

BYRON



DAYS · WITH · THE · POETS

Project Gutenberg's A Day with Lord Byron, by May Clarissa Gillington

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A DAY WITH LORD BYRON

by

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[SHE WALKS IN BEAUTY](#)

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SHE WALKS IN BEAUTY.

"She walks in beauty, like the night
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;
And all that's best of dark and bright
Meet in her aspect and her eyes:
Thus mellow'd to that tender light
Which heaven to gaudy day denies."
(Hebrew Melodies.)



A DAY WITH BYRON.

One February afternoon in the year 1822, about two o'clock,—for this is the hour at which his day begins,—"the most notorious personality of his century" arouses himself, in the Palazzo Lanfranchi at Pisa. George Gordon Noel, Lord Byron, languidly arises and dresses, with the assistance of his devoted valet Fletcher. Invariably he awakes in very low spirits, "in actual despair and despondency," he has termed it: this is in part constitutional, and partly, no doubt, a reaction after the feverish brain-work of the previous night. It is, at any rate, in unutterable melancholy and *ennui* that he surveys in the mirror that slight and graceful form, which had been idolised by London drawing-rooms, and that pale, scornful, beautiful face, "like a spirit, good or evil," which the enthusiastic Walter Scott has termed a thing to dream of. He notes the grey streaks already visible among his dark brown locks, and mutters his own lines miserably to himself,—

Through life's dull road, so dim and dirty,
I have dragg'd to three-and-thirty.
What have these years left to me?
Nothing—except thirty-three.

An innumerable motley crowd of reminiscences—most of them bitter, sorrowful, or contemptuous, throng across his mind, shaping themselves into poignant verse:

There's not a joy the world can give like that it takes away,
When the glow of early thought declines in feeling's dull decay;
'Tis not on youth's smooth cheek the blush alone, which fades so fast,
But the tender bloom of heart is gone, ere youth itself be past.

.

Oh! could I feel as I have felt,—or be what I have been,

Or weep as I could once have wept o'er many a vanished scene;
As springs in desert found seem sweet, all brackish though they be,
So, 'midst the wither'd waste of life, those tears would flow to me.

A meagre breakfast,—of claret and soda with a few mouthfuls of some Italian dish,—somewhat restores his natural vivacity: and he listens with cynical amusement to Fletcher's blood-curdling stories of the phantoms who have made night hideous. For the famous old feudal Palazzo, with its dungeons and secret chambers, has been immemorially infested with ghosts, and harassed by inexplicable noises. Fletcher has already begged leave to change his room, and then refused to occupy his new room, because, as his master reports, "there are more ghosts there than in the other!... There is one place where people were evidently walled up.... I am bothered about these spectres, as they say the last occupants were too." However, he is laughing as he descends the magnificent staircase,—the reputed work of Michael Angelo,—laughing until the shrill querulous cries of peevish children make him stop and frown. He has allowed the Leigh Hunts, with their large and fractious family, to occupy for the present the ground-floor of the Palazzo; and children are his pet abhorrence. "I abominate the sight of them so much," he has already told Moore, "that I have always had the greatest respect for the character of Herod!" No child figures in any of his poems: his own paternal feeling towards "Ada, sole daughter of my house and home," is merely a fluctuating sentiment.

He shrugs his shoulders and enters his great *salon*, again moody and with a downcast air: and throws himself upon a couch in gloomy reverie. Snatches of poetry wander through his thoughts—poetry intrinsically autobiographical, for "the inequalities of his style are those of his career," and his imaginary heroes are endless reproductions of himself, "the wandering outlaw of his own dark mind." He has drawn his own picture more effectively in *Lara* than any strange hand could do.

In him, inexplicably mix'd, appear'd
Much to be loved and hated, sought and fear'd;
Opinion, varying o'er his hidden lot,
In praise or railing ne'er his name forgot....

There was in him a vital scorn of all:
As if the worst had fall'n which could befall;
He stood a stranger in this breathing world,
An erring spirit from another hurl'd....

His early dreams of good outstripp'd the truth,
And troubled manhood follow'd baffled youth.

