

## CHAPTER XIX.

### THE BYRON CONTROVERSY, 1869-1870.

MRS. STOWE'S STATEMENT OF HER OWN CASE.--THE CIRCUMSTANCES UNDER WHICH

SHE FIRST MET LADY BYRON.--LETTERS TO LADY BYRON.--LETTER TO DR.

HOLMES WHEN ABOUT TO PUBLISH "THE TRUE STORY OF LADY BYRON'S LIFE" IN

THE "ATLANTIC."--DR. HOLMES'S REPLY.--THE CONCLUSION OF THE MATTER.

It seems impossible to avoid the unpleasant episode in Mrs. Stowe's life known as the "Byron Controversy." It will be our effort to deal with the matter as colorlessly as is consistent with an adequate setting forth of the motives which moved Mrs. Stowe to awaken this unsavory discussion. In justification of her action in this matter, Mrs. Stowe says:--

"What interest have you and I, my brother and my sister, in this short life of ours, to utter anything but the truth? Is not truth between man and man, and between man and woman, the foundation on which all things rest? Have you not, every individual of you, who must hereafter give an account yourself alone to God, an interest to know the exact truth in this matter, and a duty to perform as respects that truth? Hear me, then, while I tell you the position in which I stood, and

what was my course in relation to it.

"A shameless attack on my friend's memory had appeared in the 'Blackwood' of July, 1869, branding Lady Byron as the vilest of criminals, and recommending the Guiccioli book to a Christian public as interesting from the very fact that it was the avowed production of Lord Byron's mistress. No efficient protest was made against this outrage in England, and Littell's 'Living Age' reprinted the 'Blackwood' article, and the Harpers, the largest publishing house in America, perhaps in the world, republished the book.

"Its statements--with those of the 'Blackwood,' 'Pall Mall Gazette,' and other English periodicals--were being propagated through all the young reading and writing world of America. I was meeting them advertised in dailies, and made up into articles in magazines, and thus the generation of to-day, who had no means of judging Lady Byron but by these fables of her slanderers, were being foully deceived. The friends who knew her personally were a small, select circle in England, whom death is every day reducing. They were few in number compared with the great world, and were silent. I saw these foul slanders crystallizing into history, uncontradicted by friends who knew her personally, who, firm in their own knowledge of her virtues, and limited in view as aristocratic circles generally are, had no idea of the width of the world they were living in, and the exigency of the crisis. When time passed on and no voice was raised, I spoke."

It is hardly necessary to recapitulate, at any great length, facts already so familiar to the reading public; it may be sufficient simply to say that after the appearance in 1868 of the Countess Guiccioli's "Recollections of Lord Byron," Mrs. Stowe felt herself called upon to defend the memory of her friend from what she esteemed to be falsehoods and slanders. To accomplish this object, she prepared for the "Atlantic Monthly" of September, 1869, an article, "The True Story of Lady Byron's Life." Speaking of her first impressions of Lady Byron, Mrs. Stowe says:--

"I formed her acquaintance in the year 1853, during my first visit to England. I met her at a lunch party in the house of one of her friends. When I was introduced to her, I felt in a moment the words of her husband:--

"There was awe in the homage that she drew;  
Her spirit seemed as seated on a throne."

It was in the fall of 1856, on the occasion of Mrs. Stowe's second visit to England, as she and her sister were on their way to Eversley to visit the Rev. C. Kingsley, that they stopped by invitation to lunch with Lady Byron at her summer residence at Ham Common, near Richmond. At that time Lady Byron informed Mrs. Stowe that it was her earnest desire to receive a visit from her on her return, as there was a subject of great importance concerning which she desired her advice. Mrs. Stowe has thus described this interview with Lady Byron:--

"After lunch, I retired with Lady Byron, and my sister remained with her friends. I should here remark that the chief subject of the conversation which ensued was not entirely new to me."

"In the interval between my first and second visits to England, a lady who for many years had enjoyed Lady Byron's friendship and confidence had, with her consent, stated the case generally to me, giving some of the incidents, so that I was in a manner prepared for what followed."

