

An excerpt from

In Byron's Shadow

by Ashley J. Barnard

ONE
(July 1834)

Samuel Taylor Coleridge died on the same day that Nicholas Price came home from Oxford, the day Nicholas turned twenty-one.

Having stayed with friends for over a month in London, he heard the news in St. James Square. A small boy was running around in circles, shouting at the top of his lungs, "Coleridge is dead! Coleridge is dead!" He was covered from head to toe in filth; Nicholas would later surmise that perhaps he had been an apprentice or errand boy to a newspaper printing press, and was among the first to hear the news.

Forgetting decorum and politeness at the sudden lurch of his heart, Nicholas grabbed the boy, still shouting and running, by the collar and lifted him off the ground, bringing him up to eye level, and shook him.

"Which Coleridge, which one?" he said, as though there could be any doubt.

"The poet, sir," the urchin said, his eyes shining. "Samuel Taylor! Died in his bed this morning, in Highgate."

So excited was he with his news that he was oblivious to the blood draining from Nicholas's face, and the very slow descent he made as Nicholas lowered him back to the ground.

"Coleridge dead," he said, wandering through the square, pushed to and fro by passersby who were no more remorseful than the boy.

Of the six great poets of the time – Blake, Byron, Shelley, Keats, Coleridge and Wordsworth -- it left only Wordsworth alive, who was Nicholas's least favorite. When Byron, his idol, died ten years ago, young Nicholas locked himself in his room for a week and would speak to no one in his grief.

Softly quoting the epitaph Coleridge had written for himself a year prior, he stumbled blindly on, tears stinging his eyes.

“ ‘Stop, Christian passer-by! – Stop, child of God,
And read with gentle breast. Beneath this sod
A poet lies, or that which once seemed he.
O lift one thought in prayer for S.T.C;
That he who many a year with toil of breath
Found dead in life, may here find life in death!’ “

He took a hackney coach home to Devonshire, glaring at all the beautiful summer day offered that seemed to mock his grief with singing birds and blooming flowers. He walked the last mile home, keeping in his sight Hedland Manor that he had not visited since Christmas. Resembling a picturesque Regency painting, Hedland Manor embodied all of the gothic splendor of the early nineteenth century, with creeping ivy, gnarled, twisted trees, nettles and thistles abound, arched windows, stone bridges and Greek pavilions.

As Nicholas passed the gazebo in which his father had recently wed his second wife Eliza, Nicholas's two faithful Newfoundland hounds, Harold and Manfred, came charging at full speed, nearly knocking down their master with the ferocity of their greeting. He embraced each one, feeling his spirits rise somewhat at being home, particularly when his father's valet Fielding came out from the estate to meet him.

The two men unabashedly embraced, the older man making the usual comments of amazement at Nicholas's growth into a man, and wishing him happy returns of the day. The

latter reminded Nicholas of his heavy news, and Fielding, knowing all too well of his young master's obsession with poetry, offered sincere condolences.

As they entered the house together, Nicholas was further accosted by his brother James, two years his junior. James's short hair, bleached by the sun, was now a pale blond in contrast to his brother's dark hair which fell in curls to the nape of his neck, naturally in a very Byronic style. Both had a pair of matching green eyes, broad noses and square chins, all on long, narrow faces they had inherited from their mother. Tall and fair like James, their mother Sarah had been dead only six months before their father remarried. Eliza was much shorter and darker, and facially resembled Nicholas more than Sarah had. She was also just three years older than Nicholas, a fact which each brother silently disapproved.

"What has happened?" James said, noting instantly his brother's gloomy countenance. "You look like Laertes hearing of Ophelia's drowning."

Fielding, forgotten in the brothers' reunion, quietly took Nicholas's luggage to his room, leaving the brothers in the drawing-room. Heavy burgundy drapes were pulled back to let in the sunlight which illuminated mahogany furniture, under which Indian rugs were situated over the dark wooden floor. The beige-colored walls were decorated with an eclectic mixture of archaic and modern decoration; on one wall, for instance, was a medieval tapestry, and on the other was the latest in Italian paintings. The wall closest to the entryway was dedicated to Nicholas's own paintings; here one could track the development of his talent, from his first rudimentary watercolors to his more recent Impressionisms.

"James, the worst news befell me in my travels home. Coleridge is dead."

James closed his eyes and whispered a prayer. "I would have sooner heard that Wordsworth was dead than he."

“As would I, God forgive us both. Now he is the only one left.”

“It’s nearly the end of an era,” James said. He sighed and gently touched Nicholas on the shoulder. “Would you had received better tidings on your birthday.” He straightened and smiled suddenly, tilting his head in a boyish way that usually preceded impishness. “I do have news, however, that I daresay will cheer you up, no matter how remotely. Father is holding a banquet tonight in your honor. Guess who is on the guest list.”

