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IV.

A FRIEND OF LORD BYRON.*

MR. HODGSON has written his father's life upon a very unusual plan, for which he makes apologies in his preface. The apologies, however, were not strictly necessary, for the book is an interesting one, more so, perhaps, than if it had been composed in the manner usually followed in such cases. The late Archdeacon Hodgson was a genial and accomplished scholar, a man of the world, and an indefatigable versifier; but he was not a brilliant writer, and our loss is not great, in the fact that his letters have for the most part not been preserved. His son and biographer lays before us, in default of any specimens of his own share in his correspondence, a selection from the letters that he received from his friends. These were numerous, for Francis Hodgson had the good fortune to inspire a great deal of affection and confidence. His chief claim to the attention of posterity resides in the fact that he was an early and much-trusted intimate of Lord Byron. A good many of Byron's letters to him were printed by Moore, to whom, however, Hodgson surrendered but a portion of this correspondence. His son here publishes a number of new letters, together with a great many communications from Mrs. Leigh, the poet's sister, and two or three from Lady Byron. All this portion of these volumes is extremely interesting, and constitutes, indeed, their principal value. It throws a clearer, though by no means a perfectly clear, light upon the much-discussed episode of the separation between Byron and his wife, and upon the character of his devoted sister. The book contains, besides, a series of letters from Hodgson's Eton and Cambridge friends, and in its latter portion a variety of extracts from

* Memoir of the Rev. Francis Hodgson, B. D., with Numerous Letters from Lord Byron and Others. By his Son, the Rev. T. P. Hodgson, M. A. London: Macmillan, 1879.

his correspondence with such people as Lord Denman (Chief Justice of England, who presided at the trial of Queen Caroline, and incurred the bitter animosity of George IV.), James Montgomery, the late Herman Merivale, the late Duke of Devonshire, and the charming Mrs. Robert Arkwright, who figures in the lately published memoirs of Fanny Kemble. The picture of Hodgson's youth and early manhood, with his numerous friendships, his passion for literature, his extraordinary and unparalleled fecundity in the production of poetical epistles, his good spirits, good sense, and great industry, is an extremely pleasant one, and gives an agreeable idea of the tone of serious young Englishmen, sixty or seventy years ago, who were also good fellows. Hodgson's first intention on leaving Cambridge had been to study for the bar; but after some struggles the literary passion carried the day, and he became an ardent "reviewer." He worked a great deal for the critical periodicals of the early years of the century, notably for the "Edinburgh Review," and he produced (besides executing a translation of Juvenal) a large amount of satirical or would-be satirical verse. His biographer gives a great many examples of his poetical powers, which, however, chiefly illustrate his passion for turning couplets *à propos* of everything and of nothing. The facility of these effusions is more noticeable than their point. In 1815 Hodgson went into the Church, and in 1836, after having spent many years at Bakewell, in Derbyshire, in a living which he held from the Duke of Devonshire, he was appointed Archdeacon of Derby. In 1840 he was made Provost of Eton College, a capacity in which he instituted various salutary reforms (he abolished the old custom of the "Montem," which had become a very demoralizing influence). Archdeacon Hodgson died in 1852.

Mrs. Leigh wrote to him at the time of Byron's marriage, in which she felt great happiness, that her brother had "said that in all the years that he had been acquainted with you he never had had a moment's disagreement with you: 'I have quarreled with Hobham, with everybody but Hodgson,' were his own words." Byron's letters and allusions to his friend quite bear out this declaration, and they present his irritable and passionate nature in the most favorable light. He had a great esteem for Hodgson's judgment, both in literature and in life, and he defers to it with a docility which is touching in a spoiled young nobleman who, on occasion, can make a striking display of temper. Mr. Hodgson gives no definite account of the origin of his father's acquaintance with

