

ACT 1. sc 3

Byron's dining-room later that night. Lights and simultaneous burst of laughter illuminate the table-top in disarray in the aftermath of dinner. The evening has reached the liqueurs and is, in some cases, the worse for wear. An opium pipe is going round. A billiard table stands ready.

BYR: It's settled then!

HUNT: (*Receiving the opium pipe*) What is?

BYR: The great Italian question, you fool!

HUNT: Really? I must've been out of the room at the time.

TRE: Out of your senses, more like!

Byron begins to wander about.

POLI: Out of his brain!

BYR: Oh, you can't blame Hunt for wanting a simple change of scene – I'd go out of my mind if it were as small as his. - (*Byron circumambulates Hunt, knocking on Hunt's head and table simultaneously*) - not enough room for two thoughts at once – are there, Hunt?

HUNT: Not when they're as gross as yours Byron, no.

The sound of general cheering.

- Or as warped as yours!

VOICE: The creature lives!

POLI: Yes, shouldn't a mammal like you be hibernating by now Hunt?

HUNT: I can assure you that if I look somewhat torpid you need look no further than the soporific predictability of the evening's conversation.

POLI: Why – got something against women, have we Hunt?

HUNT: Yes, the fact that you talk about nothing else, Polidori.

BYR: Gentlemen must we continually suffer this bore's insolence?

Jeers in the negative, Byron continues.

You see, Hunt, it appears my guests desire some form of redress for your gross prudery.

POLI: Yes, haul him up!

VOICE: Put the prig on trial!

Byron takes up his chair and places it upon the table. He then clambers on board the table himself and sits on the chair in judgement. Hunt, now sitting below him is much disconcerted. Shelley observes a wry silence.

HUNT: For god's sake, Byron –

BYR: I, Noel George Gordon, Lord Byron, late of Newstead Abbey, Peer of the realm, with the power invested in me by his mad majesty King George 'Fatty the Fourth' of England, accuse you Leigh Hunt – a commoner if ever there was one – of the unpardonable offence of prudishness in good company! – How do you plead?

VOICE: We're not interested in his plea!

HUNT: I wouldn't do you the courtesy of making one.

BYR: And there's further proof of his plebeian arrogance, jurors! – I ask all of you to deliver a verdict of guilty without delay!

ALL: Guilty!

BYR: Then I shall deliver the sentence forthwith

At this point Byron begins slowly to tip a carafe of wine downwards on Hunt who rises as first drops hit him.

HUNT: Stop! For god's sake stop! – (*Brushing himself*) - The least you can do is give me the chance to choose my own defence!

BYR: My dear fellow, you don't need one – you've been convicted!

HUNT: Then I demand the right of appeal – and I choose the poet Shelley to represent me!

BYR: Poet!? We don't want no drivelling poets here, do we lads? – All that womanly whining annoys us at the best of times. – Besides which Shelley's barred – he was late for dinner. What's more: I've never seen more sober: mental clarity is a great insult to a host, you know, Shelley!

HUNT: But a great quality in an advocate! I demand Shelley be allowed to defend me!

BYR: All right, all right! (*he sits in judgement again*) So, Shelley! What can you possibly have to say in defence of such an idiot?

SHEL: Precisely that.

BYR: What?

SHEL: He's an idiot.... – a simpleton.

BYR: Well we won't argue with that will we lads?

HUNT: (*Amazed*) Shelley...!

SHEL: And consequently in no position to answer for his actions or words!
Therefore, I submit it would be improper of any court, however nobly constituted, to convict an arrant fool – commit him to an asylum, yes - to a common prison, never!

BYR: This is sharp practise Shelley.

SHEL: Necessary to protect a blunt mind, milord!

BYR: But then you must prove his idiocy before we revoke our former judgement.... – it shouldn't be difficult.

SHEL: Indeed not; and if their lordships will allow me to continue I shall, within a matter of moments, cite incontrovertible proof of my client's pathetic stupidity.

