

# BYRON MAY GILLINGTON

A DAY WITH KEATS

May Byron

**A Day with Keats**

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# A Day with Keats

## A DAY WITH KEATS

About eight o'clock one morning in early summer, a young man may be seen sauntering to and fro in the garden of Wentworth Place, Hampstead. Wentworth Place consists of two houses only; in the first, John Keats is established along with his friend Charles Armitage Brown. The second is inhabited by a Mrs. Brawne and her family. They are wooden houses, with festooning draperies of foliage: and the clean countrified air of Hampstead comes with sweet freshness through the gardens, and fills the young man with ecstatic delight. He gazes around him, with his weak dark eyes, upon the sky, the flowers, the various minutiae of nature which mean so much to him: and although he has severely tried a never robust physique by sitting up half the night in study, a new exhilaration now throbs through his veins. For, in his own words, he loves the principle of beauty in all things: and he repeats to himself, as he loiters up and down in the sunshine, the lines into which he has crystallized, for all time, sensations similar to those of the present: —

A thing of beauty is a joy for ever:  
Its loveliness increases; it will never  
Pass into nothingness; but still will keep  
A bower quiet for us, and a sleep  
Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing.  
Therefore, on every morrow, are we wreathing  
A flowery band to bind us to the earth,  
Spite of despondence, of the inhuman dearth  
Of noble natures, of the gloomy days,  
Of all the unhealthy and o'er-darken'd ways  
Made for our searching: yes, in spite of all,  
Some shape of beauty moves away the pall  
From our dark spirits. Such the sun, the moon,  
Trees old and young, sprouting a shady boon  
For simple sheep; and such are daffodils  
With the green world they live in; and clear rills  
That for themselves a cooling covert make  
'Gainst the hot season; the mid-forest brake,  
Rich with a sprinkling of fair musk-rose blooms:  
And such too is the grandeur of the dooms  
We have imagined for the mighty dead;  
All lovely tales that we have heard or read:  
An endless fountain of immortal drink,  
Pouring unto us from the heaven's brink.  
Nor do we merely feel these essences  
For one short hour; no, even as the trees  
That whisper round a temple become soon  
Dear as the temple's self, so does the moon,  
The passion poesy, glories infinite,  
Haunt us till they become a cheering light

Unto our souls, and bound to us so fast,  
That, whether there be shine, or gloom o'er-cast,  
They always must be with us, or we die.

*Endymion.*

Yet John Keats is in some respects out of keeping with the magnificent phraseology of which he is the mouthpiece. "Little Keats," as his fellow medical students termed him, is a small, undersized man, not over five feet high – the shoulders too broad, the legs too spare – "death in his hand," as Coleridge said, the slack moist hand of the incipient consumptive. The only "thing of beauty" about him is his face. "It is a face," to quote his friend Leigh Hunt, "in which energy and sensibility" (i.e., sensitiveness) "are remarkably mixed up – an eager power, wrecked and made impatient by ill-health. Every feature at once strongly cut and delicately alive." There is that femininity in the cast of his features, which Coleridge classed as an attribute of true genius. His beautiful brown hair falls loosely over those eyes, large, dark, glowing, which appeal to all observers by their mystical illumination of rapture – eyes which seem as though they had been dwelling on some glorious sight – which have, as Haydon said, "an inward look perfectly divine, like a Delphian priestess who saw visions."

And he *is* seeing visions all the while. Some chance sight or sound has wrapt him away from the young greenness of the May morning, and plunged him deep into the opulent colour of September. His prophetic eye sees all the apple-buds as golden orbs of fruit, and the swallows, that now build beneath the eaves, making ready for their departure. And these future splendours shape themselves into lines as richly coloured.

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness!  
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;  
Conspiring with him how to load and bless  
With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eaves run;  
To bend with apples the moss'd cottage-trees,  
And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;  
To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells  
With a sweet kernel; to set budding more,  
And still more, later flowers for the bees,  
Until they think warm days will never cease,  
For Summer has o'er-brimmed their clammy cells.

Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?  
Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find  
Thee sitting careless on a granary floor,  
Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind;  
Or on a half-reap'd furrow sound asleep,  
Drowsed with the fume of poppies, while thy hook  
Spares the next swath and all its twined flowers;  
And sometimes like a gleaner thou dost keep  
Steady thy laden head across a brook;  
Or by a cider-press, with patient look,  
Thou watchest the last oozings, hours by hours.

Where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where are they?  
Think not of them, thou hast thy music too,  
While barrèd clouds bloom the soft-dying day,

And touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue;  
Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn  
Among the river shallows, borne aloft  
Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies;  
And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn;  
Hedge-cricket sing; and now with treble soft  
The red-breast whistles from a garden-croft.  
And gathering swallows twitter in the skies.

*Autumn.*

The voice of Charles Brown at the open window, hailing him cheerily, breaks the spell; Keats goes in, and they sit down together to a simple breakfast-table, and Brown "quizzes" Keats, as the current phrase goes, on his inveterate abstractedness. The young man, with his sweet and merry laugh, defends himself by producing the result of his last-night's meditations, in praise of the selfsame wandering fancy.

Ever let the Fancy roam,  
Pleasure never is at home:  
At a touch sweet Pleasure melteth,  
Like to bubbles when rain pelteth;  
Then let wingèd Fancy wander  
Through the thought still spread beyond her:  
Open wide the mind's cage door,  
She'll dart forth, and cloudward soar.  
O, sweet Fancy! let her loose;  
Summer's joys are spoilt by use,  
And the enjoying of the Spring  
Fades as does its blossoming:  
Autumn's red-lipp'd fruitage too,  
Blushing through the mist and dew,  
Cloys with tasting: What do then?  
Sit thee by the ingle, when  
The sear faggot blazes bright,  
Spirit of a winter's night;  
When the soundless earth is muffled,  
And the caked snow is shuffled  
From the ploughboy's heavy shoon...  
Fancy, high-commission'd: – send her!  
She has vassals to attend her:  
She will bring, in spite of frost,  
Beauties that the earth hath lost;  
She will bring thee, all together,  
All delights of summer weather;  
All the buds and bells of May,  
From dewy sward or thorny spray;  
All the heapèd Autumn's wealth,  
With a still, mysterious stealth:  
She will mix these pleasures up,  
Like three fit wines in a cup,

And thou shalt quaff it...

*Fancy.*

Breakfast over, the business of the day begins: and that, with Keats, is poetry, and all that can foster poetic stimulus. He takes no real heed of anything else. A devoted son and brother, one ready to sacrifice himself and his slender resources to the uttermost farthing for his mother, brothers, sister and friends – yet he has no vital interest in other folks' affairs, nor in current events, nor in ordinary social topics. Other people's poetry does not appeal to him, except that of Shakespeare, and of Homer – whom he does not know in the original, but who, through the poor medium of translation, has filled his soul with Grecian fantasies.

Much have I travell'd in the realms of gold,  
And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;  
Round many western islands have I been  
Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.  
Oft of one wide expanse had I been told  
That deep-brow'd Homer ruled as his demesne:  
Yet did I never breathe its pure serene  
Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:  
Then felt I like some watcher of the skies  
When a new planet swims into his ken;  
Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes  
He stared at the Pacific – and all his men  
Look'd at each other with a wild surmise —

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