"Those who accuse Lady Byron of being a person fond of talking upon this subject, and apt to make unconsidered confidences, can have known very little of her, of her reserve, and of the apparent difficulty she had in speaking on subjects nearest her heart. Her habitual calmness and composure of manner, her collected dignity on all occasions, are often mentioned by her husband, sometimes with bitterness, sometimes with admiration. He says: 'Though I accuse Lady Byron of an excess of self-respect, I must in candor admit that, if ever a person had excuse for an extraordinary portion of it, she has, as in all her thoughts, words, and deeds she is the most decorous woman that ever existed, and must appear, what few I fancy could, a perfectly refined gentlewoman, even to her femme de chambre.'

"This calmness and dignity were never more manifested than in this interview. In recalling the conversation at this distance of time, I cannot remember all the language used. Some particular words and forms

of expression I do remember, and those I give; and in other cases I give my recollection of the substance of what was said.

"There was something awful to me in the intensity of repressed emotion which she showed as she proceeded. The great fact upon which all turned was stated in words that were unmistakable."

Mrs. Stowe goes on to give minutely Lady Byron's conversation, and concludes by saying:--

Of course I did not listen to this story as one who was investigating its worth. I received it as truth, and the purpose for which it was communicated was not to enable me to prove it to the world, but to ask my opinion whether she should show it to the world before leaving it. The whole consultation was upon the assumption that she had at her command such proofs as could not be questioned. Concerning what they were I did not minutely inquire, only, in answer to a general question, she said that she had letters and documents in proof of her story. Knowing Lady Byron's strength of mind, her clear-headedness, her accurate habits, and her perfect knowledge of the matter, I considered her judgment on this point decisive. I told her that I would take the subject into consideration and give my opinion in a few days. That night, after my sister and myself had retired to our own apartment, I related to her the whole history, and we spent the night in talking it over. I was powerfully impressed with the justice and propriety of an immediate disclosure; while she, on the contrary,

represented the fatal consequences that would probably come upon Lady Byron from taking such a step.

Before we parted the next day, I requested Lady Byron to give me some memoranda of such dates and outlines of the general story as would enable me better to keep it in its connection, which she did. On giving me the paper, Lady Byron requested me to return it to her when it had ceased to be of use to me for the purpose intended.

Accordingly, a day or two after, I inclosed it to her in a hasty note, as I was then leaving London for Paris, and had not yet had time fully to consider the subject. On reviewing my note I can recall that then the whole history appeared to me like one of those singular cases where unnatural impulses to vice are the result of a taint of constitutional insanity. This has always seemed to me the only way of accounting for instances of utterly motiveless and abnormal wickedness and cruelty. These, my first impressions, were expressed in the hasty note written at the time:--

LONDON, November 5, 1856.

DEAREST FRIEND,--I return these. They have held mine eyes waking. How strange! How unaccountable! Have you ever subjected the facts to the judgment of a medical man, learned in nervous pathology? Is it not insanity?

"Great wits to madness nearly are allied,

And thin partitions do their bounds divide."

But my purpose to-night is not to write to you fully what I think of this matter. I am going to write to you from Paris more at leisure.

(The rest of the letter was taken up in the final details of a charity in which Lady Byron had been engaged with me in assisting an unfortunate artist. It concludes thus:)

I write now in all haste, en route for Paris. As to America, all is not lost yet. Farewell. I love you, my dear friend, as never before, with an intense feeling that I cannot easily express. God bless you.

H. B. S.

The next letter is as follows:--

PARIS, December 17, 1856.

DEAR LADY BYRON,--The Kansas Committee have written me a letter desiring me to express to Miss ---- their gratitude for the five pounds she sent them. I am not personally acquainted with her, and must return these acknowledgments through you.

I wrote you a day or two since, inclosing the reply of the Kansas

Committee to you.

On that subject on which you spoke to me the last time we were together, I have thought often and deeply. I have changed my mind somewhat. Considering the peculiar circumstances of the case, I could wish that the sacred veil of silence, so bravely thrown over the past, should never be withdrawn during the time that you remain with us. I would say then, leave all with some discreet friends, who, after both have passed from earth, shall say what was due to justice. I am led to think this by seeing how low, how unworthy, the judgments of this world are; and I would not that what I so much respect, love, and revere should be placed within reach of its harpy claw, which pollutes what it touches. The day will yet come which will bring to light every hidden thing. "There is nothing covered that shall not be revealed, neither hid that shall not be known;" and so justice will not fail.

Such, my dear friend, are my thoughts; different from what they were since first I heard that strange, sad history. Meanwhile I love you forever, whether we meet again on earth or not.

