ministered to that spirit of contemplation which was the ruling spirit of his life: they were the very texture of dreams...

Soon Sara Coleridge descended and took her share in the domestic preparations. She found fault, after a quick vivacious fashion, with her husband's futile efforts and perplexities. She was the typical incompatible wife for a poet: not only, socially speaking, his inferior, but naturally incapable of sharing his dreams or sympathising with his studies. Yet she was an honest and good-hearted woman; and perhaps, now and then, she felt a certain lack of human warmth in the warmest of human relationships. For there was a tepid quality about Coleridge's

affections and his expression of them: fire and fervour were utterly unknown to his pensive, tender, gentle methods. He had no intensity or passion, either in love or friendship: his feelings were steadfast and of an unblemished purity, yet the very fact that they knew neither ebb nor flow, but were always maintained at a calm level, might jar upon the inscrutable mind of a woman. One might almost imagine, as Sara bustled to and fro and scolded her husband with the volubility of a squirrel, that she was anxious to urge him, if but for one moment, out of his invariable *laissez faire* of amiability... But no: he remained as placid, as good tempered, as cheerful as ever.

Presently another member of the household appeared, Coleridge's pupil and paying-guest, – worth a precious £70 a year to the lean exchequer, – one Charles Lloyd. He was a young bank-clerk who had poetry on the brain, and found himself ill-attuned to the drudgery of keeping his father's ledgers. He was also subject to epileptic fits, which did not conduce either to poetizing or banking with success. What he expected to learn from Coleridge, it is hard to say: certainly his curriculum included a good many hardships, makeshifts and *contretemps* to which he had never looked forward. His instructor, however, had not deceived him as to the hybrid nature of his present occupation. Coleridge had deliberately set himself down at Nether Stowey to be near his friend Tom Poole, and to support himself by "a mixture of literature and husbandry." He proposed to make some £60 per annum by reviewing and magazine work:

he had an offer from Cottle, the Bristol publisher, for as much verse as he chose to write, at terms working out somewhere near fourpence a line, – and for the rest, "I would rather," he declared, "be an expert self-maintaining gardener than a Milton, for I could not unite both. I mean to raise the vegetables for myself and wife, and feed a couple of snouted and grunting cousins from the refuse. My evenings I shall devote to literature." – "And what," enquired Charles Lamb after hearing of this desperate undertaking, "what does your worship know about farming?" But Coleridge was not to be discouraged. He allowed his natural unfitness for the task – "I am, and ever have been, a great reader, and have read almost everything... I am *deep* in all out-of-the-way books, whether of the monkish times or of the Puritanical era. I have read and digested most of the historic writers, but I do not *like* history. Metaphysics and poetry and 'facts of the mind' (*i. e.*, accounts of all the strange phantasms that ever possessed your philosophy-dreamers, from Thoth, the Egyptian, to Taylor, the English pagan) are my darling studies. In short, I seldom read except to amuse myself, and I am almost always reading. Of useful knowledge, – I am a so-so chemist, and I love chemistry – all else is blank – but I will be (please God) a horticulturist and farmer."

What is to be done against such impregnable obstinacy? Coleridge's friends let him "gang his ain gait": and when *mauvais quarts d'heure* threatened to drive him to despair, they came to the rescue with timely cheques: meanwhile, Tom Poole strove

hard to educate him in potato culture, and Charles Lloyd paid down his twenty-five shillings a week.

But to-day Charles Lloyd was looking ill-at-ease and sulky. He threw out hints about the general discomfort of things, – vague allusions to other people being made much of and himself contemned. He was in a disagreeable mood, and evidently dying to pick a quarrel. Half through breakfast, he took umbrage at some inoffensive jest, and flung himself out of the room.

"What can ail the lad?" asked Coleridge, in amazement.

"I suppose he has another fit coming on," observed the practical Sara.

"I don't like sour looks and bitter words in our peaceful home," said the poet, rumpling his heavy black locks with a distracted air.

"God forbid that he should take it into his head to go away," said Sara: and she got up with a very grave face and proceeded to clear the breakfast table. Coleridge betook himself to the garden and called over the back hedge to the neighbour for whose companionship he had taken this inefficient little cottage. Thomas Poole, his friend and benefactor, was a well-to-do tanner, well-educated and a devout student of literature: he discerned the potentialities of great things in Coleridge, and felt honoured by his acquaintanceship. For the poet had something of that peculiar fascination for more prosaic men, that magnetic charm of personality, which atones for so many minor defects, – which obviates weakness and ill-balance of mind, – which even

endears him who is "impossible" from a worldly standpoint, to those of saner and robuster calibre. Coleridge could never be without a friend, without a listener: and a listener was a desideratum to him. This "noticeable man with large grey eyes" undoubtedly attracted to himself all that was best in other people. his culture allured them, his eloquence held them spell-bound, and his voice – that wonderful voice which was to Hazlitt "as a stream of rich distilled perfumes" – sank into every fibre of their being.

So you cannot be surprised that the faithful, kindly Thomas Poole, already busy in his tan-yard, hearing Coleridge calling at the hedge, instantly forsook his proper tasks and hurried to salute his comrade. When he heard of Charles Lloyd's tendency towards mutiny, "Oh," says Poole with a great laugh, "don't let that discompose you. The young man is consumed by a very common malady, – jealousy. And indeed I think he has some cause."

"Jealousy!" repeated Coleridge, rolling his fine eyes wildly. It was a word which had little or no meaning for him. "Jealousy of whom? about whom? – I do not understand you in the least."

"Why, your fine friends the Wordsworths, of course," Poole told him. "Here have you been gadding about with them the whole of this last twelve-month, trapesing the hills night and day and leaving your pupil, forsooth, to sit at home with Madam and Master Baby, a-twiddling his thumbs and scribbling schoolboy verse. You have taken precious little notice of him, – and as for

your friends, they think him but a poor thing not worth mention.
I say he is a lad of spirit to kick up his heels at last."

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