

ARIEL

THE LIFE OF SHELLEY

BY ANDRÉ MAUROIS

TRANSLATED BY ELLA D'ARCY



D. APPLETON AND COMPANY
NEW YORK ❧ ❧ ❧ MCMXXV

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FIRST PART

*So I turned to the Garden of Love
That so many sweet flowers bore;
And I saw it was filled with graves.*

WILLIAM BLAKE

CONTENTS

PART I

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. KEATE'S WAY	1
II. THE HOME	9
III. THE CONFIDANT	17
IV. THE NEIGHBOURING PINE	24
V. QUOD ERAT DEMONSTRANDUM	33
VI. TIMOTHY SHELLEY'S VIGOROUS DIALECTICS	40
VII. AN ACADEMY FOR YOUNG LADIES	49
VIII. THE DESPOTIC CHAIN	59
IX. A VERY YOUNG COUPLE	66
X. HOGG	74
XI. HOGG (CONTINUED)	84
XII. FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH MIDDLE AGE	90
XIII. SOAP BUBBLES	102
XIV. THE VENERATED FRIEND	112
XV. MISS HITCHENER	119
XVI. HARRIET	126
XVII. COMPARISONS	135
XVIII. SECOND INCARNATION OF THE GODDESS	146

PART II

CHAPTER	PAGE
XIX. A SIX WEEKS' TOUR	159
XX. THE PARIAHS	166
XXI. GODWIN	177
XXII. DON JUAN CONQUERED	185
XXIII. ARIEL AND DON JUAN	193
XXIV. GRAVES IN THE GARDEN OF LOVE	205
XXV. THE RULES OF THE GAME	216
XXVI. "QUEEN OF MARBLE AND OF MUD"	230
XXVII. THE ROMAN CEMETERY	243
XXVIII. "ANY WIFE TO ANY HUSBAND"	250
XXIX. THE CAVALIERE SERVENTE	262
XXX. A SCANDALOUS LETTER	269
XXXI. LORD BYRON'S SILENCE	273
XXXII. MIRANDA	283
XXXIII. THE DISCIPLES	292
XXXIV. II SAMUEL xii: 23	300
XXXV. THE REFUGE	308
XXXVI. ARIEL SET FREE	317
XXXVII. LAST LINKS	329

ARIEL

CHAPTER I

KEATE'S WAY

IN the year 1809 George III appointed as Headmaster of Eton, Dr. Keate, a terrible little man who considered the flogging-block a necessary station on the road to perfection, and who ended a sermon on the Sixth Beatitude by saying, "Now boys, be pure in heart! For if not, I'll flog you until you are!"

The country gentlemen and merchant princes who put their sons under his care were not displeased by such a specimen of pious ferocity, nor could they think lightly of the man who had birched half the ministers, bishops, generals, and dukes in the kingdom.

In those days the severest discipline found favour with the best people. The recent French Revolution had proved the dangers of liberalism when it affects the governing classes. Official

ARIEL

England, which was the soul of the Holy Alliance, believed that in combating Napoleon she was combating liberalism in the purple. She required from her public schools a generation of smooth-tongued hypocrites.

In order to crush out any possible republican ardour in the young aristocrats of Eton, their studies were organized on conventional and frivolous lines. At the end of five years the pupil had read Homer twice through, almost all Virgil, and an expurgated Horace; he could turn out passable Latin epigrams on Wellington and Nelson. The taste for Latin quotations was then so pronounced, that Pitt in the House of Commons being interrupted in a quotation from the *Æneid*, the whole House, Whigs and Tories alike, rose as one man to supply the end. Certainly a fine example of homogeneous culture.

The study of science, being optional, was naturally neglected, but dancing was obligatory. On the subject of religion Keate held doubt to be a crime, but that otherwise it wasn't worth talking about. He feared mysticism more than indifference, permitted laughing in chapel and wasn't strict about keeping the Sabbath.

Here, in order to make the reader understand the—perhaps unconscious—Machiavelism of this celebrated trainer of youth, we may note that he

KEATE'S WAY

did not mind being told a few lies: "A sign of respect," he would say.

Barbarous customs reigned amongst the boys themselves. The little boys were the slaves or "fags" of the big boys. The fag made his master's bed, fetched from the pump outside and carried up his water in the morning, brushed his clothes, and cleaned his shoes. Disobedience was punished by torments to fit the crime. A boy writing home, not to complain, but to describe his life, says: "Rolls, whose fag I am, put on spurs to force me to jump a ditch which was too wide for me. Each time I funk'd it he dug them into me, and of course my legs are bleeding, my 'Greek Poets' reduced to pulp, and my new clothes torn to tatters."