“I haven’t the slightest idea, James.”

“Which lady would you like to meet above all others, no matter how ridiculous the notion?”

At this Nicholas gave a small smile. “Ada Byron, who isn’t the least likely to come.”

James’s face broke out in a wide grin, and Nicholas felt his heart race in spite of his doubts.

“It is she!”

Nicholas grabbed his brother by the shoulders, squeezing hard. “Certainly not! I pray you, do not tease me in such a manner, on today of all days.”

“I would never be so cold-hearted! I tell you Ada Byron is coming here tonight, and in her company is none other than her mother, Lady Annabella Byron.”

Just then Nicholas saw his father over James’s shoulder, and rotating his brother to the side, rushed to his father, and after shaking his hand and answering half-a-dozen inquiries regarding his health and journey home, Nicholas blurted, “Is it true? Is Ada Byron coming here tonight?”

“She is indeed,” said Lord Neville. “I had hoped to please you on your birthday.”

“I am very pleased, Father, very pleased,” Nicholas said, still pumping his father’s hand. “This is capital indeed. But how was it arranged?”

“A fellow MP I met from the House of Commons is acquainted with Lady Byron. You will meet him tonight. He is bringing his young daughter with him.”

“I shall be pleased to meet the man who may have secured my future.”

Lord Neville laughed, twisting one end of his graying mustache. “Don’t bother with wedding plans yet, Nicholas. I have heard from Sir George that Annabella detested her husband so greatly that now she is firmly opposed to anything related to poetry. In fact, the stories go that Ada is forbidden to read any of her father’s poetry, or see anything bearing his likeness.”

“It’s true,” James said. “You know of the famous portrait by Thomas Phillips of Lord Byron in Albanian costume?”

“Of course,” Nicholas said.

“When Ada was a child it was kept in the household of Lady Byron’s parents, and moreover, a curtain was drawn over the portrait so that Ada might not espy her father’s face. Now it is simply packed away somewhere, collecting dust.”

“It is a crime, surely,” Nicholas said, “to deprive a lady of her father’s countenance, not to mention hiding from the world such an esteemed work of art.”

“It may be so,” said Neville, “but Lady Byron is determined to keep Ada from succumbing to her father’s passion at any cost. Even a glimpse of Lord Byron, Annabella fears, will influence her daughter away from science and toward poetry, which she equates with debauchery, lewdness, and all other evils real or imagined that Lady Byron conceived of her husband.”

“So she is to be an unfeeling slave to science then?” said Nicholas. “Someone must rescue her from such a fate!”

“If it is to be you,” his father said, “say nothing of your love for poetry in front of Annabella. In fact, you would do well to . . . tell a white lie or two regarding the focus of your education.”

“If I find the young lady as alluring as I have dreamt her to be, I will endeavor anything to win her affections, and the approval of her mother.”

“So be it. I shall warn the household of your intentions so that nothing may be said of your love for poetry and especially for Lord Byron. For now, retire to your room to prepare for this evening’s banquet. Our guests will be arriving presently, and Eliza is anxious to see you.”

“Certainly, Father. You could not have greeted me with better tidings.”

Nicholas suppressed the urge to plant a kiss on the ruddy bald spot on his father’s head as the Earl of Neville, in his sixties with an increasingly growing paunch, was a full head shorter than Nicholas.

As Nicholas dressed with alacrity for the banquet, James sat on an armchair in the foyer of his brother’s room, crossing his knees and swinging his foot back and forth.

“I tell you, James,” Nicholas said as he tied a silk cravat around his neck, “that with the exception of the tragedy of Coleridge’s death, I have never been happier than I am at this moment. I have completed my schooling, I am of age, and the woman I have always dreamed of marrying shall be made acquainted with me. The future holds so much promise, that I am positively bursting with the excitement of all the possibilities.”

“You know I could not be more pleased for you, dear brother,” James said, smiling with genuine affection.

As Nicholas slipped on his shoes, James said, “What do you hope to accomplish by making Ada Byron your wife? Is it just to have possession of Lord Byron’s closest relation?”

“It is much more than that,” said Nicholas. “I want in my future wife that very fiery passion of Byron’s that her mother seeks to squelch. I want the brilliant poetic mind with which to compose poetry and hold intellectual and stimulating conversation. And yes, I want the name Byron associated with me, I want to use the connection in hopes of finding a publisher and audience for my own poetry, and, in my wildest fancies, I want the very rare chance to be named the next Lord Byron.”

“Lofty ambitions indeed,” James said with a smile. “Lord Neville is not enough for you.”

“If I could,” Nicholas said, holding out his hand to help James to his feet, “I would give the title to you. I would be more than happy simply being Lord Byron.”