Byron—he simply says that their intimacy, which in 1808 had become complete, had “doubtless been formed previously, during Hodgson’s visits to London and Cambridge and to the Drurys at Harrow.” In 1808 Hodgson was appointed tutor in moral philosophy at King’s College, Cambridge, and in this year “Byron came to Cambridge for the purpose of availing himself of his privilege as a nobleman, and taking his M. A. degree, although he had only matriculated in 1805. . . . From this time until early in 1816 the friends constantly met, and when absent as constantly corresponded.” Hodgson was completely under the charm of Byron’s richly-endowed nature ; but his affection, warm as it was (and its warmth is attested by the numerous copies of verse which he addressed to his noble friend, and which, though they exhibit little poetical inspiration, show great tenderness of feeling), was of that pure kind which leaves the judgment unbribed. Byron’s letters have always a great charm, and those quoted by Mr. Hodgson, whether published for the first time, or anticipated by Moore, are full of youthful wit and spontaneity. In 1811, while the second canto of “Childe Harold” (Hodgson was helping to revise it) was going through the press, the poet’s affectionate Mentor had, by letter, a religious discussion with him. Hodgson’s side of the controversy has disappeared, but Byron’s skeptical rejoinders are full of wit, levity, and a cynicism which (like his cynicism through life) was half natural and half affected. “As to your immortality, if people are to live, why die? And any carcasses, which are to rise again, are they worth raising? I hope, if mine is, that I shall have a *better pair of legs* than I have moved on these two-and-twenty years, as I shall be sadly behind in the squeeze into paradise.” The letters which throw light upon Byron’s unhappy marriage are all, as we have said, of great interest. Hodgson’s correspondence with Mrs. Leigh, which became an intimate one, began in 1814 and lasted for forty years. Staying with Byron at Newstead in the autumn of that year, she first writes to him as a substitute for her brother, who, “being very lazy,” has begged her to take his pen. It was at this moment that he became engaged to Miss Milbanke, and one of the few extracts from his father’s own letters, given by Mr. Hodgson, is a very sympathetic account of a meeting with Byron in Cambridge while the latter was in the glow of just having completed his arrangements for marrying “one of the most divine beings on earth.” There are several letters of Mrs. Leigh’s during 1815, after the marriage had taken place, going on into the winter of 1816,

when they assume a highly dramatic interest. It is interesting, in view of the extraordinary theory which in the later years of her life Lady Byron was known to hold on the subject of the relations between her husband and his sister, and which were given to the world in so regrettable a manner not long after her death, to observe that Mrs. Leigh's letters afford the most striking intrinsic evidence of the purely phantasmal character of the famous accusation, and place the author's character in a highly honorable and touching light. This is the view taken, in the strongest manner, by the editor of these volumes, who regards Mrs. Leigh as the most devoted and disinterested of sisters—as the good genius, the better angel, of the perverse and intractable poet. She appears to have been a very sympathetic and conscientious woman, not very witty or very clever, but addicted to writing rather expansive, confidential, lady-like letters, and much concerned about the moral tone and religious views of her brother, whose genius and poetic fame inspire her with a quite secondary interest. She appeals to Hodgson, as her brother's nearest and most trusted friend, to come up to town and intercede with either party to prevent the separation. Hodgson obeyed her summons, and did his best in the matter, but his efforts were unavailing. His son quotes a remarkable letter which he wrote to Lady Byron, urging her to the exercise of patience and forbearance; and he quotes as well Lady Byron's reply, which on the whole does less credit to her clemency than his appeal had done to his tact and wisdom. There is an element of mystery in the whole matter of her rupture with her husband which these letters still leave unsolved; but, putting this aside, they leave little doubt as to her ladyship's rigidity of nature.

"I believe the nature of Lord B.'s mind to be most benevolent," she says in answer to Hodgson's appeal. "But there may have been circumstances (I would hope the *consequences*, not the *causes* of mental disorder) which would render an original tenderness of conscience the motive of desperation, even of guilt, when self-esteem had been forfeited *too far*." And in reply to Hodgson's request, made on Byron's behalf, that she would specify those acts of his which she holds to have made a reconciliation impossible, she says, "He *does* know, too well, what he affects to inquire." Mrs. Leigh says to Hodgson, in writing of her brother: "If I may give you *mine* [my opinion], it is that *in his own mind* there *were* and *are* recollections fatal to his peace, and which would have prevented his being happy with any woman whose excellence

equaled or approached that of Lady B., from the consciousness of being unworthy of it. Nothing," she adds, "could or can remedy this fatal cause but the consolation to be derived from religion, of which, alas! dear Mr. H., our beloved B. is, I fear, destitute." In such allusions as these some people will always read the evidence of some dark and definite wrong-doing on the part of one who delighted in the appearance of criminality, and who, possibly, simply by overacting his part, in the desire to mystify, rather viciously, a woman of literal mind, in whom the sense of humor was not strong, and the imagination was uncorrected by it, succeeded too well and got caught in his own trap.

Even if the inference we speak of were valid, it would be very profitless to inquire further as regards Byron's unforgivable sin; we are convinced that, if it were ascertained, it would be, to ingenuous minds, a great disappointment. The reader of these volumes will readily assent to Mr. Hodgson's declaration that they offer a complete, virtual exoneration of Mrs. Leigh. The simple, touching, pious letters addressed to her brother's friend at the time of Byron's death and of the arrival of his remains in England, strongly contribute to this effect; as does also the tone in which she speaks of Lady Byron's estrangement from her, which took place very suddenly some years after the separation. The tone is that of a person a good deal mystified and even wounded.

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