Affectionately yours,

H. B. S.

Before her article appeared in print, Mrs. Stowe addressed the following letter to Dr. Holmes in Boston:--

HARTFORD, June 26, 1869.

DEAR DOCTOR,--I am going to ask help of you, and I feel that confidence in your friendship that leads me to be glad that I have a friend like you to ask advice of. In order that you may understand fully what it is, I must go back some years and tell you about it.

When I went to England the first time, I formed a friendship with Lady Byron which led to a somewhat interesting correspondence. When there the second time, after the publication of "Dred" in 1856, Lady Byron wrote to me that she wished to have some private confidential conversation with me, and invited me to come spend a day with her at her country-seat near London. I went, met her alone, and spent an afternoon with her. The object of the visit she then explained to me. She was in such a state of health that she considered she had very little time to live, and was engaged in those duties and reviews which every thoughtful person finds who is coming deliberately, and with their eyes open, to the boundaries of this mortal life.

Lady Byron, as you must perceive, has all her life lived under a weight of slanders and false imputations laid upon her by her husband. Her own side of the story has been told only to that small circle of confidential friends who needed to know it in order to assist her in meeting the exigencies which it imposed on her. Of course it has thrown the sympathy mostly on his side, since the world generally has

more sympathy with impulsive incorrectness than with strict justice.

At that time there was a cheap edition of Byron's works in contemplation, meant to bring them into circulation among the masses, and the pathos arising from the story of his domestic misfortunes was one great means relied on for giving it currency.

Under these circumstances some of Lady Byron's friends had proposed the question to her whether she had not a responsibility to society for the truth; whether she did right to allow these persons to gain influence over the popular mind by a silent consent to an utter falsehood. As her whole life had been passed in the most heroic self-abnegation and self sacrifice, the question was now proposed to her whether one more act of self-denial was not required of her, namely, to declare the truth, no matter at what expense to her own feelings.

For this purpose she told me she wished to recount the whole story to a person in whom she had confidence,--a person of another country, and out of the whole sphere of personal and local feelings which might be supposed to influence those in the country and station in life where the events really happened,--in order that I might judge whether anything more was required of her in relation to this history.

The interview had almost the solemnity of a deathbed confession, and Lady Byron told me the history which I have embodied in an article to

appear in the "Atlantic Monthly." I have been induced to prepare it by the run which the Guiccioli book is having, which is from first to last an unsparing attack on Lady Byron's memory by Lord Byron's mistress.

When you have read my article, I want, not your advice as to whether the main facts shall be told, for on this point I am so resolved that I frankly say advice would do me no good. But you might help me, with your delicacy and insight, to make the manner of telling more perfect, and I want to do it as wisely and well as such story can be told.

My post-office address after July 1st will be Westport Point, Bristol Co., Mass., care of Mrs. I. M. Soule. The proof-sheets will be sent you by the publisher.

Very truly yours, H. B. STOWE.

In reply to the storm of controversy aroused by the publication of this article, Mrs. Stowe made a more extended effort to justify the charges which she had brought against Lord Byron, in a work published in 1869, "Lady Byron Vindicated." Immediately after the publication of this work, she mailed a copy to Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes, accompanied by the following note:--

BOSTON, May 19, 1869.

DEAR DOCTOR,--. . . In writing this book, which I now take the liberty of sending to you, I have been in . . . a "critical place." It has been a strange, weird sort of experience, and I have had not a word to say to anybody, though often thinking of you and wishing I could have a little of your help and sympathy in getting out what I saw. I think of you very much, and rejoice to see the hold your works get on England as well as this country, and I would give more for your opinion than that of most folks. How often I have pondered your last letter to me, and sent it to many (friends)! God bless you. Please accept for yourself and your good wife, this copy.

From yours truly,

H. B. STOWE.

Mrs. Stowe also published in 1870, through Sampson Low & Son, of London, a volume for English readers, "The History of the Byron Controversy." These additional volumes, however, do not seem to have satisfied the public as a whole, and perhaps the expediency of the publication of Mrs. Stowe's first article is doubtful, even to her most ardent admirers. The most that can be hoped for, through the mention of the subject in this biography, is the vindication of Mrs. Stowe's purity of motive and nobility of intention in bringing this painful matter into notice.