His men, in short, as has been observed, are "made after his own image, and his women after his own heart." Yet the inveterate family likeness of these heroes is not shared by the heroines of his romantic stanzas: for Byron has an eclectic taste in beauty. One can hardly imagine a wider dissimilarity than between the *Bride of Abydos*, the gentle Zuleika, with her

"Nameless charms unmark'd by her alone—

The light of love, the purity of grace,
The mind, the music breathing from her face,
The heart whose softness harmonised the whole,
And oh! that eye was in itself a Soul."

and "Circassia's daughter," the stately Leila of *The Giaour*, whose black and flowing hair "swept the marble where her feet gleamed whiter than the mountain sleet." Or, if the reader seek a further choice, there is Medora, beloved of the Corsair,—Medora of the deep blue eye and long fair hair; or the nameless Eastern maiden of the *Hebrew Melodies*:

She walks in beauty, like the night
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;
And all that's best of dark and bright
Meet in her aspect and her eyes:
Thus mellow'd to that tender light
Which heaven to gaudy day denies.

One shade the more, one ray the less,
 Had half impair'd the nameless grace
Which waves in every raven tress,
 Or softly lightens o'er her face;
Where thoughts serenely sweet express
 How pure, how dear their dwelling-place.

And on that cheek, and o'er that brow,
 So soft, so calm, yet eloquent,
The smiles that win, the tints that glow,
 But tell of days in goodness spent,
A mind at peace with all below,
 A heart whose love is innocent!

Yet all these heroines are alike in one respect—their potentiality of passionate emotion: since Byron's "passions and his powers," according to his intense admirer Shelley, "are incomparably greater than those of other men:" and he has used the last almost recklessly in portrayal of the first.

As the poet reclines in sombre meditation, his reverie is broken by the not unwelcome entrance of his friends—who may be better termed his intimate acquaintances. For, to that brooding, introspective spirit,—constitutionally shy, and morbidly conscious of the fact,—"friendship is a propensity," he has declared, "to which my genius is very limited. I do not know the *male* human being, except Lord Clare, the friend of my infancy, for whom I feel anything that deserves the name. All my others are men-of-the-world friendships." Be that as it may, it is with a warmly cordial expression, and with that peculiarly sweet smile of his, that Byron welcomes his usual visitors,—Captain Williams, Captain Medwin, Taafe the Irishman, and Percy Bysshe Shelley, "the most companionable person under thirty," he has avowed, "that ever I knew." When they have discussed the latest little Pisan *on dits*, and the progress of Shelley's boat-building, the conversation trends more and more towards literary topics: personal topics, be it understood, for Byron is not an omnivorous reader like

Shelley. Williams and Medwin, themselves dabblers in verse and prose, listen with respectful admiration to the *dicta* of the great poets exchanging views. The low, clear, harmonious voice of Byron "is a sort of intoxication: men are held by it as under a spell." He makes no secret of his open contempt for the professional writing fraternity. "Who would write, if he had anything better to do?" he scornfully enquires, "I think the mighty stir made about scribbling and scribes, by themselves and others, a sign of effeminacy, degeneracy, and weakness."

Shelley, whose assiduous studies in literature have led him to quite other conclusions, defends his craft with ardour. But Byron's chief successes have been too lightly won. He who wrote the *Corsair* in ten days, the *Bride of Abydos* in four, and *Lara* whilst undressing after balls and masquerades, cannot be expected to take a very serious view of poetry as the one business of a lifetime. "I by no means rank poetry or poets," says he, "high in the scale of imagination. Poetry is the lava of the imagination, whose eruption prevents an earthquake. If I live ten years longer," he adds prophetically, "you will see that all is not over with me,—I don't mean in literature, for that is nothing, and, it may seem odd enough to say, I don't think it's my vocation. But you will see that I shall do *something* or other!"

JUAN AND HAIDÉE

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JUAN AND HAIDÉE.

"They heard the waves splash, and the wind so low,
And saw each other's dark eyes darting light
Into each other—and, beholding this,
Their lips drew near, and clung into a kiss."

(*Don Juan.*)

This contemner of poesy, however, is soon persuaded, without much difficulty, to read aloud some excerpts from his new poems in process of completion: and very well he reads them. The listeners are moved to smiles by the bitter humour of the *Vision of Judgment*: they are left half breathless by the impetuous vigour of *Heaven and Earth*. But a murmur of unfeigned applause punctuates the second canto of *Don Juan*, with its exquisite presentment of youth, love, and ecstasy in the persons of Juan and Haidée.