BYR: Please, I can hardly bear the lack of suspense.

SHEL: Gentlemen of the jury! We are all saying farewell! – Because some of us have the good fortune to be leaving very shortly for Italy, the mere mention of whose name confers upon our melancholic Northern souls honorary citizenship of the antique republic of summer! Italy, gentlemen! – where the sun vigorously exercises his timeless right to shine; where winter, a classical democrat, shares but one season in four and doesn't tyrannously usurp the whole year as in this barbarous gothic clime...

(Byron emits audible yawn, so Shelley exclaims in his ear)

Italy! – Where the sun is the life and soul of celebration and not, as in our own dismal land, some absent guest of honour whose perennial failure to show his face in June, July and August flattens both the wine and the gaiety of his expectant hosts, suffusing successive British summers with a sober sense of pointlessness. – Italy, gentlemen! – However....some of us are not so lucky! Some of us are staying behind: vicious circumstance confines them in this damp prison island to which we were all born inmates. Either the unfortunate have no money, or worse still, no imagination. But the fact remains that those to whom the gift of freedom has been granted --

BYR: Are getting the hell out! (*Cheers*)

SHEL: All, that is, with the sad exception of my poor client. He alone has freely chosen to remain a prisoner here on a spiritual diet of bread and rainwater; even though the door of his cell has been left open by that most capricious gaoler ‘fortune!’ – for Mr Hunt can most certainly afford to make the journey and he has a wife who, with kind words, could be persuaded to accompany him, yet he will not come; will not come gentlemen, in spite of his knowledge that a palace, courtesy again of Milord- umm *-(Cries of “Byron”)* - Byron -- awaits those of us who make the voyage. -- A grand palazzo, which, I may add, is destined to promote and protect the constant delight of a company of friends of like minds and hopes. For what is human happiness gentlemen – nay, heaven itself – if not living and learning, laughing and lamenting with those we love?

BYR: What say you Polly, could you learn to love me?

POLI: Byron, I never thought you’d ask.

SHEL: And there you see the spirit and the emblem of our venture gentlemen: a fellowship in hope and aspiration. Now we all know how near allied is genius to madness; imagine then how refulgent with folly must be the mind of my client – a man, mark you, who self-confessedly loves an adventure, but who nevertheless cocks his snook at this our Italy. The guaranteed romance of its classical past! The unexplored promise of its –

POLI: Women! ---

SHEL: Future!

Jeers.

VOICE: Puritan!

SHEL: In spite of seas warmer than perfumed baths; of skies bluer than the comeliest maiden’s eyes; of meadows softer than feather beds---

VOICE: Better!

SHEL: In spite of fruits more delicious than any god ever forbade –

VOICE: Atheist!

SHEL: In spite of moonlight so bright a man’s shadow walks hand-in-hand with him at midnight. – In spite of endless summer days that last until Christmas and begin again in January! In spite of festivals whose brilliance blinds the black looks of night and dazzles the dull-witted dawn ---

VOICE: More!

SHEL: In spite of all these and the myriad joys I’ve no time to mention -

BYR: Shame.

SHEL: In spite of them all, my client wishes to remain in gaol; wishes indeed to pull firmly shut the door that circumstance has purposely left open. And why, gentlemen? Why? (*Shelley pauses behind Hunt then begins to knock on the tabletop at the same time as Hunt's head*). – Because he is an irremediable, unmitigated, demented, deranged blockhead! Could he be otherwise?

ALL: No! A lunatic! A madman! (*etc*)

SHEL: And therefore I ask that you acquit him!

ALL: Innocent! Innocent!

BYR: Smart enough defence, I don't deny Shelley – but I think we'll execute the idiot anyway! – (*Against cries of disapproval Byron makes to pour wine over Hunt, the jeers intensify – 'no for shame', etc*).

VOICE: Down with the aristocracy!

