

*Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster. And if you gaze long enough into an abyss, the abyss will gaze back at you.*

—Friedrich Nietzsche

# The Strange Case of Lord Byron's Lover

by

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## 1

My memory isn't what it once was, but my past is written large within these pages. I beg you to indulge me as I recount a series of perplexing events occurring both before and after I wrote the Gothic opus for which I am known. My work achieved popular success, and even the indomitable Sir Walter Scott congratulated me for my "original genius and power of expression."

However, lest you believe the story I'm about to share in the final pages of my journal is a prideful, self-congratulatory boast, let me assure you that I, Mary Shelley, have a far stranger tale to tell than the man-made monster of my fiction. And like the creature dredged from my nightmares, these events haunt me to this day.

The mystery began innocently enough with a summer holiday spent in Lake Geneva with the notorious Lord Byron in the manor house he called Villa Diodati. I recall the manor, though stately and imposing, was cold and dreary during those days of incessant rain in June of 1816. It was the beginning of a wet, ungenial summer, a portent of the unnatural events to follow.

I didn't mind the cramped quarters of our own rented cottage since Lord Byron welcomed us into his spacious villa for much of the time, but the weather was truly depressing—blustery and rainy during the day, freakishly cold at night. As I look back at those days we resided in the village of Cologny, I can see the weather was the least freakish occurrence during our time spent with Lord Byron and his not-so-secret lover.

To this day a rational explanation defies me, but allow me to detail the mystifying incidents of that week, and perhaps someone perusing this journal after my death will come forth with an answer. Or, like me, you may decide something *unhuman* moved among us that summer—and perhaps still does.

As I began with mention of the weather, I should continue that thread of my story. A remarkable servant girl explained the dramatic change in temperature was directly related to the prior year's volcanic eruption in the islands of Indonesia. At the time I dismissed her explanation as preposterous poppycock, but looking back on what transpired, I now think she may have been correct, though how she would have known such a thing is beyond me. But that is at the heart of this mystery, is it not?

Whatever the reason for the peculiar conditions of that summer, we were forced to give up any thoughts of frolicking in the sun or sailing on the lake. Instead we spent our time reading by candlelight in the shadowed rooms of Villa Diodati, or huddled in front of the massive fireplace, drinking wine to excess.

My impetuous sister Claire—she was only a half-sister, truth be told, and half mad at that—convinced us to journey to Switzerland to spend some time with her former lover, George Gordon Noel Byron on the French-Swiss border. Please take note that George was a profligate in every way possible, including his ostentatious name, and I will henceforth refer to him as either Byron or Lord Byron, as he was more popularly known.

Though I was initially opposed to Claire's suggestion, when the deed was finally done I hoped Percy and I could use the holiday as a way to bring some relief to my grieving over the death of our daughter. Percy often exclaimed that I had a gloomy disposition and tended to lose myself in funereal brooding. This may be true, but I blame my father and the dark angel of death who visited us shortly after my birth, snatching my mother from us, leaving his bloody tracks to plague me, and my father to punish me with silent recriminations.

Looking back on my life, I fear death continued to stalk me throughout my 53 years, depositing one heartbreak after another at my doorstep. Sadly I must report losing four of my five children. My half-sister Claire, who instigated our holiday with Lord Byron, later took her own life. Could there be any doubt why I became nearly deranged by the sting of death's frequent visits? And I haven't yet mentioned death's cruelest torment, transforming me into a widow at the age of 24 when my beloved Percy drowned in a boating accident.

Is it any wonder I took to my bed for weeks, and wrote the following in my journal?

*How can I not think that some veiled creature is experimenting with my life? Probing the limits of my sanity with cruel intentions by striking down all that I love and hold dear. Sometimes I feel like Job in the belly of the whale, crying out, "Why me, God? Why me?"*

I remember with crystal clarity the day I met Percy Bysshe Shelley, how our friendship quickly turned to lust and love. I carried Percy's child until the day she was born. We buried her two days later.