While she was being on all hands effectively, and evidently in some quarters with rare satisfaction, roundly abused for the article, and her consequent responsibility in bringing this unsavory discussion so prominently before the public mind, she received the following letter from Dr. O. W. Holmes:--

BOSTON, September 25, 1869.

MY DEAR MRS. STOWE,--I have been meaning to write to you for some time, but in the midst of all the wild and virulent talk about the article in the "Atlantic," I felt as if there was little to say until the first fury of the storm had blown over.

I think that we all perceive now that the battle is not to be fought here, but in England. I have listened to a good deal of talk, always taking your side in a quiet way, backed very heartily on one occasion by one of my most intellectual friends, reading all that came in my way, and watching the course of opinion. And first, it was to be expected that the Guiccioli fanciers would resent any attack on Lord Byron, and would highly relish the opportunity of abusing one who, like yourself, had been identified with all those moral enterprises which elevate the standard of humanity at large, and of womanhood in particular. After this scum had worked itself off, there must necessarily follow a controversy, none the less sharp and bitter, but not depending essentially on abuse. The first point the recusants got hold of was the error of the two years which contrived to run the

gauntlet of so many pairs of eyes. Some of them were made happy by mouthing and shaking this between their teeth, as a poodle tears round with a glove. This did not last long. No sensible person could believe for a moment you were mistaken in the essential character of a statement every word of which would fall on the ear of a listening friend like a drop of melted lead, and burn its scar deep into the memory. That Lady Byron believed and told you the story will not be questioned by any but fools and malignants. Whether her belief was well founded there may be positive evidence in existence to show affirmatively. The fact that her statement is not peremptorily contradicted by those most likely to be acquainted with the facts of the case, is the one result so far which is forcing itself into unwilling recognition. I have seen nothing, in the various hypotheses brought forward, which did not to me involve a greater improbability than the presumption of guilt. Take that, for witness, that Byron accused himself, through a spirit of perverse vanity, of crimes he had not committed. How preposterous! He would stain the name of a sister, whom, on the supposition of his innocence, he loved with angelic ardor as well as purity, by associating it with such an infamous accusation. Suppose there are some anomalies hard to explain in Lady Byron's conduct. Could a young and guileless woman, in the hands of such a man, be expected to act in any given way, or would she not be likely to waver, to doubt, to hope, to contradict herself, in the anomalous position in which, without experience, she found herself?

As to the intrinsic evidence contained in the poems, I think it

confirms rather than contradicts the hypothesis of guilt. I do not think that Butler's argument, and all the other attempts at invalidation of the story, avail much in the face of the acknowledged fact that it was told to various competent and honest witnesses, and remains without a satisfactory answer from those most interested.

I know your firm self-reliance, and your courage to proclaim the truth when any good end is to be served by it. It is to be expected that public opinion will be more or less divided as to the expediency of this revelation. . . .

Hoping that you have recovered from your indisposition,

I am Faithfully yours,

O. W. HOLMES.

While undergoing the most unsparing and pitiless criticism and brutal insult, Mrs. Stowe received the following sympathetic words from Mrs. Lewes (George Eliot):--

THE PRIORY, 21 NORTH BANK, December 10, 1869.

MY DEAR FRIEND,-- . . . In the midst of your trouble I was often thinking of you, for I feared that you were undergoing a considerable trial from the harsh and unfair judgments, partly the fruit of

hostility glad to find an opportunity for venting itself, and partly of that unthinking cruelty which belongs to hasty anonymous journalism. For my own part, I should have preferred that the Byron question should never have been brought before the public, because I think the discussion of such subjects is injurious socially. But with regard to yourself, dear friend, I feel sure that, in acting on a different basis of impressions, you were impelled by pure, generous feeling. Do not think that I would have written to you of this point to express a judgment. I am anxious only to convey to you a sense of my sympathy and confidence, such as a kiss and a pressure of the hand could give if I were near you.

I trust that I shall hear a good account of Professor Stowe's health, as well as your own, whenever you have time to write me a word or two. I shall not be so unreasonable as to expect a long letter, for the hours of needful rest from writing become more and more precious as the years go on, but some brief news of you and yours will be especially welcome just now. Mr. Lewes unites with me in high regards to your husband and yourself, but in addition to that I have the sister woman's privilege of saying that I am always

Your affectionate friend,

M. H. LEWES.