Byron pelted with orange peel.

HUNT: Yes! Liberty, fraternity and – what's the other one?

BYR: (*Accepting his lost cause*) Equality, Hunt – an impossible dream in your case. – Fletcher! Set up the billiards! - Balls, gentlemen?

Byron ushers them to the table

BYR: Fletcher why ain't there any Bordeaux on the table?

FLE: Because you've drunk it all milord.

BYR: There you see - even my valet moralises at me! And that's why I like him! Because he speaks his mind honestly and I can dismiss him for it if I want! There's no better company than an honest man one doesn't have to listen to: at least one knows one's ignoring the best advice. (*chalks up his cue*) - Come on! Is no-one brave enough to take me on?

VOICE: The painter! He's good with sticks!

Hayden is pushed forward and a cue thrust in hand.

BYR: Yes, come on Hayden, give me a beating – you know you've always wanted to! Tone up the muscles for Italy – who knows you might need'em! (*Raises his cue phallically*)

HAYD: Is there really any need to be quite so coarse, Byron? – We're not all going to Italy just to gratify the basest appetites.

BYR: Oh no, quite right, Hayden: we're going in order to worship at the Shelleyan shrine of classical knowledge.

HAYD: I didn't say that.

They start to play.

BYR: No you didn't. In fact you didn't say anything. Why are you coming to Italy, Hayden?

HAYD: I'm going in order to paint, Byron. That's what painters do, you know: landscapes, portraits ---

BYR: Of beautiful girls --

HAYD: I shall endeavour to be true to life.

BYR: Ah, yes, the most difficult of arts, Hayden – especially when it's so much more easy and rewarding to flatter.

HAYD: I flatter myself that a gentleman doesn't need to flatter a lady.

BYR: Then you do indeed flatter to deceive yourself, my dear Hayden. What, not use flattery on a woman? You must never've spoken to one at all or you'd know that merely to converse with a woman is to flatter her in some degree.

HAYD: I don't converse with the subject in the studio Byron, I paint her.

BYR: Mm. Whether she likes it or not.

HAYD: She does like it – in fact, if you must know, women are far more appreciative of art than men.

BYR: And of artists?

HAYD: They are disposed to like those whose paintings they like --

BYR: And those whose paintings are liked are disposed to like those who like their paintings – quite! Well, it's obvious there's no tempting St. Hayden to admit a human side, let alone a love of womankind...

HAYD: That's not true – as it happens, since we're on the subject, and since I was going to mention it earlier -

Roars stilled by Byron's gesture, the company fall silent.

- there is someone I've had in mind for sometime. However, I intend it to remain a secret.

Groans from company.

BYR: Indeed, from the poor girl herself, Hayden, if you've as much sympathy for women as you profess -

Laughter. - Byron speaks the next passage with 'throwaway' speed.

Anyway, gentlemen, the great Italian question is settled once and for all – some of us are going and some of us are staying, Fact is, we're a simple-hearted bunch: Shelley believes in rainbows with crocks of gold, and the intrepidly penniless Trelawney believes in spending them! Beatific St Hayden here's going to paint every Italian wench he finds a virgin white, whilst Polly paints their towns red – fat little leech that he is – he knows that no-one else but me would be stupid enough to afford the drain on his finances which his dismal attentions represent.

POLI: Leeches are so expensive these days —

BYR: And life is so cheap! So there you have it: we all have our reasons and we all know what they are, though our letters home shall be reserved strictly to impart the innocent traveller's sense of wonderment – a gorge here, a glacier there; that sort of thing. The important point is that we, as companions know each other's hearts in the matter.

HUNT: Do we? I don't recall hearing your reasons for going Byron.

Cheers.

BYR: Really, Hunt - (*momentarily cold*) - I should've thought my reasons were the most public of all... (*Warming up, he begins to perambulate the billiard table*) – You obviously haven't been reading the newspaper gossip – oh no, that's right, you've been writing it! Well, then you above all should know that I'm going because I no longer have a choice.