“ ‘Simply being,’ ” James said with a roll of his eyes, and the two of them descended the two flights of the spiral staircase back to the drawing-room on the ground floor to await the guests.

“If she marries me,” Nicholas said, “or even allows me to woo her, I will free her mind from scientific oppression so that there will be no going back.”

“Heaven help Lady Byron, then,” said James.

“Nicholas!” a voice said, and the brothers turned in unison to see Lady Neville, dressed in black and burgundy brocade, hurrying toward them. Having made Eliza’s acquaintance only once before, on the day of her marriage to his father during the Christmas holiday, Nicholas smiled nervously, bowing deeply.

“Lady Neville,” he said, “I am honored to see you again.”

“Please, Nicholas,” she said, taking his hand, “if you will not consent to call me Mother, or even Stepmother, do me the courtesy of calling me Eliza.”

“Eliza, then,” Nicholas said and straightened, meeting her gaze.

“Well, Nicholas, how handsome you are,” she said, holding high in her hand a glass of sherry, of which Nicholas found he could smell with great clarity on her breath. “Indeed, I did not see much of you during your stay with us last Christmas, with the wedding so busy and frantic and the honeymoon closely following, and I really had no idea . . .”

She trailed off, her eyes glazing over with a look Nicholas was quite unfamiliar with. In his innocence he was unsure of what to do, and so stared at the floor and shifted uncomfortably.

James coughed, and Eliza finally tore her gaze from Nicholas to address him.

Releasing his held breath with relief, Nicholas found his father at the far end of the room, and together they greeted the guests as they arrived. Nicholas found it increasingly difficult to look his father in the eye after having endured Eliza’s devouring eyes, and made an extra effort to greet each guest with gusto.

“Lady Byron and Miss Ada Byron,” the butler announced after several guests had arrived, and Nicholas felt faint.

“Dear God,” he said to himself, “let me make a favorable impression, and I shall never shirk from church on Sundays again.”

The words no sooner left his lips than his eyes caught sight of them, and his pulse quickened with all the hope and fervor of unstained, sanguine youth.

TWO

Her mother came in first, and Nicholas hardly noticed as his eyes were only for Ada who followed close behind.

She was not quite as beautiful as he had hoped, which was disappointing, but she was far from plain. At eighteen years old, she bore her father's bold nose and chin, dark hair and grey eyes, and she was built tall and solidly. She walked with a slight limp, and Nicholas recalled having heard something about a terrible childhood illness that had left her temporarily paralyzed and almost blind. Finding the thought unfair as she had obviously recovered well, he focused on her dress of green satin, coming just off the shoulders, which accentuated her long and swanlike neck. She smiled but didn't blush under Nicholas's stare, and as his father introduced him to the two ladies, he bowed so low his forehead nearly touched his shins.

"Dear ladies," Nicholas said, "I am honored beyond reason to make your acquaintance."

Lady Byron's face was a mask of suspicion, the composing of which Nicholas supposed was her daily habit.

"I have heard much about you from your father's correspondence," said Annabella. "And it pleases both of us greatly to meet you at last."

"The pleasure, I am quite sure, is all mine."

Then they were gone, with a rustle of skirts, to sit on one of the sofas, and the next guests were admitted.

"Sir George O'Reilly and Miss Catherine O'Reilly."

After the introductions were made, Nicholas shook the hand of George O'Reilly, Bart., who was a stocky man with a shock of red hair, and bowed to his daughter, a young girl of ten years. Her hair was a lighter red than her father's, and on her pale skin was a splatter of freckles,

particularly across her nose. She regarded Nicholas plainly with green eyes specked with gold, taking in his appearance with a raised eyebrow. Nicholas nearly burst out laughing at her impropriety, but didn't want to embarrass her, and so winked at her instead.

The change in her expression was instant as she gave him a face-splitting smile. "Pleased to meet you, sir," she said, and curtsied.

The pair having made up the last of the guests, Eliza, as the hostess, paired up the men with the women and gave the signal to embark to the dining-room. Having been assigned Ada as his dinner partner, Nicholas took her arm and led her to the table, seating himself across from her as the others took their places. There was a small fire burning in the fireplace behind the table for ambiance rather than warmth; Nicholas could feel it heating his back and feared he would soon begin to perspire.

The butler and two footmen began the parade of scrumptious dishes which permeated the air with the mouth-watering scents of garlic and roasted mutton. In between courses Nicholas spoke to Ada when he had opportunity, which was rare as either Eliza or Annabella dominated the majority of the conversation, and Annabella's heavy, judgmental stare made him nervous. He also found it incredibly difficult to speak of anything rather than poetry.

He found himself exchanging exasperated glances with his father, inconspicuously shrugging when he could to indicate his ineptitude at conversing with Ada. He had little interests beyond poetry and the arts, and could think of nothing to say that would not arouse Annabella's suspicion.

