Byron in Love

Edna O'Brien

Published by Weidenfeld & Nicolson

Extract

TWELVE

Sir Wedderburn, that 'glorious object for cuckoldom', recently married to Lady Frances, daughter of the Earl of Mountnorris, invited Byron to visit them at Aston Hall, near Rotherham in Yorkshire. Augusta, at Byron's request, has also been invited, but she declines, now finding herself pregnant and therefore queasy and also guessing that she might be a wallflower in that company. Accepting, Byron requests that he be excused from going to the races at Doncaster and also from dining with them, as he does not dine at all.

The ensuing farcical goings-on, what with misplaced passion and clandestine glances, could easily have been penned by the playwright Richard Brinsley Sheridan, whom Byron greatly admired.

Lady Frances proves to be pretty and pleasing, but in delicate health and according to Byron, 'close to decline'. Webster, 'jealous to jaundice', gives orations on his wife's beauty, kisses her hand several times at table, overtures which she receives with a noticeable lifelessness. The other guests are frightful, facetious and frivolous. Byron, despite his earlier demur, does attend dinners, Webster droning on about his wife's virtues and high principles, comparing her morals to Christ, at which Byron, fortified with claret, laughs so exceedingly that his

host is outraged and harmony only restored because as Byron said the devil himself thought it proper to do so. Daily missives are dispatched to Lady Melbourne and for secrecy's sake the denomination of 'Ph' is given to Lady Frances, whose virtue must be preserved.

Webster warns Byron that 'femme' must not see Byron's copies of Dante or Alfieri, which would do her infinite damage. Yet 'femme' is beginning to show a certain interest in Byron, evidenced by her eyes, her change of colour, a trembling hand and a devotional attitude. Meanwhile, Webster, the Othello monopolist, who in his leisure time writes pamphlets, expounds at table on what he would do to any man who gazed too long at his wife or sought to compromise her – he would exterminate such a brute. Byron concludes to Lady Melbourne that his throat might soon be cut, but vows to retaliate with a 'roughing' and with shaming Webster by citing the country wenches that he has been pursuing.

Augusta's frantic letters go unanswered, as Byron has found another perch.

The topography of the house however is not ideal for the putative but by now more manifest lovers. In the billiards room, 'amidst the clashing of billiard balls and the barking Nettle', a poodle which the Websters have given Byron as a present, a declaration is made. Ph asks Byron how a woman who liked a man could inform him of it. Imprudently, as he tells Lady Melbourne and 'in tender and tolerably turned prose', he risks all by writing a letter. He hands it to Ph in the billiards room, when, to their consternation, 'Marito', whom Byron wished at the bottom of the Red Sea, enters, but the Lady with great presence of mind deposits the letter inside her gown and close to her heart. So begins another amatory

correspondence under Webster's roof, Byron also writing to Annabella Milbanke, addressing her as 'My dear friend'. For Byron, Ph's letters, which he leaves on the desk in his bedroom, reek too much of virtue and the soul, but then again she is a woman who takes prayers morning and night and as he tells Lady Melbourne, 'is measured for a Bible every quarter'. Yet he can report that they have, in a sense, 'made love' and that Platonism is in peril. All that is needed is the privacy to consummate it. Apart from Sir Wedderburn's vigilance, which is manic, Byron also suspects one of the other male guests of having cast himself in the Iago mode, and her sister Lady Catherine, recently jilted, seems to cling over-duly to Ph.

It is decided that the house party will repair to Newstead, the 'melancholy mansion' of Byron's forebears and where he hopes the residing genii will foster his intentions. During dinner Ph announces to her husband that her sister shall share her room at Newstead, whereupon Webster thunders about his rights and maintains that none but a husband has any legal claim to divide the spouse's pillow. Lady Frances, in a rare moment of spiritedness, whispers to Byron – 'N'importe, this is all nothing', a remark which perplexes him greatly. At Newstead he has one of the mounted skulls filled with claret, which he downs in one go, incurring a fit which bars him from being with the ladies, convulsions followed by such motionlessness that Fletcher believes that his master is dead. But his master revives in order to resume the courtship.