It was the cooling hour, just when the rounded
 Red sun sinks down behind the azure hill,
Which then seems as if the whole earth it bounded,
 Circling all nature, hush'd, and dim, and still,
With the far mountain-crescent half surrounded
 On one side, and the deep sea calm and chill,
Upon the other, and the rosy sky,
With one star sparkling through it like an eye.
And thus they wander'd forth, and hand in hand,
 Over the shining pebbles and the shells,
Glided along the smooth and harden'd sand....

. . . .

They look'd up to the sky, whose floating glow
 Spread like a rosy ocean, vast and bright;
They gazed upon the glittering sea below,
 Whence the broad moon rose circling into sight;
They heard the waves splash, and the wind so low,
 And saw each other's dark eyes darting light
Into each other—and, beholding this,
Their lips drew near, and clung into a kiss.

(*Don Juan.*)

Byron's restless spirit, perpetually eager to express itself in action, now makes

him anxious to dismiss intellectual discussions: and he hastily proposes a game of billiards. As he moves around the billiard-table, his lameness is distinctly noticeable: not all the ingenuity of his tailor, nor his own efforts to walk naturally, can conceal it. Yet, as has been said of him in other matters, he redeems all his defects by his graces. And his companions note with surprise the remarkable change for the better which has taken place in him since, a few months before, he arrived at this old palace on the Arno with a troop of servants, carriages, horses, fowls, dogs, and monkeys. The selfish and sensual Byron of Venetian days is entirely a thing of the past. "He is improved in every respect,"—says Shelley to Williams, "in genius, in temper, in moral views, in health and happiness." And although keeping up a certain splendour upon an income of £4000 a year, he devotes £1000 of that income entirely to purposes of charity. His own personal needs are of the simplest.

The game concluded, Byron's carriage is announced: his friends and he proceed in it as far as the town gates of Pisa, by this means to avoid the starers of the streets. Horses are in readiness at the gates: the company, with one or two servant-men, mount and ride into the pine-forest that reaches towards the sea.

Byron is as excellent and graceful a rider as a swimmer, with remarkable powers of endurance. He can cover seventy or eighty miles a day, fast going, and swim five miles at a stretch: he is indeed, in many respects, the typical open-air Englishman. But to-day he rides slowly and immersed in thought. As his wife years since assured him, he is at heart the most melancholy of mankind, often when apparently the gayest. His abnormally long sight takes in every detail of the scenery,—storing it up unconsciously for future reference. It has been said that Byron is nothing without his descriptions: and in these he has achieved some of his finest work: notably in some immortal stanzas of *Childe Harold*, with their dazzling panoramic succession of vivid scenes: whether depicting how

I stood in Venice, on the Bridge of Sighs;
A palace and a prison on each hand:
I saw from out the wave her structures rise
As from the stroke of the enchanter's wand.

or, on the eve of Waterloo,

There was a sound of revelry by night,
And Belgium's capital had gather'd then
Her Beauty and her Chivalry, and bright
The lamps shone o'er fair women and brave men;
A thousand hearts beat happily; and when
Music arose with its voluptuous swell,
Soft eyes look'd love to eyes which spake again,
And all went merry as a marriage bell;
But hush! hark! a deep sound strikes like a rising knell!

whether again, in the "vale of vintage,"

The castled crag of Drachenfels
Frowns o'er the wide and winding Rhine,
Whose breast of waters broadly swells
Between the banks which bear the vine,
And hills all rich with blossom'd trees,
.
.
.
.
And peasant girls, with deep blue eyes,
And hands which offer early flowers,
Walk smiling o'er this paradise.

or, looking backwards through a score of centuries,

I see before me the Gladiator lie:
He leans upon his hand—his manly brow
Consents to death, but conquers agony,
And his droop'd head sinks gradually low—
And through his side the last drops, ebbing slow
From the red gash, fall heavy, one by one,
Like the first of a thunder-shower; and now

The arena swims around him—he is gone,
Ere ceased the inhuman shout which hail'd the wretch who won.

