

## BYRON AND MISS CHAWORTH

“Les anges,” says Madame Dudevant, a woman who intersperses many an admirable sentiment amid a chaos of the most shameless and altogether objectionable fiction — “*Les anges ne sont plus pures que le cœur d’un jeune homme qui aime en vérité.*” The angels are not more pure than the heart of a young man who loves with fervor.

The hyperbole is scarcely less than true. It would be truth itself, were it averred of the love of him who is at the same time young and a poet. The boyish poet-love is indisputably that one of the human sentiments which most nearly realizes our dreams of the chastened voluptuousness of heaven.

In every allusion made by the author of “Childe Harold” to his passion for Mary Chaworth, there runs a vein of almost spiritual tenderness and purity, strongly in contrast with the gross earthliness pervading and disfiguring his ordinary love-poems. The Dream, in which the incidents of his parting with her when about to travel, are said to be delineated, or at least paralleled, [\[a\]](#) has never been excelled (certainly never excelled by him) in the blended fervor, delicacy, truthfulness and ethereality which sublimates and adorn it. For this reason, it may well be doubted if he has written anything so universally popular.

That his attachment for this “Mary” (in whose very name there indeed seemed to exist for him an “enchantment”) was earnest, and long-abiding, we have every reason to believe. There are a hundred evidences of this fact, scattered not only through his own poems and letters, but in the memoirs of his relatives, and contemporaries in general. But that it was thus earnest and enduring, does not controvert, in any degree, the opinion that it was a passion (if passion it can properly be termed) of the most thoroughly romantic shadowy and imaginative character. It was born of the hour, and of the youthful necessity to love, while it was nurtured by the waters and the hills, and the flowers and the stars. It had no peculiar regard to the person, or to the character, or to the reciprocating affection of Mary Chaworth. Any maiden, not immediately and positively repulsive, he would have loved, under the same circumstances of hourly and unrestricted communion, such as our engraving shadows forth. They met without restraint and without reserve. As mere children they sported together; in boyhood and girlhood they read from the same books, sang the same songs, or roamed, hand in hand, through the grounds of the conjoining estates. The result was not merely natural or merely probable, it was as inevitable as destiny itself.

In view of a passion thus engendered, Miss Chaworth, (who is represented as possessed of no little personal beauty and some accomplishments,) could not have failed to serve sufficiently well as the incarnation of the ideal that haunted the fancy of the poet. It is perhaps better, nevertheless, for the mere romance of the love-passages between the two, that their intercourse was broken up in early life and never uninterruptedly resumed in after years. Whatever of warmth, whatever of soul-passion, whatever of the truer rare and essentiality of romance was elicited during the youthful association is to be attributed altogether to the poet. If *she* felt at all, it was only while the magnetism of *his* actual presence compelled her to feel. If *she* responded at all, it was merely because the necromancy of *his* words of fire could not do otherwise than exhort a response. In absence, the bard bore easily with him all the fancies which were the basis of his flame — a flame which absence itself but served to keep in vigor — while the less ideal but at the same time the less really substantial affection of his lady-love, perished utterly and forthwith, through simple lack of the element which had fanned it into being. He to her, in brief, was a not unhandsome, and not ignoble, but somewhat portionless, somewhat eccentric and

rather lame young man. She to him was the Egeria of his dreams — the Venus Aphrodite that sprang, in full and supernal loveliness, from the bright foam upon the storm-tormented ocean of his thoughts.