

Lord Byron's Love Letter

CHARACTERS

THE SPINSTER.

THE OLD WOMAN.

THE MATRON.

THE HUSBAND.

SCENE: *The parlor of a faded old residence in the French Quarter of New Orleans in the late nineteenth century. The shuttered doors of the room open directly upon the sidewalk and the noise of the Mardi Gras festivities can be faintly distinguished. The interior is very dusky. Beside a rose-shaded lamp, the Spinster, a woman of forty, is sewing. In the opposite corner, completely motionless, the Old Woman sits in a black silk dress. The doorbell tinkles.*

SPINSTER: (*rising*) It's probably someone coming to look at the letter.

OLD WOMAN: (*rising on her cane*) Give me time to get out. (*She withdraws gradually behind the curtains. One of her claw-like hands remains visible, holding a curtain slightly open so that she can watch the visitors. The Spinster opens the door and the Matron, a middle-aged woman, walks into the room.*)

SPINSTER: Won't you come in?

MATRON: Thank you.

SPINSTER: You're from out of town?

MATRON: Oh, yes, we're all the way from Milwaukee. We've come for Mardi Gras, my husband and I. (*She suddenly notices a stuffed canary in its tiny pink and ivory cage.*) Oh, this poor little bird in such a tiny cage! It's much too small to keep a canary in!

SPINSTER: It isn't a live canary.

OLD WOMAN: (*from behind the curtains*) No. It's stuffed.

MATRON: Oh. (*She self-consciously touches a stuffed bird on her hat.*) Winston is out there dilly-dallying on the street, afraid he'll miss the parade. The parade comes by here, don't it?

SPINSTER: Yes, unfortunately it does.

MATRON: I noticed your sign at the door. Is it true that you have one of Lord Byron's love letters?

SPINSTER: Yes.

MATRON: How very interesting! How did you get it?

SPINSTER: It was written to my grandmother, Irénée Marguerite de Poitevent.

MATRON: How very interesting! Where did she meet Lord Byron?

SPINSTER: On the steps of the Acropolis in Athens.

MATRON: How very, *very* interesting! I didn't know that Lord Byron was ever in Greece.

SPINSTER: Lord Byron spent the final years of his turbulent life in Greece.

OLD WOMAN: (*still behind the curtains*) He was exiled from England!

SPINSTER: Yes, he went into voluntary exile from England.

OLD WOMAN: Because of scandalous gossip in the Regent's court.

SPINSTER: Yes, involving his half-sister!

OLD WOMAN: It was false—completely.

SPINSTER: It was never confirmed.

OLD WOMAN: He was a passionate man but not an evil man.

SPINSTER: Morals are such ambiguous matters, I think.

MATRON: Won't the lady behind the curtains come in?

SPINSTER: You'll have to excuse her. She prefers to stay out.

MATRON: (*stiffly*) Oh. I see. What was Lord Byron doing in Greece, may I ask?

OLD WOMAN: (*proudly*) *Fighting for freedom!*

SPINSTER: Yes, Lord Byron went to Greece to join the forces that fought against the infidels.

OLD WOMAN: He gave his life in defense of the universal cause of freedom!

MATRON: What was that, did she say?

SPINSTER: (*repeating automatically*) He gave his life in defense of the universal cause of freedom.

MATRON: Oh, how very interesting!

OLD WOMAN: Also he swam the Hellespont.

SPINSTER: Yes.

OLD WOMAN: And burned the body of the poet Shelley who was drowned in a storm on the Mediterranean with a volume of Keats in his pocket!

MATRON: (*incredulously*) Pardon?

SPINSTER: (*repeating*) And burned the body of the poet Shelley who was drowned in a storm on the Mediterranean with a volume of Keats in his pocket.

MATRON: Oh. How very, very interesting! Indeed. I'd like so much to have my husband hear it. Do you mind if I just step out for a moment to call him in?

SPINSTER: Please do. (*The Matron steps out quickly, calling, "Winston! Winston!"*)

OLD WOMAN: (*poking her head out for a moment*) Watch them carefully! Keep a sharp eye on them!