TRE: Poor Byron: the prophet despised in his own country –

BYR: Yea, brethren - falsely accused of feats of carnality that would be ludicrous were they not geometrically impossible! Couple this with a demand for divorce from a termagant wife who refuses even to allow him entry... to his own house, and it is surely understandable that the aforementioned reprobate has been driven into warmer waters and the delicious arms of Italian sirens. Game, I think Hayden? - Anyway, to hell with marriage! If there's one thing more insufferable than a faithless woman, it's a constant one! Ask Shelley – he may still be married in name – but mentally he's as much a divorcee as I am – eh Shel? Companions of dishonour you might call us: hardened veterans of the locked bedroom door, and the distant weeping of damsels in self-imposed distress. But enough of women, gentlemen – the final valedictory toast! I give you all the things we have

relished tonight and will doubly do so in the future: to luxury, opium, and – speaking personally – to fame!

All drink and cheer.

POLI: Opiates are a destructive addiction Byron.

TRE: And fame?

SHEL: Worse – it corrodes the conscience.

BYR: How would you know Shelley? Your last atheist polemic only sold four copies –

SHEL: Five, I made Trelawney buy his.

BYR: Another example of fortune’s malicious sense of humour: you love the people and they ignore you, whereas I loathe them and they won’t leave me alone.

Fletcher renews their drinks.

So, Fletcher! What do you think of Italy?

FLE: It’s ‘ot, sir.

BYR: And there you have it - No prevarication, no dissembling: in the words of the sage “it’s ‘ot!” – And can a man be happy in Italy, Fletcher?

FLE: Depends whether a man’s content to sleep in lousy beds and drink rough wine.

BYR: That’s my Fletcher! Always thinking about his belly or his bum! And is there nothing else could entice a man to Italy, Fletcher? What about all the joys my friend Shelley mentioned? The sea? The sky? The moonlight?

FLE: With respect, sir, nothing that can’t be had at Brighton, if I may speak my mind, sir?

BYR: Oh speak it, Fletcher, speak it! But there’s more to man than that much over-rated organ the mind: what about the other parts of your manhood, Fletcher? That part, for example, that responds to the look in a pretty girl’s eyes?

Hayden sighs in exasperation

FLE: I don’t know anything about that, milord.

BYR: Oh come on, Fletcher, you’ve been casting around for a wife for decades now (*to others*) – I’ll wager the old codger knows more than all of us!

Fletcher, it's your duty as my valet to give us any relevant counsel you may possess!

FLE: Well milord, as I recall from the last time I served you in Italy, the womenfolk ---

BYR: Womenfolk, what are they?

FLE: The ladies ---

BYR: We don't want to hear about ladies, Fletcher.

FLE: The maidens –

company sniggers –

- the maidens are very dark, Milord.

BYR: Dark! Excellent! The maidens are dark! – Where?

FLE: Pardon, milord?

BYR: Where are they dark, Fletcher? On their knees? Their elbows? Their hands? Where?

SHEL: *(laconically)* Spare us, please...

BYR: Spare yourself, Shelley I'm hungry for Fletcher's wisdom. – Dark, Fletcher – where are they dark?

FLE: I'm sure milord's been close enough to see for himself, but if he really wants my opinion, then I'd say the women was dark everywhere, but darkest - *(expectant silence)* -

BYR: Yes, Fletcher...?

FLE: Darkest of all, milord - darkest of all.... – in their hearts!

Roars of approval. Glasses raised, etc. Slow fade.

ACT 1. sc 4

Lights up almost immediately on the party making its adieus, laughing and leave-takings, etc.

BYR: Going so soon, Shelley? The night may not be young but it's still serviceable.

Fletcher helps Shelley & Trelawney with coats.

FLE: You'd do better to retire yourself milord, it's keeping such odd hours gives you all those nightmares.