The opportunity at last presents itself. It is two in the morning at Newstead and they are alone, Ph's words so sincere, so serious, she is in a perplexity of love, she owns up to a helplessness, saying she will give herself to him but fears

that she will 'not survive the fall'. Byron is flabbergasted, he is used to women saying no while meaning yes, and this sincerity, this artlessness, this ingenuousness is too much altogether so that he wavers and in a burst of chivalry that he would come to regret, he feels he cannot take advantage of her. Each and every nuance is relayed to the scrutinous Lady Melbourne, who of course is impatient to know if he is willing to go away with Ph. The answer is Yes. To the ends of the earth if necessary, because he loves her, adding that if he had not loved her he would have been more selfish when she yielded.

When the party return to Aston Hall, the entire household is thrown into bile and ill temper, Sir Wedderburn prating at servants in front of the guests, sermonising his wife and her sister in front of the guests, and a general feeling that something catastrophic is about to occur.

What transpires is that Byron is due to leave, Frances's heart, though broken, is cemented to his as she gives him the gift of a seal, asks that he be faithful to her and vow that they meet in the spring.

On the eve of departure, Sir Wedderburn plays a caddish card, tells his wife that Byron confessed to him that he had only come and stayed to seek the hand of Lady Catherine, the drooping sister. Ph is devastated. Byron has deceived her. There is weeping and gnashing at their last secret rendezvous in the garden. Then Webster borrows £1,000 from his befuddled houseguest. The following morning as Byron prepares to step into his carriage, Webster confounds matters by professing such a friendship that he will accompany Byron to London. On the wearisome journey, Webster assures him that he and his wife are totally in love and marriage the happiest of all possible estates.

Meanwhile, Lady Frances has begun her copious correspondence, penning letters that extend to eighteen pages, dilating on Byron's beauty and her 'bursting heart'. Borne out in a poem, 'Concealed Griefs', Lady Melbourne, who is privy to this dotage, does not doubt Ph's sincerity, but pronounces her 'childish and tiresome'.

Byron had not, as he believed, exorcised the love of Augusta and with his mind in such 'a state of fermentation' he was obliged to discharge it in rhyme. A first draft of *The Bride of Abydos* was completed in four days, the 'lines strung as fast as minutes'. It recounts the passion and doomed love of Princess Zuleika and her brother Selim, Zuleika lamenting her solitary plight as she is banished to a tower. Fear of detection, as he wrote to Dr E.D. Clarke at that time, and his recent intrigue in the north, induced him to alter the consanguinity of the lovers and confine them to cousinship.

'Dear sacred name, rest ever unrevealed' Byron wrote, borrowing from, though misquoting, Pope's poem *Eloisa to Abelard*. Though the names and the narrative were ascribed to the East, the emotional turmoil certainly belonged in Bennett Street, with traces of Augusta everywhere and his inability to break with her. Publish it he must, suggesting to John Murray that it might steal quietly into the world with *The Giaour*, which featured a Venetian noble, intent on the rescue of a slave girl, Leila, from the harem of her vicious pasha. Deferring to the mores of the time, while realising that it would weaken its inner voltage, Byron agreed to make a change in *The Bride*, so as to remove the frightful taboo of incest. Brother and sister were altered to being first cousins. Though not a poet, Augusta felt compelled to respond to it in verse and by not being a poet her reply is all the more moving. Writing in French and with a haunting poignancy,

she wished to share all his feelings, to see through his eyes, to live only for him, he being the only destiny that could make her happy. In the sheet of paper she had also enclosed a curl of her chestnut hair, tied with white silk. Byron kept it all his life and on the folded paper wrote 'La Chevelure of the one I most *loved*'. Her signature ended with the branches of a cross, the mathematical symbol confirming the secret of their love, and Byron had two seals made for a brooch that they would wear.

Within three months the love for Lady Frances had waned and hearing that he was with his sister, she envied that 'happy happy woman' and hoped that Augusta would not despise her. In vain and on bended knees she asked for her letters to be returned, but the request was ignored. He had tired of her, her constancy and her naiveté. Her tedious use of *aimer* merely confirmed for him the blindness of nature.