SPINSTER: Yes. Be still. (*The Matron returns with her husband who has been drinking and wears a paper cap sprinkled with confetti.*)

MATRON: Winston, remove that cap. Sit down on the sofa. These ladies are going to show us Lord Byron's love letter.

SPINSTER: Shall I proceed?

MATRON: Oh, yes. This—uh—is my husband—Mr. Tutwiler.

SPINSTER: (*coldly*) How do you do.

MATRON: I am *Mrs.* Tutwiler.

SPINSTER: Of course. Please keep your seat.

MATRON: (*nervously*) He's been—celebrating a little.

OLD WOMAN: (*shaking the curtain that conceals her*) Ask him please to be careful with his cigar.

SPINSTER: Oh, that's all right, you may use this bowl for your ashes.

OLD WOMAN: Smoking is such an unnecessary habit!

HUSBAND: Uh?

MATRON: This lady was telling us how her Grandmother happened to meet Lord Byron. In Italy, wasn't it?

SPINSTER: No.

OLD WOMAN: (*firmly*) In Greece, in Athens, on the steps of the Acropolis! We've mentioned that *twice*, I believe. Ariadne, you may read them a passage from the journal first.

SPINSTER: Yes.

OLD WOMAN: But please be careful what you choose to read!

(*The Spinster has removed from the secretary a volume wrapped in tissue and tied with a ribbon.*)

SPINSTER: Like many other young American girls of that day and this, my Grandmother went to Europe.

OLD WOMAN: The year before she was going to be presented to society!

MATRON: How old was she?

OLD WOMAN: Sixteen! Barely sixteen! She was very beautiful, too! Please show her the picture, show these people the picture! It's in the front of the journal. (*The Spinster removes the picture from the book and hands it to the Matron.*)

MATRON: (*taking a look*) What a lovely young girl. (*passing it to the Husband*) Don't you think it resembles Agnes a little?

HUSBAND: Uh.

OLD WOMAN: Watch out! Ariadne, you'll have to *watch* that man. I believe he's been drinking. I *do* believe that he's been—

HUSBAND: (*truculently*) Yeah? What is she saying back there?

MATRON: (*touching his arm warningly*) Winston! Be quiet.

HUSBAND: Uh!

SPINSTER: (*quickly*) Near the end of her tour, my Grandmother and her Aunt went to Greece, to study the classic remains of the oldest civilization.

OLD WOMAN: (*correcting*) The oldest *European* civilization.

SPINSTER: It was an early morning in April of the year eighteen hundred and—

OLD WOMAN: Twenty-seven!

SPINSTER: Yes. In my Grandmother's journal she mentions—

OLD WOMAN: Read it, read it, *read* it.

MATRON: Yes, *please* read it to us.

SPINSTER: I'm trying to find the place, if you'll just be patient.

MATRON: Certainly, excuse me. (*She punches her Husband who is nodding.*) Winston!

SPINSTER: Ah, here it is.

OLD WOMAN: Be *careful!* Remember where to *stop* at, Ariadne!

SPINSTER: Shhh! (*She adjusts her glasses and seats herself by the lamp.*) "We set out early that morning to inspect the ruins of the Acropolis. I know I shall never forget how extraor-

dinarly pure the atmosphere was that morning. It seemed as though the world were not very old but very, very young, almost as though the world had been newly created. There was a taste of earliness in the air, a feeling of freshness, exhilarating my senses, exalting my spirit. How shall I tell you, dear Diary, the way the sky looked? It was almost as though I had moistened the tip of my pen in a shallow bowl full of milk, so delicate was the blue in the dome of the heavens. The sun was barely up yet, a tentative breeze disturbed the ends of my scarf, the plumes of the marvelous hat which I had bought in Paris and thrilled me with pride whenever I saw them reflected! The papers that morning, we read them over our coffee before we left the hotel, had spoken of possible war, but it seemed unlikely, unreal: nothing was real, indeed, but the spell of golden antiquity and rose-colored romance that breathed from this fabulous city."

OLD WOMAN: Skip that part! Get on to where she meets him!