BYR: Yes - thank you Fletcher! (*Gestures adieu to Hunt & Hayden*)

FLE: (*To Shelley*) He keeps seeing little Miss Allegra crying her eyes out – Then he even dreamt he murdered you last night, sir. No love lost in that dream, I can tell you!

BYR: I said 'thank you' Fletcher!

SHEL: (*Ironically*) Our fortunes are bound together – why not our nightmares? More details, Fletcher – who knows what such dreams may mean for us all.

Trelawney shifts uneasily.

- Not just you and me, Byron – Allegra and her future, and her mother too!

BYR: (*Irritably*) The girl's mother never comes into my dreams.

SHEL: But you won't deny it concerns her daughter.

BYR: Spare me your meditations just for once, Shelley! (*He fills his glass and swigs*) God knows why I allowed myself to be seduced into this preposterous escapade in the first place - You'd do well to remember I merely agreed to set the child up and put a roof over its infernal mother's head! One thing's certain: I haven't escaped the frigid clutches of a noble wife merely to be bound by the shop-girl passions of a sometime mistress. Exactly what atonement would you deem sufficient to expiate one night of dismal pleasure with the damned girl?

TRE: Byron, I hardly think ---

BYR: Well do tell me please! I've broken with my wife, I'm contemned in every decent house in London, I'm leaving the 'old' country – good god, I'm even supplying you all with a damned palace in the new one, what more can you possibly want? (*His glass drops and breaks causing an embarrassed silence*) – Well don't just stand there Fletcher! Fetch another glass! (*moves to window*).

TRE: Come on Shelley, the heath will take a while.

BYR: The heath? Why in god's name go that way home?

Fletcher returns with a bottle, glass & dustpan.

TRE: Shelley's idea: one last panoramic view of the capital.

BYR: Of course! It'll be spectacular in the pitch dark and rain.

TRE: Actually there's a full moon tonight. - Well, see you on board!

Byron doesn't turn as he replies.

BYR: Oh, I shan't jump ship: - god knows why not.

TRE: Goodnight, then – and thanks.

BYR: What for?

Exit Shelley and Trelawney

FLE: Will that be all, then milord?

BYR: Yes, Fletcher.... Sweet dreams.

Fletcher exits sheepishly whilst Byron stands gazing into the fire. Lights.

ACT I. sc 5

Hampstead Heath. Shelley and Trelawney look out across the audience.

TRE: There: a million souls at rest: humanity in harmony!

SHEL: Principally because they're all asleep.

TRE: (*Wrly*) The ideal city!

SHEL: The city of the dead - may they rest in peace, safely stowed in their beds, like souls in a mausoleum. It's a wonder we *have* such a fear of death when we rehearse it each night so fluently.

Exit Shelley. Trelawney lingers.

TRE: We forget our lines...- The peace of oblivion. Shame they have to be woken... (*Lights slow fade*).

ACT I. sc 6

Dawn. The broken darkness of Byron's room. Lights illuminate Byron seated in armchair, wine-glass in one hand, a candelabra gutters on a side-table. Enter Fletcher, in cleaning mode. Byron awakes with a start, evidently from a bad dream.

BYR: What time is it?

FLE: It's tomorrow, Milord. – Sun'll be breaking through this window any moment – spear you like a chicken it will, if it finds you sitting there; then you'll regret being such a night bird.

BYR: A chicken is not a night bird, Fletcher.... - Tell me, did I say anything last night that I might live to regret? (*He stretches*).

FLE: Of course, milord. (*Examining last night's broken wine glass*).

BYR: Quite. Who cares, anyway! Regrets are like broken glass, Fletcher: fit only for memory's rubbish-tip. So - to Italy, eh? Well, I tell you one thing, I'll not live like a damned gypsy with the rest of the troupe. - As for the child: we'll see...

(Lights. Slow fade).

ACT ONE ENDS