Lord Neville smiled in acknowledgement, and when he found a lapse in conversation, he addressed Ada and said, "Sir George has told me you are acquainted with Charles Babbage.

Nicholas and I were once guests at his home on Dorset Street; quite a charming fellow, Dr. Babbage. Eh, Nicholas?”

“Er, quite. Yes, he was quite . . . lovely.” Nicholas, of course, had no idea as to whom this fellow Babbage was, but grateful for the rescue, plunged ahead. “How did you find Dr. Babbage, Miss Byron?” he asked Ada, smiling innocently. He noted out the corner of his eye that Lady Byron looked mildly pleased.

“Completely fascinating,” she said, her features brightening with animation. “Last year I had the great honor of being introduced to his Difference Engine. I was quite changed by the occasion. Are you familiar with this mechanism, Lord Nicholas?”

There was something in her smile, a glint in her eye, that told Nicholas as far as she was concerned the game was up. Seeing nothing beyond amusement in the arching of her eyebrow, he felt that she had exonerated his deceit, and casting his eyes downward with a small smile, said, “No, I’m afraid he had not yet invented such a machine when I saw him last. Pray, describe it to me.”

“He calls it a thinking machine, able to perform mental arithmetic completely without human intervention, made up of interconnected components of brass and steel. It is quite a miraculous invention, and I was completely enthralled.”

The way her eyes shone as she described the machine nearly caused Nicholas to forget they were discussing science. There was a heated passion there, but not the kind he had been expecting. He surmised it was merely the result of Lady Byron’s brainwashing, and allowed himself a quick moment to imagine how her passion might be stirred listening to him recite poetry.

“How unfortunate that I was detained at Oxford, and was unable to witness such a spectacle,” Nicholas said. “It sounds positively splendid.”

“It was quite capital indeed,” said Lady Byron. “His reception in Marylebone was especially delightful. Ada and I were made acquainted with everyone from earls to engineers, as well as the best in the way of literary people.”

Nicholas nearly gave himself away at the mention of “literary people,” but luckily was unable to speak as Lady Byron never gave him the chance.

“We saw many of them again at the Court Ball last May, when Ada was presented to society. She was the focus of many suitors, I daresay, many of whom maintain quite respectable positions in society.”

“Mama,” Ada said, which went unheard.

To Lord Neville, Annabella added, “Not only does Ada possess beauty and wit among her charms, but she is also heiress to the Wentworth Estates that I have inherited, worth more than eight-thousand pounds per annum.”

Nicholas wasn't sure if he were more shocked at the affluence of the estates or the egregious slip in decorum Lady Byron had made by sharing the information. His eyes met those of his father, and both seemed to conclude simultaneously that Lady Byron had made a rather shrewd and calculating slip.

Nicholas grinned in spite of himself – was Lady Byron actually trying to market Ada to Lord Neville as a possible wife to his son? The approbation he had won referencing Dr. Babbage had evidently exceeded his wildest hopes. He glanced at Ada and once more caught the knowing smile and mischievous gleam in her eye.

A great deal of wine was had by all, and once the hearty meal was consumed, the ladies rose to adjourn to the drawing-room for coffee while the men remained in order to smoke cigars and drink brandy. Nicholas stood with the others and bowed to Ada, wistfully watching her leave the room.

His mind roving from Ada to Lord Byron to poetry in general, Nicholas found himself thinking of Coleridge again. Under the influence of too much wine and brandy, he feared a sudden onslaught of tears, and excused himself to take a walk in the garden.

The grounds were unlit but the moon provided more than ample light for Nicholas to find his way to one of the Greek pavilions. He sat on a bench, staring at the reflection of the moonlight in the neighboring pond, listening absently to the flapping of wings and shriek of a nearby owl as it ostensibly swooped down for the kill of some unsuspecting creature.

He nearly jumped out of his skin when he heard a voice behind him say, "Bravo, Lord Nicholas. A virtuoso performance, indeed. You ought to be an actor, truly."

He stood abruptly and took a hasty step forward, smacking his forehead clean into the low awning of the pavilion's ceiling. Swallowing a curse, he managed to bow in response to Ada's throaty laugh.

"Miss Byron, you have found me out," he said, rubbing his forehead. "I'm a scoundrel and a liar. I am completely unworthy, and yet I pray you do not abhor me, for my intentions were not at all wicked."

"Deceiving my mother and me as to the very core of your being is not wicked?" Ada said, dipping down low and gracefully to enter the pavilion, taking Nicholas's seat. "I daresay, Lord Nicholas, you are the most wicked gentleman I have ever encountered. How delightful."