SPINSTER: Yes. . . . (*She turns several pages and continues.*)

"Out of the tongues of ancients, the lyrical voices of many long-ago poets who dreamed of the world of ideals, who had in their hearts the pure and absolute image—"

OLD WOMAN: *Skip* that part! Slip down to where—

SPINSTER: Yes! *Here!* *Do* let us manage without any more *interruptions!* "The carriage came to a halt at the foot of the hill and my Aunt, not being too well—"

OLD WOMAN: She had a sore throat that morning.

SPINSTER: "—preferred to remain with the driver while I undertook the rather steep climb on foot. As I ascended the long and crumbling flight of old stone steps—"

OLD WOMAN: Yes, yes, that's the place! (*The Spinster looks up in annoyance. The Old Woman's cane taps impatiently behind the curtains.*) Go on, Ariadne!

SPINSTER: "I could not help observing continually above me a man who walked with a barely perceptible limp—"

OLD WOMAN: (*in hushed wonder*) Yes—Lord Byron!

SPINSTER: "—and as he turned now and then to observe beneath him the lovely panorama—"

OLD WOMAN: Actually he was watching the girl behind him!

SPINSTER: (*sharply*) Will you *please* let me finish? (*There is no answer from behind the curtains, and she continues to read.*)

"I was irresistibly impressed by the unusual nobility and refinement of his features!" (*She turns a page.*)

OLD WOMAN: The handsomest man that ever walked the earth! (*She emphasizes the speech with three slow but loud taps of her cane.*)

SPINSTER: (*flurriedly*) "The strength and grace of his throat, like that of a statue, the classic outlines of his profile, the sensitive lips and the slightly dilated nostrils, the dark lock of hair that fell down over his forehead in such a way that—"

OLD WOMAN: (*tapping her cane rapidly*) Skip that, it goes on for pages!

SPINSTER: ". . . When he had reached the very summit of the Acropolis he spread out his arms in a great, magnificent gesture like a young god. Now, thought I to myself, Apollo has come to earth in modern dress."

OLD WOMAN: Go on, skip that, get on to where she *meets* him!

SPINSTER: "Fearing to interrupt his poetic trance, I slackened my pace and pretended to watch the view. I kept my look thus carefully averted until the narrowness of the steps compelled me to move close by him."

OLD WOMAN: Of course he pretended not to see she was coming!

SPINSTER: "Then finally I faced him."

OLD WOMAN: Yes!

SPINSTER: "Our eyes came together!"

OLD WOMAN: Yes! Yes! That's the part!

SPINSTER: "A thing which I don't understand had occurred between us, a flush as of recognition swept through my whole being! Suffused my—"

OLD WOMAN: Yes . . . Yes, that's the part!

SPINSTER: "'Pardon me,' he exclaimed, 'you have dropped your glove!' And indeed to my surprise I found that I had, and as he returned it to me, his fingers ever so slightly pressed the cups of my palm."

OLD WOMAN: (*hoarsely*) Yes! (*Her bony fingers clutch higher up on the curtain, the other hand also appears, slightly widening the aperture.*)

SPINSTER: "Believe me, dear Diary, I became quite faint and breathless, I almost wondered if I could continue my lonely

walk through the ruins. Perhaps I stumbled, perhaps I swayed a little. I leaned for a moment against the side of a column. The sun seemed terribly brilliant, it hurt my eyes. Close behind me I heard that voice again, almost it seemed I could feel his breath on my—"

OLD WOMAN: Stop *there!* That will be quite enough! (*The Spinster closes the journal.*)

MATRON: Oh, is that all?

OLD WOMAN: There's a great deal more that's not to be read to people.

MATRON: Oh.

SPINSTER: I'm sorry. I'll show you the letter.

MATRON: How nice! I'm dying to see it! Winston? *Do sit up!*

(*He has nearly fallen asleep. The Spinster produces from the cabinet another small packet which she unfolds. It contains the letter. She hands it to the Matron, who starts to open it.*)

OLD WOMAN: Watch out, watch *out*, that woman can't *open* the letter!

SPINSTER: No, no, please, you mustn't. The contents of the letter are strictly private. I'll hold it over here at a little distance so you can see the writing.

