

# BYRON MAY GILLINGTON

A DAY WITH LORD BYRON

May Byron

**A Day with Lord Byron**

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# May Clarissa Gillington A Day with Lord Byron

## SHE WALKS IN BEAUTY

"She walks in beauty, like the night  
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;  
And all that's best of dark and bright  
Meet in her aspect and her eyes:  
Thus mellow'd to that tender light  
Which heaven to gaudy day denies."

*(Hebrew Melodies.)*

## A DAY WITH BYRON

One February afternoon in the year 1822, about two o'clock, – for this is the hour at which his day begins, – "the most notorious personality of his century" arouses himself, in the Palazzo Lanfranchi at Pisa. George Gordon Noel, Lord Byron, languidly arises and dresses, with the assistance of his devoted valet Fletcher. Invariably he awakes in very low spirits, "in actual despair and despondency," he has termed it: this is in part constitutional, and partly, no doubt, a reaction after the feverish brain-work of the previous night. It is, at any rate, in unutterable melancholy and *ennui* that he surveys in the mirror that slight and graceful form, which had been idolised by London drawing-rooms, and that pale, scornful, beautiful face, "like a spirit, good or evil," which the enthusiastic Walter Scott has termed a thing to dream of. He notes the grey streaks already visible among his dark brown locks, and mutters his own lines miserably to himself, —

Through life's dull road, so dim and dirty,  
I have dragg'd to three-and-thirty.  
What have these years left to me?  
Nothing – except thirty-three.

An innumerable motley crowd of reminiscences – most of them bitter, sorrowful, or contemptuous, throng across his mind, shaping themselves into poignant verse:

There's not a joy the world can give like that it takes away,  
When the glow of early thought declines in feeling's dull decay;  
'Tis not on youth's smooth cheek the blush alone, which fades so fast,  
But the tender bloom of heart is gone, ere youth itself be past.

...

Oh! could I feel as I have felt, – or be what I have been,  
Or weep as I could once have wept o'er many a vanished scene;  
As springs in desert found seem sweet, all brackish though they be,  
So, 'midst the wither'd waste of life, those tears would flow to me.

A meagre breakfast, – of claret and soda with a few mouthfuls of some Italian dish, – somewhat restores his natural vivacity: and he listens with cynical amusement to Fletcher's blood-curdling stories of the phantoms who have made night hideous. For the famous old feudal Palazzo, with its dungeons and secret chambers, has been immemorially infested with ghosts, and harassed by inexplicable noises. Fletcher has already begged leave to change his room, and then refused to occupy his new room, because, as his master reports, "there are more ghosts there than in the other!.. There is one place where people were evidently walled up... I am bothered about these spectres, as they say the last occupants were too." However, he is laughing as he descends the magnificent staircase, – the reputed work of Michael Angelo, – laughing until the shrill querulous cries of peevish children make him stop and frown. He has allowed the Leigh Hunts, with their large and fractious family, to occupy for the present the ground-floor of the Palazzo; and children are his pet abhorrence. "I abominate the sight of them so much," he has already told Moore, "that I have always had the greatest respect

for the character of Herod!" No child figures in any of his poems: his own paternal feeling towards "Ada, sole daughter of my house and home," is merely a fluctuating sentiment.

He shrugs his shoulders and enters his great *salon*, again moody and with a downcast air: and throws himself upon a couch in gloomy reverie. Snatches of poetry wander through his thoughts – poetry intrinsically autobiographical, for "the inequalities of his style are those of his career," and his imaginary heroes are endless reproductions of himself, "the wandering outlaw of his own dark mind." He has drawn his own picture more effectively in *Lara* than any strange hand could do.

In him, inexplicably mix'd, appear'd  
Much to be loved and hated, sought and fear'd;  
Opinion, varying o'er his hidden lot,  
In praise or railing ne'er his name forgot...

There was in him a vital scorn of all:  
As if the worst had fall'n which could befall;  
He stood a stranger in this breathing world,  
An erring spirit from another hurl'd...

His early dreams of good outstripp'd the truth,  
And troubled manhood follow'd baffled youth.

His men, in short, as has been observed, are "made after his own image, and his women after his own heart." Yet the inveterate family likeness of these heroes is not shared by the heroines of his romantic stanzas: for Byron has an eclectic taste in beauty. One can hardly imagine a wider dissimilarity than between the *Bride of Abydos*, the gentle Zuleika, with her

"Nameless charms unmark'd by her alone —

The light of love, the purity of grace,  
The mind, the music breathing from her face,  
The heart whose softness harmonised the whole,  
And oh! that eye was in itself a Soul."

and "Circassia's daughter," the stately Leila of *The Giaour*, whose black and flowing hair "swept the marble where her feet gleamed whiter than the mountain sleet." Or, if the reader seek a further choice, there is Medora, beloved of the Corsair, – Medora of the deep blue eye and long fair hair; or the nameless Eastern maiden of the *Hebrew Melodies*:

She walks in beauty, like the night  
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;  
And all that's best of dark and bright  
Meet in her aspect and her eyes:  
Thus mellow'd to that tender light  
Which heaven to gaudy day denies.

One shade the more, one ray the less,  
Had half impair'd the nameless grace  
Which waves in every raven tress,  
Or softly lightens o'er her face;

Where thoughts serenely sweet express  
How pure, how dear their dwelling-place.

And on that cheek, and o'er that brow,  
So soft, so calm, yet eloquent,  
The smiles that win, the tints that glow,  
But tell of days in goodness spent,  
A mind at peace with all below,  
A heart whose love is innocent!

Yet all these heroines are alike in one respect – their potentiality of passionate emotion: since Byron's "passions and his powers," according to his intense admirer Shelley, "are incomparably greater than those of other men: " and he has used the last almost recklessly in portrayal of the first.

As the poet reclines in sombre meditation, his reverie is broken by the not unwelcome entrance of his friends – who may be better termed his intimate acquaintances. For, to that brooding, introspective spirit, – constitutionally shy, and morbidly conscious of the fact, – "friendship is a propensity," he has declared, "to which my genius is very limited. I do not know the *male* human being, except Lord Clare, the friend of my infancy, for whom I feel anything that deserves the name. All my others are men-of-the-world friendships." Be that as it may, it is with a warmly cordial expression, and with that peculiarly sweet smile of his, that Byron welcomes his usual visitors, – Captain Williams, Captain Medwin, Taafe the Irishman, and Percy Bysshe Shelley, "the most companionable person under thirty," he has avowed, "that ever I knew." When they have discussed the latest little Pisan *on dits*

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