THE PRISONER OF CHILLON AND THE BIRD

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THE PRISONER OF CHILLON AND THE BIRD

"Thro' the crevice where it came,
That bird was perch'd, as fond and tame,
 And tamer than upon the tree;
A lovely bird, with azure wings,
And song that said a thousand things,
 And seem'd to say them all for me!"
(The Prisoner of Chillon.)

Byron is emphatically a citizen of the world, who has "not only painted the environs, but reflected the passions and aspirations of every scene which he visualizes." And it is this magic power of conveying the authentic impression of an actual occurrence, which renders his most recondite situations so thrilling,—which breathes a Western vigour into the scented air of the Orient, and thrills with poignant pathos through the horrors of the *Prisoner of Chillon*.

A light broke in upon my brain—
 It was the carol of a bird;
It ceased, and then it came again,
 The sweetest song ear ever heard:

And mine was thankful till my eyes
Ran over with the glad surprise,
And they that moment could not see
I was the mate of misery;
But then by dull degrees came back
My senses to their wonted track;
I saw the dungeon walls and floor
Close slowly round me as before,
I saw the glimmer of the sun
Creeping as it before had done;
But through the crevice where it came
That bird was perch'd, as fond and tame,
 And tamer than upon the tree;
A lovely bird, with azure wings,
And song that said a thousand things,
 And seem'd to say them all for me!
I never saw its like before,
I ne'er shall see its likeness more:
It seem'd like me to want a mate,
But was not half so desolate,
And it was come to love me when
None lived to love me so again,
And cheering from my dungeon's brink,
Had brought me back to feel and think.
I know not if it late were free,
 Or broke its cage to perch on mine,
But knowing well captivity,
 Sweet bird! I could not wish for thine!
Or if it were, in winged guise,
A visitant from Paradise;
For—Heaven forgive that thought! the while
Which made me both to weep and smile—

I sometimes deem'd that it might be
My brother's soul come down to me;
But then at last away it flew,
And then 'twas mortal well I knew,
For he would never thus have flown,
And left me twice so doubly lone,
Lone as the corse within its shroud,
Lone as a solitary cloud,—

A single cloud on a sunny day,
While all the rest of heaven is clear,
A frown upon the atmosphere,
That hath no business to appear
When skies are blue, and earth is gay.

(The Prisoner of Chillon.)

Unhappily, all these shifting scenes of imagination or experience—so the poet has made mournful confession—have little power to wean him from himself. "Neither the music of the shepherd, the crashing of the avalanche, nor the torrent, the mountain, the glacier, the forest, nor the cloud, have for one moment lightened the weight upon my heart, nor enabled me to lose my own wretched identity in the majesty, and the power, and the glory, above, around, and beneath me."

And although, it will be noticed, he exempts the sea—and although the blood of old sea-kings, running fiercely in his veins, still kindles him to imperishable rapture in its presence,—

And I have loved thee, Ocean! and my joy
Of youthful sports was on thy breast to be
Borne, like thy bubbles, onward: from a boy
I wanton'd with thy breakers—they to me

Were a delight; and if the freshening sea
 Made them a terror—'twas a pleasing fear,
For I was as it were a child of thee,
 And trusted to thy billows far and near,
And laid my hand upon thy mane—as I do here.
 (*Childe Harold.*)

—yet there is sorrow on the sea itself,—the "unplumb'd, salt, estranging sea" which separates him from his mother-country. Cosmopolitan as he is, self-banished exile, quick with Greek and Italian sympathies, Byron never for one moment forgets that he is head of one of England's proudest families. Despite his scathing scorn towards his fair-weather London friends, towards the unreasoning outbursts of malignity which drove him out of his England—with all her faults, he loves her still. He vaguely hopes and hankers after a return to those long-lost shores: and endeavours to believe that the future will in some way make atonement for all the calamities of the past.