OLD WOMAN: Not too close, she's holding up her glasses! (*The Matron quickly lowers her lorgnette.*)

SPINSTER: Only a short while later Byron was killed.

MATRON: How did he die?

OLD WOMAN: He was killed in action, defending the cause of freedom! (*This is uttered so strongly the husband starts.*)

SPINSTER: When my Grandmother received the news of Lord Byron's death in battle, she retired from the world and remained in complete seclusion for the rest of her life.

MATRON: Tch-tch-tch! How dreadful! I think that was foolish of her. (*The cane taps furiously behind the curtains.*)

SPINSTER: You don't understand. When a life is completed, it ought to be put away. It's like a sonnet. When you've written the final couplet, why go on any further? You only destroy the part that's already written!

OLD WOMAN: Read them the poem, the sonnet your Grandmother wrote to the memory of Lord Byron.

SPINSTER: Would you be interested?

MATRON: We'd adore it—truly!

SPINSTER: It's called *Enchantment*.

MATRON: (*She assumes a rapt expression.*) *Aahhh!*

SPINSTER: (*reciting*)

“*Un saison enchanté!* I mused. Beguiled
Seemed Time herself, her erstwhile errant ways
Briefly forgotten, she stayed here and smiled,
Caught in a net of blue and golden days.”

OLD WOMAN: Not blue and golden—gold and *azure* days!

SPINSTER:

“Caught in a net—of gold and *azure* days!

But I lacked wit to see how lightly shoon
Were Time and you, to vagrancy so used—”

(*The Old Woman begins to accompany in a hoarse undertone.
Faint band music can be heard.*)

“That by the touch of one October moon
From summer's tranquil spell you might be loosed!”

OLD WOMAN: (*rising stridently with intense feeling above the
Spinster's voice*)

“Think you love is writ on my soul with chalk,
To be washed off by a few parting tears?
Then you know not with what slow step I walk
The barren way of those hibernal years—

My life a vanished interlude, a shell
Whose walls are your first kiss—and last farewell!”

(*The band, leading the parade, has started down the street,
growing rapidly louder. It passes by like the heedless, turbulent
years. The Husband, roused from his stupor, lunges to the door.*)

MATRON: What's that, what's that? The *parade*? (*The Hus-
band slaps the paper cap on his head and rushes for the
door.*)

HUSBAND: (*at the door*) Come on, Mama, you'll miss it!

SPINSTER: (*quickly*) We usually accept—you understand?—a
small sum of money, just anything that you happen to think
you can spare.

OLD WOMAN: Stop him! He's gone outside! (*The Husband
has escaped to the street. The band blares through the door.*)

SPINSTER: (*extending her hand*) Please—a *dollar* . . .

OLD WOMAN: *Fifty cents!*

SPINSTER: Or a *quarter!*

MATRON: (*paying no attention to them*) Oh, my goodness—
Winston! He's *disappeared* in the crowd! *Winston—Winston!*
Excuse me! (*She rushes out onto the door sill.*) *Winston!* Oh,
my goodness gracious, he's off again!

SPINSTER: (*quickly*) We usually accept a little money for the
display of the letter. Whatever you feel that you are able to
give. As a matter of fact it's all that we have to *live* on!

OLD WOMAN: (*loudly*) One *dollar!*

SPINSTER: *Fifty cents—or a quarter!*

MATRON: (*oblivious, at the door*) *Winston! Winston!* Heavenly
days. *Goodbye!* (*She rushes out on the street. The Spinster fol-
lows to the door, and shields her eyes from the light as she looks
after the Matron. A stream of confetti is tossed through the
doorway into her face. Trumpets blare. She slams the door shut
and bolts it.*)

SPINSTER: *Canaille! . . . Canaille!*

OLD WOMAN: Gone? Without paying? *Cheated* us? (*She parts
the curtains.*)

SPINSTER: Yes—the *canaille!* (*She fastidiously plucks the thread
of confetti from her shoulder. The Old Woman steps from be-
hind the curtains, rigid with anger.*)

OLD WOMAN: *Ariadne*, my letter! You've dropped my letter!
Your Grandfather's letter is lying on the floor!

Curtain