The glorious "art of self-defence" was in high honour. At the conclusion of one strenuous bout, a boy was left dead upon the floor. Keate, coming to look at the corpse, said simply: "This is regrettable, of course, but I desire above all things that an Eton boy should be ready to return a blow for a blow."

The real, but hidden, aim of the system was to form "hard-faced men," all run in the same mould. In action you might be independent, but any originality of thought, of dress, or of language was the most heinous of crimes. To

ARIEL

betray the smallest interest in ideas or books was a bit of disgusting affectation to be forcibly pulled up by the roots.

Such a life as this seemed to the majority of English boys quite right. The pride they felt in carrying on the traditions of a school like Eton founded by a king, and under the protection of and near neighbour to all the succeeding kings, was balm of Gilead to their woes.

Only a few sensitive souls suffered terribly and suffered long.

One of these, for example, the young Percy Bysshe Shelley, son of a rich Sussex landowner, and grandson to Sir Bysshe Shelley, Bart., did not seem able to acclimatize himself at all.

This boy, who was exceptionally beautiful, with brilliant blue eyes, dark curling hair, and a delicate complexion, displayed a sensitiveness of conscience most unusual in one of his class, as well as an incredible tendency to question the Rules of the Game.

When first he appeared in the school, the Sixth Form captains, seeing his slender build and girlish air, imagined they would have little need to enforce their authority over him. But they soon discovered that the smallest threat threw him into a passion of resistance. An unbreakable will, with a lack of the necessary physical strength to

KEATE'S WAY

carry out its decrees, forefated him to rebellion. His eyes, dreamy when at peace, acquired, under the influence of enthusiasm or indignation, a light that was almost wild; his voice, usually soft and low, became agonized and shrill.

His love of books, his contempt for games, his long hair floating in the wind, his collar opened on a girlish throat, everything about him scandalized those self-charged to maintain in the little world of Eton the brutal spirit of which it was so proud.

But Shelley, from his first day there, having decided that fagging was an outrage to human dignity, had refused obedience to the orders of his fag-master, and in consequence was proclaimed an outlaw.

He was called "Mad Shelley." The strongest of his tormentors undertook to save his soul as by fire, although they gave up attacking him in single combat, when they found he would stop at nothing. Scratching and slapping, he fought with open hands like a girl.

An organized "Shelley-bait" became one of the favourite amusements. Some scout would discover the strange lad reading poetry by the riverside, and at once give the "view hallo!" Shelley, with his hair streaming on the wind, would take flight across the meadows, through the college

ARIEL

cloisters, the Eton streets. Finally, surrounded like a stag at bay, he would utter a prolonged and piercing shriek, while his tormentors would "nail" him to the wall with balls slimey with mud.

A voice would cry "Shelley!" And "Shelley!" another voice would take it up. The old walls would re-echo to yells of "Shelley!" in every key. A lickspittle fag would pluck at the victim's jacket; another would pinch him; a third would kick away the books he squeezed convulsively under his arm. Then, every finger would be pointed towards him, while fresh cries of "Shelley!" "Shelley!" "Shelley!" finally shattered his nerves.

The crisis was reached for which his tormentors waited—an outburst of mad rage, in which the boy's eyes flashed fire, his cheeks grew white, his whole body trembled and shook.

Tired at length of a spectacle that was always the same, the school went back to its games.

Shelley picked up his mud-stained books and, lost in thought, wandered away through the meadows that border the Thames and, flinging himself down on the sun-flecked grass, watched the river glide past him. Running water, like music, has the power to change misery into melancholy. Both, through their smooth, unceasing flow, pour over the soul the anodyne of forget-

KEATE'S WAY

fulness and peace. The massive towers of Windsor and Eton typified to the young rebel a hostile and unchanging world, but the reflection of the willow-trees trembling in the water soothed him by its tenuous fragility.

He returned to his books, to Diderot, to Voltaire, to the system of M. d'Holbach. To love these Frenchmen, so hated by his masters, seemed an act of defiance worthy of his courage. An English work condensed them all. Godwin's *Political Justice*. It was his favourite reading.

Godwin made all things seem simple. Had men studied him the world would have attained to a state of idyllic happiness. Had they listened to the voice of reason, that is of Godwin, two hours' work a day would have been sufficient for all their needs. Free love would have replaced the stupid conventions of marriage, and philosophy have banished the terrors of superstition.

Unfortunately, "prejudices" still shut men's minds to truth.