But now Shelley, Williams, Medwin, and Taafe are dismounting in the pine forest, and the men-servants setting up the target. Pistol-practice is Byron's forte; when he hits a half-crown at twelve yards he is as delighted as a boy, and quite glum and disconcerted if he should happen to miss. This very rarely happens, as he is a crack shot, easily distancing the other competitors. His hand trembles violently, but he calculates on this vibration, and, depending entirely on his eye, hardly ever fails. After about an hour's shooting, the light begins to wane towards sunset: and the friends ride back to the city, Byron in exuberant good humour with himself and everybody else. Arrived at the Palazzo Lanfranchi, he finds two guests awaiting him,—Count Pietro Gamba, brother of the lovely Contessa Guiccioli, and Trelawny, that handsome, picturesque, piratical-looking "Younger Son," who has not yet published to an astonished world his remarkable and almost incredible "Adventures." Trelawny is at present in command of Byron's yacht the *Bolivar*, lying in the harbour of Genoa.

The poet welcomes these new additions to his company: for, since his arrival

in Pisa, he has begun to entertain men at dinner-parties, for the first time since leaving England. A very cheerful company sits down with him to dinner: their host displays himself to great advantage, "being at once," to quote Shelley, "polite and cordial, full of social hilarity and the most perfect good humour, never diverging into ungraceful merriment, and yet keeping up the spirit of liveliness throughout the evening." Byron, according to his own declaration, has never passed two hours in mixed society without wishing himself out of it again. Nobody, however, could guess at this fact from his bright, frank, and spontaneous gaiety. Always an abstemious eater—"I have fed at times for over two months together," he assures his friends, "on sheer biscuit and water,"—very little food suffices him: and besides, *bien entendu*, he is anxious to retain that "happy slenderness" on which he prides himself,—the slenderness which is a characteristic of his family, and which he has recently endangered by a lazy life in Venice. The guests sit fascinated by his enthralling personality: they recognize that he wears a natural greatness which "his errors can only half obscure:" and they rivet their gaze upon that pale and splendid face, the only one, as Scott says, that ever came up to an artist's notion of what the lineaments of a poet should be. He looks around him upon the ethereal and feminine countenance of Shelley, the visionary,—the kind, pleasant, honest English faces of Medwin and Williams,—the good-looking Italian Gamba, the quaint little Irishman Taafe,—last, not least, the dark mustachios and wildly-flashing Celtic eyes of the Cornish adventurer Trelawny. This latter might well have served for a model of Conrad the Corsair: and so he is assured by his companions.

"Sun-burnt his cheek, his forehead high and pale
The sable curls in wild profusion veil....
His features' deepening lines and varying hue
At times attracted, yet perplex'd the view."

CONRAD AND GULNARE

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CONRAD AND GULNARE.

"Extreme in love or hate, in good or ill,
The worst of crimes had left her woman still!
This Conrad mark'd, and felt—ah! could he less?—
Hate of that deed, but grief for her distress."

(*The Corsair.*)



But where, they ask, shall the original of *Gulnare* be found,—Gulnare, who stains her hand with the blood of her lord the Pasha, to save the Corsair from a dreadful death? Byron refuses to reveal his source of inspiration: but Shelley quotes with sincere approval the lines which most emphatically delineate that lovely, desperate woman.

Embark'd, the sail unfurl'd, the light breeze blew—
How much had Conrad's memory to review!...

He thought on her afar, his lovely bride:
He turned and saw—Gulnare, the homicide!

She watch'd his features till she could not bear
Their freezing aspect and averted air;
And that strange fierceness, foreign to her eye,
Fell quench'd in tears, too late to shed or dry.

"But for that deed of darkness what wert thou?
Reproach me—but not yet—O! spare me *now*!
I am not what I seem—this fearful night
My brain bewilder'd—do not madden quite!
If I had never loved, though less my guilt,
Thou hadst not lived to—hate me—if thou wilt."

Extreme in love or hate, in good or ill,
The worst of crimes had left her woman still!

This Conrad mark'd, and felt—ah! could he less?
Hate of that deed, but grief for her distress;
What she has done no tears could wash away,
And Heaven must punish on its angry day:
But—it was done: he knew, whate'er her guilt,
For him that poniard smote, that blood was spilt;
And he was free! and she for him had given
Her all on earth, and more than all in heaven!

(The Corsair.)

But—"Heavens, Shelley!" cries his host, "what infinite nonsense are you quoting?" and he hastily turns the current of conversation towards more impersonal subjects.