Nicholas burst out laughing in spite of himself, and after gaining the assent of Ada, sat next to her, careful not to hit his head again. The moonlight shone through the holes in the pavilion ceiling, casting a ghostly glow on Ada's pale shoulders and neck. Her upswept hair was so dark it blended in with the shadows, and her eyes, pierced with moonlight, were like dark pools of molasses – so sweet and tempting one would give his life to drown in them.

“Tell me, sir, why you have attempted to deceive us,” Ada said.

“Am I so transparent, Miss Byron?” Nicholas asked instead, but before she could answer, he suddenly realized the awkward predicament they were in.

“Miss Bryon, how is it that you are out here unchaperoned?”

“My mother and your stepmother are in a very serious discussion regarding moral incontinence, and I was able to slip away unnoticed.”

“Moral incontinence!”

“The ‘disease’ my father is said to have suffered from,” Ada said with a sigh. “Though she never references him directly, my mother speaks around him all the time.”

“Miss Byron, that reminds me of a question I would like to ask you. I fear, however, given your mother's sensibilities, that my question may offend. If so, you may certainly refrain from answering without fear of causing offense to me.”

“I prefer offensive questions, Lord Nicholas,” Ada said with a grin. “I find most questions to be quite dull and predictable. You may ask me anything you will, Lord Nicholas.”

For a moment Nicholas was perfectly incapable of speech. “Indeed . . . I fear I've forgotten the question.”

“We were speaking of my father.”

“Your father. Of course. What I wish to know is, have you ever been permitted to read any of his poetry? Anything at all?”

“No, nothing,” Ada said in a low voice. “I have been expressly forbidden to see his likeness or to read a single word he has written.”

“The injustice you have been served is too cruel to describe,” Nicholas said before thinking.

“You need not tell me, Lord Nicholas,” Ada said, leaning in closer to him. “As if denying me any hint of his existence were not bad enough, I am under constant surveillance to ensure that I will not succumb to his ‘moral incontinence.’”

“Good heavens.”

“Before he died my mother was convinced he would attempt to snatch me away. She was certain that his agents were placed among the servants in my grandparents’ employ, and once nearly had a maid arrested whom she had unjustly accused of collaborating with my father to steal me away to him.”

“Can it be possible?”

“Quite possible. She was so convincing in her delusions that my grandmother slept with a loaded pistol next to her pillow.”

“This is above all!”

Her chest heaving, Ada nodded in satisfaction that Nicholas was sufficiently horrified before continuing.

“Now I am surrounded by the Furies.”

“The Furies?” said Nicholas, amused.

“A most annoying group of old hens pretending to be my tutors, but really their chief employment is to keep a strict eye on me and to interfere in my business whenever possible. I am quite certain they detest me.”

“Surely you are mistaken, Miss Byron. No one could detest you.”

“You’re very kind, but if you had the opportunity to see the great satisfaction they take in thwarting any pleasure I might find for myself, you’d be persuaded otherwise. Nearly everyday they devise some complaint in my behavior, and proceed with it directly to my mother.”

“My dear Miss Byron, I do not know how you can bear it!”

“That is not all. The last and most dreadful measure my mother has taken, was to employ a Dr. King when I turned fifteen. Guess what Dr. King’s former employment was.”

“I dare not venture a guess. I am afraid to hear.”

“He was none other than the manager of a lunatic asylum!”

“Gracious God!”

“Now the good doctor is a resident in our home at Fordhook, and prescribes trigonometry and sums in order to prevent ‘objectionable thoughts’ from assailing my young and impressionable mind. It is with this discipline that he hopes to rid my fancies completely of poetry and passion.”

Nicholas jumped to his feet, startling Ada. “Miss Byron, I fear I cannot stand another word! I am in such a fury I fear I may say something quite objectionable to your mother.”

“You had better not. Otherwise you’ll ruin your perfectly convincing performance. You’d never be able to see me again.”

Overwhelmed, Nicholas promptly dropped to one knee and took Ada's gloved hand in his, bringing it to his lips. "Miss Byron, I should like nothing more than to see you as often as possible. Please tell me it is your hope as well."

Ada hesitated before saying, "I believe it is."

"Then I shall endeavor to remain calm and collected in the presence of Lady Byron."

"Do, Lord Nicholas. Now, we'd best head back to the house before her alarm bells begin ringing and she sends the police after me."

"Yes, yes, of course," said Nicholas, helping her to her feet. "Forgive me for detaining you."

"It was I who detained you, sir, and I am grateful for your attentive ear."

"May you always have access to my attentive ear," Nicholas said as they walked arm in arm toward the house. "And if I may borrow yours one last time this evening, may I commit the most vile of offenses by quoting some of your father's poetry to you?"

At this Ada stopped and held Nicholas steadily in her gaze. "Lord Nicholas, I should like nothing more."

"I can think of nothing more appropriate than the lines he wrote to you, dear Miss Byron, in the final canto of *Childe Harold*."