Shelley closed his book, stretched himself out upon the sunny, flower-starred grass, and meditated on the misery of man. From the school buildings behind him a confused murmur of stupid voices floated out over the exquisite landscape of wood and stream, but here at least no mocking eye could spy upon him. The boy's

ARIEL

tears ran down, and pressing his hands together, he made this vow: "I swear to be just and wise and free, if such power in me lies. I swear never to become an accomplice, even by my silence, of the selfish and the powerful. I swear to dedicate my whole life to the worship of beauty."

HAD Dr. Keate been witness to an outburst of religious ardour so deplorable in any well-regulated school, he would certainly have treated the case in his favourite way.

CHAPTER II

THE HOME

IN the holidays the refractory slave became the hereditary prince. Mr. Timothy Shelley, his father, owned the manor of Field Place in Sussex, a well built, low, white house surrounded by a park, and extensive woods. There Shelley found his four pretty sisters, a little brother three years old, whom he had taught to say "The devil!" so as to shock the pious, and his beautiful cousin Harriet Grove, who people said resembled him.

The head of the family, Sir Bysshe Shelley, lived in the market-town of Horsham. He was a gentleman of the old school who boasted of being as rich as a duke and of living like a poacher. Six feet high, of commanding presence and a handsome face, Sir Bysshe was of cynical mind and energetic temperament. The Shelleys inherited their brilliant blue eyes from him.

He had sunk eighty thousand pounds in building Castle Goring, but could not finish it because

ARIEL

of the expense. So he lived in a cottage close to the Horsham Town Hall, with one man-servant as eccentric as himself. He dressed like a peasant and spent his days in the tap-room of the Swan Inn, talking politics with all and sundry. From America he had brought back a rough humour that frightened the slow-witted country-folk. He had made his two daughters so unhappy at home that they had run away, which afforded him an excellent pretext for not giving them any dowry.

His one desire was to round off an immense estate and to transmit it intact to innumerable generations of Shelleys. With this in view he had entailed the greater part of it on Percy, to the total exclusion of his other children. Considering his grandson as the necessary upholder of his posthumous ambition, he had a certain affection for him. But for his son Timothy, who dealt in stilted phrases, he had nothing but contempt.

Timothy Shelley was member of Parliament for the pocket borough of New Shoreham. Like his father, he was tall and well made, fair, handsome and imposing. He had a better heart than Sir Bysshe but less will-power. Sir Bysshe was attractive enough, as avowed egoists and cynics often are. Timothy had good intentions and was insupportable. He admired intellect with

10

THE HOME

the irritating want of tact of the illiterate. He affected a fashionable respect for religion, an aggressive tolerance for new ideas, a pompous philosophy. He liked to call himself liberal in his political and religious opinions, but was careful not to scandalize the people of his set. A friend of the Duke of Norfolk, he spoke with complacency of the emancipation of the Irish Catholics. He was proud of his own boldness and not a little scared by it. He had tears at command, but became ferocious if his vanity was touched. In private life he plumed himself on his urbanity, but tried to combine the mailed fist with the velvet glove. Diplomatic in small things he was boorish in big ones; inoffensive yet exasperating, he was well fitted to try the temper of any young critic; and it was the vexation caused by the silly bibble-babble of his father which had done much to throw Shelley into intellectual isolation. As to Mrs. Shelley, she had been the prettiest girl in the county, she liked a man to be a fighter, and she would watch with disgust her eldest son go off into the woods carrying a book under his arm instead of a gun.

In the eyes of his sisters, however, Shelley was a Superman. The moment he arrived from Eton the house was filled with fantastic guests, the park was alive with confused murmurs as in "A

ARIEL

Midsummer Night's Dream." The little girls lived in a continual but agreeable terror. Percy delighted in clothing with mystery the everyday objects of life. There was no hole in the old walls into which he did not thrust a stick in the search for secret passages. In the attics he had discovered a locked room. Here, said he, lived an old alchemist with a long beard, the terrible Cornelius Agrippa. When a noise was heard in the attics, it was Cornelius upsetting his lamp. During a whole week the Shelley family worked in the garden, digging out a summer shelter for Cornelius.

Other monsters woke again with the boy's arrival. There was the great tortoise which lived in the pond, and the great old snake, a formidable reptile, that once had really frequented the underwood, and which one of the Squire's gardeners had killed with a scythe. "This gardener, little girls, this gardener who had the look of a human being like you and me, was in reality Father Time himself who causes all legendary monsters to perish."

What rendered these inventions so fascinating was that the teller himself was not too sure he was inventing them. Stories of witches and ghosts had troubled his sensitive childhood. But the more he feared ghostly apparitions the more