The evening wears on: the guests depart: the clear spring moonlight streams upon the winding Arno. Byron stands dreaming at the open window, the bridges and buildings of Pisa lie still and silver-lit before him: a subtle influence of quietude steals down upon him from the stars. "What nothings we are," he murmurs, "before the least of these stars!" One in particular—is it Sirius?—entrances his attention with its cold refulgence of pure light. His thoughts involuntarily shape themselves in rhythm and rhyme;

Sun of the sleepless! melancholy star!
Whose tearful beam glows tremulously far,
That show'st the darkness thou canst not dispel,
How like art thou to joy remember'd well!
So gleams the past, the light of other days,
Which shines, but warms not with its powerless rays;
A night-beam Sorrow watcheth to behold,

Distinct, but distant—clear—but oh! how cold!

It is the hour when Byron's brain becomes thronged with a glowing phantasmagoria of ideas that cry aloud for visible expression. He forgets, under the stress of creative impulse, the sources and causes of his inherent melancholy,—the miserable days of his childhood, with a Fury for a mother,—the wound, never to be healed, of his unrequited love for Mary Chaworth,—the inimical wife from whom he is eternally alienated,—the little daughter that he may never hold in his arms,—the beloved sister separated from his side,—the ancestral home of his forefathers now passed into a stranger's hold,—the meteoric glory and total eclipse of his unparalleled popularity in England,—the follies, and worse than follies, which have made him what he is, "consistent in nothing but his passion and his pride." These memories, like poisonous exhalations, are banished from his mind, and leave a clear horizon for a while,—a fertile landscape peopled with great words and images. Something akin to inspiration seizes upon him: and he throws himself to work with all the zest and nerve of his impulsive nature.

This is a man who writes, in his own phrase, "with rapidity and rarely with pains.... When I once take pen in hand, I *must* say what comes uppermost or fling it away." Not for him that careful polishing of sentences, which other writers meticulously bestow. "I have always written as fast as I could put pen to paper, and never revised but in the proofs.... I can never recast anything. I am like the tiger; if I miss the first spring, I go grumbling back to my jungle." And to this impetuous directness of onslaught, his finest poems bear witness. Some critic has remarked that Byron is too much of the earth earthy to be a great lyrical writer: yet a Promethean fire, stolen from heaven, burns immortally through some of his shorter lyrics. In Greek, it is said, there are 1632 ways of expressing the simple fact *I love you*: yet who has ever put it in a more convincing form than Byron does in *Maid of Athens*?



MAID OF ATHENS

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MAID OF ATHENS

By those tresses unconfined,
Woo'd by each Ægean wind;
By those lids whose jetty fringe
Kiss thy soft cheeks' blooming tinge;
By those wild eyes like the roe,
Zöe mou, sas agapo.



Maid of Athens, ere we part,
Give, oh give me back my heart!
Or, since that has left my breast,
Keep it now, and take the rest!
Hear my vow before I go.
Zöe mou, sas agapo.
(My life, I love you!)

By those tresses unconfined,
Woo'd by each Ægean wind;
By those lids whose jetty fringe
Kiss thy soft cheeks' blooming tinge;
By those wild eyes like the roe,
Zöe mou, sas agapo.

By that lip I long to taste;
By that zone-encircled waist;
By all the token-flowers that tell
What words can never speak so well;

By love's alternate joy and woe,
Zöe mou, sas agapo.

Maid of Athens! I am gone:
Think of me, sweet! when alone.
Though I fly to Istambol,
Athens holds my heart and soul:
Can I cease to love thee? No!
Zöe mou, sas agapo.

Rapidly as his pen flies over the paper, the torrent of throbbing thought flows faster still. Far on into the night, when ghostly noises echo through the sleeping palace, "that ever-gushing and perennial fount of natural waters," as Scott has described the genius of Byron, pours forth in reckless profusion. Until at last, outspent with energy, he draws a deep breath of exhaustion, and realizes that he is weariness itself. The moon has sunk in Arno: the stars are half-way across the sky: a cold glimmer of dawn is palpitating along the East, as Byron—

"Again to that accustom'd couch must creep
Where joy subsides, and sorrow sighs to sleep."

After day's fitful fever he sleeps well: and rest, a few short hours of it, is due
to that perturbed spirit, which now,

...O'erlabour'd with his being's strife,
Shrinks to that sweet forgetfulness of life...
That sleep, the loveliest, since it dreams the least.
(Lara.)

DECORATION



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