"Pray, let me hear it," she said, her eyes glistening.

With the croaking of frogs and chirping of crickets as his chorus, he began.

"My daughter! with thy name this song begun –
My daughter! with thy name thus much shall end! –
I see thee not – I hear thee not – but none
Can be so wrapped in thee; thou art the friend
To whom the shadows of far years extend:
Albeit my brow thou never shouldst behold,
My voice shall with thy future visions blend,
And reach into thy heart – when mine is cold –"

A token and a tone even from thy father's mold.' "

When he finished Ada was opening weeping, and with the beat of his heart roaring in his ears, he watched with abject fascination as she leaned in against him, and for one blissful moment rested her lips on his neck.

"Lord Nicholas," she said in his ear, her voice smooth and low, "what a gift you have given me."

Before he could respond, she had moved away from him, leaving him grasping at the empty air.

"There's more, Miss Byron, much more, but I'm afraid I don't know the rest. But if you would accompany me to the library, I'll show you the very poem."

Again she paused, and in the moonlight Nicholas could see the desire shining in her eyes, and the hopefulness in her very posture. "I'd like that very much, Lord Nicholas."

Nearly skipping with glee, he led her into the house with stealth through a pair of French doors between the dining-room and drawing-room. As they crept down the hall they could hear the loud laughter of the men seated at the dining table accompanied by the distant smell of cigar smoke. Nearing the library, Ada's hand in his, Nicholas realized with a sinking heart that the room was already occupied as he heard a child's voice projecting loudly therein. Pausing at the door, they observed Miss O'Reilly, the young daughter of his father's parliamentary associate, seated on a sofa, a copy of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* in her hand.

"We are prevented," Ada said with a rueful smile. "Another time, perhaps, Lord Nicholas."

"Wait! I can grab the book and we'll steal to another room," Nicholas said, instinctively knowing this would be his only opportunity.

She shook her head and said, "I have taken too many chances already. I fear this is meant as a warning that discovery is eminent."

She curtsied, signifying dismissal, and upon seeing his mournful look, blew him a kiss before disappearing down the hallway.

Crushed, Nicholas leaned against the doorframe, breathing heavily, his eyes fixed on the bust of Milton in the library. After a few moments had passed, against his will he found himself drawn into listening to the girl's recital.

She read aloud from the play with surprising diction and energy, blissfully distracting Nicholas from his dismal reveries.

"I will return again into the house and desire some conduct of the lady. I am no fighter. I have heard of some kind of men that put quarrels purposely on others to taste their valor. Belike this is a man of that quirk." "

Nicholas answered her from the doorframe. "Sir, no. His indignation derives itself out of a very competent injury.' Forgive me, I but I do not recall the rest of the line. Shall I read with you to complete the scene, dear Viola?"

With a gasp the young lady blushed up to the roots of her reddish hair and nearly dropped the book. She wore a mock-Regency gown of red and white, and in her hair that fell in loose curls around her shoulders was a bright red bow.

"Forgive me, sir, I did not realize you were there. I, I, I merely grew bored with the conversations in the drawing-room, and Lady Neville invited me to the library so that I might find some distraction."

“My dear girl, there is no offense whatsoever. I am heartily pleased to find you enjoying yourself, and may I say what a convincing Viola you make. Shall I read Sir Toby and Sir Andrew’s lines? And then perhaps we can proceed to the duel between Viola and Sir Andrew.”

“The duel, sir?”

“Quite. There is a great duel coming up, I should think, in the next page or two. We’ll use those blunted weapons over there for our purpose.”

He nodded toward the wall, mounted on which were two imitation sixteenth-century rapiers, the points and edges dulled for the safe purposes of decoration.

The girl’s face erupted into a grin. “Can we really, sir?”

“Well, of course! We must do Shakespeare justice. But first, you must endeavor to call me Nicholas.”

“Very well, Nicholas,” she said with the confidence and air of an adult. “And you shall call me Catherine.”

“Catherine the Great?”

“Just Catherine will do.”

“Very well, Catherine. Now turn that script so I might see it, and let us continue with the scene.”

They read their respective parts, and before long, Nicholas was just as drawn into the scene as Catherine was, and by the time they reached the duel, they were leaping on the furniture and shouting their lines.

As Nicholas handed her a rapier, she quoted, “ ‘I do assure you, sir, ‘tis against my will!’ ” and crossed her sword with Nicholas. He had thought to instruct her but was delighted to

learn she was already acquainted with the rudiments of dueling with rapier. Around the room they fought, improvising lines and occasionally stabbing the other with harmless repercussions.

At last they collapsed exhausted onto the sofa, and at once began laughing.

“You make a very formidable opponent, dear Catherine,” said Nicholas, wheezing.

“Indeed, I have not met your better.”

“You, sir, proved very gallant indeed. I should like to recite lines and duel with you quite frequently, I should think.”

“Then let your wish be granted, for you are always welcome here.”

“Truly, Nicholas?”

“Oh, yes. Any girl with a passion for Shakespeare will always be regarded as a dear friend of mine. Should you ever need assistance, dear Catherine, pray come to me.”

She blushed again, and searching for a diversion, pointed to his vast collection of poetry.

“I see you are a great aficionado of poetry too, Nicholas.”

“Yes, that I am indeed. My favorite poet of all time is Lord Byron.”

“And his very daughter here in your house! What a coincidence!”

Nicholas had to smile, and told her of his seclusion when Byron died, and of his distress upon hearing Coleridge was dead.

“My favorite is Blake,” said Catherine, tilting her head up with a touch of superiority, unaffected by the news of Coleridge’s death.

“Oh, is it indeed? And who was it that did expose you to Blake?”

“My mother,” Catherine said, her countenance instantly darkening. “She loved all the poets, quite madly.”

“And where is she now?” Nicholas asked, though he was already certain he could supply the answer for himself.

“She has been dead these two years now.”

“Then that is another thing we share in common. My mother died less than a year ago.”

“And your father already remarried? Oh, forgive me, sir, I meant no offense—“

“And none taken. ‘The funeral baked meats did coldly furnish forth the marriage table.’ “

She smiled, the great red bow in her hair gleaming in the light like a butterfly resting on a poppy and basking in the sun.

“Well, dear Catherine, shall we adjourn to the drawing-room? I fear that soon they shall come to look for us.”

“Very well,” she said with a sigh. “But I shall be back to visit ere long, make no mistake!”

He entered the drawing-room arm in arm with young Catherine, feeling his face grow irrepressibly hot when the first eyes he met belonged to Ada.

Quickly averting his gaze, he bowed to his company and took a seat next to her, motioning for Catherine to sit on the other side, and tried to appear relaxed and jovial. Ada smiled impishly, and once again he was under the close scrutiny of Lady Byron. She had been interviewing James about his studies, addressing him properly as Mr. Price. When she addressed Nicholas, again using the proper title of Lord Nicholas, Nicholas shot James an apologetic look at which the latter rolled his eyes. They both understood that Nicholas, as the eldest son of an earl, was distinguished as “Lord,” whereas James, the younger son, was merely “Mr. Price.” Only Nicholas was bothered by the unfair distinction, though it made sense as he would inherit their father’s title of Lord Neville.

“Lord Nicholas,” Annabella said again, turning to him, “your father tells us you have just graduated from Oxford. Tell me, of what did you primarily study there? What is your degree in?”

“Physics,” Nicholas said, having planned the lie some hours ago. “I studied some botany and chemistry, but mostly physics.”

Lady Byron nodded in apparent satisfaction, and just as Nicholas heaved a sigh of relief, he heard the little voice of his protégé next to him echoing loudly through the room, like a herald of doom.

“Physics! You studied physics when you have such a love of poetry?”

Feeling the blood drain from his face, Nicholas slowly looked over to Catherine and began to give her a silencing look when he realized it was of no use. His fate was sealed.

“Why do you not speak, Nicholas? Why would you betray your passion?” continued Catherine, oblivious.

“What’s this?” Annabella said in a low growl.

“Did you not just tell me, Nicholas, of how you wept today for Coleridge’s death, and locked yourself in your room for a week out of grief when Lord Byron died?”

The final nail driven soundly into the coffin, Nicholas dared to look up at Ada, to convey his apologies with a glance, but was distracted by the choking sounds coming from her mother.

Annabella had turned a violent crimson, her hand at her throat, her eyes wild.

“You did *what*, sir? Oh, we have been deceived most cruelly, Ada. Let us go at once before anything more is said of B--, of your father.”

“Have I offended?” Catherine said, her eyes shining with innocence and confusion.

“Please, Lady Byron, I’m sure Nicholas meant no harm,” said Eliza, rising from the sofa in unison with Lady Byron.

“You could not have known, Lady Neville, that the name of my deceased husband is not to be spoken in my presence or that of Ada’s,” said Annabella. “And further, you were probably not made aware of the utmost deception your husband orchestrated by inviting us here, boasting of his son’s love of science and abhorrence of poetry.”

“Forgive me, Lady Byron,” Neville sputtered, half rising. “I only thought to acquaint Nicholas with Ada without the preconceived bias of—“

“To marry him off to her, you mean! Oh, most cruel, how monstrous! She could have married him without knowing the truth! Look to yourself, Lord Neville. You will make a great many enemies if you continue to deceive the parents of the ladies of whom your son fancies. A great many indeed.”

With that she all but yanked Ada to her feet, who had time only to glance at Nicholas with regret.

In the ensuing commotion the other guests had arisen as well, with Sir George O’Reilly mumbling apologies and excuses in his Irish brogue to Lord Neville as he pulled his confused daughter to her feet. Nicholas, moved to desperate measures, followed at a trot the ladies Byron out the front door, and was met with an unexpected gush of cold wind and rain. At some point since the scene in the pavilion and his sojourn in the library, rain clouds had gathered, as if finally acknowledging the cruel fate to which Nicholas was headed.

“Miss Byron, Lady Byron!” Nicholas called out as the two ladies, in their haste, had not fastened their cloaks and had paused outside to do so. “Please, one word, I pray!”

“One word is too many from you, I’m afraid, Lord Nicholas,” Annabella said, grabbing Ada’s arm and pulling her in the direction of their coach. Their footman, having waited outside in the rain, jumped to attention and began opening the doors for them.

“I only wished to acquaint myself with your daughter, and knowing you would not have allowed it had you been aware of my feelings toward poetry, I had to resort to lying which I would have quickly remedied upon –“

“Lord Nicholas, save your breath. For it is not your lies which cause the greatest offence, it is your love of poetry and that of my late husband in particular. For your appreciation of such reveals your true character, or that which would have eventually surfaced. I have often said of my late husband that to look in his eyes was to know true evil. And so your eyes would have developed a similar gleam, Lord Nicholas, had you continued in your course, and you would have exposed my dear Ada to the very thing I have tried all of her life to shield her from. And that is not forgivable, nor negotiable.”

And with that, she ushered Ada into the coach, and the two ladies disappeared from sight. Nicholas watched as the coach was swallowed in the mist and rain, until his hair and frockcoat were soaked. With no other sound but the loud pattering of rain drops on his shoulders and the branches of the trees swaying in the wind, he released a wretched sigh and went back into the house.

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“I have brought a penitent to see you.”

Nicholas looked up from his letter to Ada, his fingers stained with ink, to regard his brother James and the visitor he had brought with him. The penitent was no other than Catherine O'Reilly, who looked so completely miserable that Nicholas felt a stab of regret in his heart that he had not assured her that Lady Byron's outrage had not been her fault. Not purposefully, anyway.

It was the morning following the disastrous banquet, and Nicholas had hardly slept that night having composed in his head scores of different letters and poems that he might write to Ada. He finally settled on one, the which he was currently composing, when James and his charge appeared at the door of his sitting-room.

“Dear Lord Nicholas, how can I possibly convey –“ said Catherine before Nicholas interrupted her.

“So it’s ‘Lord Nicholas,’ now?”

“Well, you must hate me, sir –“

“Indeed I do not! I didn’t tell you, Catherine, of my devious scheme. How were you to know? You were only defending the passion we have in common.”

She brightened considerably, her freckled face breaking out into a smile. “Still, I have come to make amends by sharing with you an intelligence I have regarding Miss Byron.”

“Oh?” Nicholas said, his interest definitely pricked.

“I heard my father and Lady Byron discussing her wish for a male tutor for Miss Byron, someone to teach her shorthand.”

Nicholas slowly rose, the implications lending strength to his limbs. “A tutor, eh?”

“Now, Nick,” James said, correctly identifying the look on Nicholas’s face, “Father warned you not to proceed in this enterprise, lest you bring disgrace upon the family. Besides, Annabella would never allow you to tutor Ada!”

“She would if she did not recognize me,” said Nicholas. “And if I arrived under an assumed name . . . A relation perhaps of someone associated with science. Hm . . .”

“Nicholas, you cannot possibly –“

“Yes, yes! I’ll be William Turner, the brother of Edward Turner the professor of chemistry at Cambridge. I’ll grow a beard –“

“It’s preposterous! Even if you succeed, what can you possibly hope to accomplish?”

Nicholas met his gaze unwaveringly. “Making Ada my wife no matter what the consequence.” To Catherine he said, “A thousand thanks, dear lady, for this invaluable intelligence. You are hereby released from further obligation to make amends.”

Catherine applauded and laughed, and to James’s horror and Nicholas’s humor, added her own ideas to Nicholas’s disguise.

“A limp!” she cried. “A mole, a wart! A large, red, bulbous nose!”

“We don’t want to make him unattractive, my dear,” James said, finally succumbing. “A beard and a change of dialect should be sufficient.”

Nicholas gave him a grateful smile. “You’ll assist me, then?”

“Yes,” James said with a sigh, “though it may be the ruin of us both.”

Nicholas, clapping his brother fondly on the shoulder, said, “Fear not. Should I not succeed, I shall never reveal your involvement to Father. Now Catherine, what dialect would you suggest?”

As the three of them deliberated the different possibilities, Nicholas felt his spirits rising, certain that this time he would prevail. If she would have him, he would make Ada his wife, with or without her mother’s consent.