But that is all in the distant past. To begin this story, you only need know that some years after my mother's death, father married a woman of prodigious temper and narrow mind. Suffice to say we clashed in many ways, and Percy and I departed London to travel the continent, no certain destination in mind except what might amuse us and lead us to new pleasures and stimulating company. Claire joined us after the death of our daughter.

Lord Byron had impregnated Claire, as he did many women, before tossing her aside. Poor Claire, foolish to the end, believed he would take her back since she was carrying his child. Her delusions came to a head one early morning in Paris where we had rented rooms on a narrow street to the west of *Place de la Bastille*. I recall Percy and I had just finished making love when the door to our bedroom flew open and Claire rushed in, her cheeks flushed with excitement.

"He's going to summer in Lake Geneva," she gushed.

Neither of us bothered to cover ourselves since Claire had seen us both naked before. In fact, to my dismay, Percy confessed he had bedded her several times before taking up with me.

“Claire, for God’s sake, you might knock before breaking down our door,” I said. “Now tell me exactly who is going to Lake Geneva, though I can probably guess it must be Lord Byron.”

“Who else, my dear sister,” she replied, bouncing her large derriere on the bed beside me.

“That is news of no interest to us, I’m afraid.”

“Don’t you see? Lake Geneva is little more than a day’s train ride. We were looking to move on, so why not Switzerland?”

I have previously mentioned Claire’s unrestrained infatuation with Byron. He was a man of debauched appetites, and a scandalous reputation for romances with both men and women, including a shameful affair with Augusta, his half-sister. Even among those of us who professed to believe in free love, his behavior was shocking, and I could envision nothing but vexation for my sister.

“Claire, I don’t believe a reunion with your former lover is a good idea.”

I was trying to be gentle with her, and thought Percy would take my side. Surprisingly, he was anxious to meet Byron. And so we traveled through abnormal wintry conditions to Lake Geneva where Byron and Percy struck up an instant friendship.

Though the three of us rented a modest cottage not far from Villa Diodati, we were soon introduced to the manor and its amazing inhabitants. With Byron’s arrival, the villa was transformed into an elegant carnival tent stocked with his coterie of servants, assorted sycophants, and his personal physician, Dr. John Polidori, who was darkly handsome and overly flirtatious. Along with Byron’s excessive staff, he’d also brought along a menagerie of eight dogs, three monkeys, five cats, an eagle, a crow, and a peacock, as well as horses for the splendid Napoleonic coach he’d had built to transport him in the style he believed a lord should enjoy. Percy would complain that the villa was more of a zoo since all of the animals, except the horses, were free to walk around the house.

And then there was Anastasia.

Anastasia was the remarkable servant girl I alluded to earlier in my narrative. Remember her name, for it is she who stands at the center of the mystery surrounding our time spent with Lord Byron. At first blush, the girl seemed like nothing more than what she appeared to be, one of the retinue of servants Byron had carried with him to cater to his every whim during his summer sojourn to escape the creditors and notoriety he’d left behind in London.

It soon became clear Anastasia serviced Byron in many ways, including helping to satiate his ravenous sexual appetites. I understood why a man like Lord Byron would be drawn to this young girl of Greek descent. She was 23 or 24 years of age, with the coloring and dark hair of the Mediterranean people. Anastasia was attractive, though she didn’t strike me as beautiful. But there was an allure to her, a sexual magnetism that clung to her like a second skin.

I was instantly struck by the boldness of her gaze and the exceptional shine of her dark eyes, which sometimes seemed to glow with an otherworldly light. She listened more than she spoke, an agreeable trait for a young woman of her breeding, often with her head slightly canted to one side like a curious hound. When she did speak, however, her utterances were most astonishing, as you will soon see.

Lord Byron turned out to be as charming as he was exceedingly handsome, and I could see why so many young women (and apparently, boys) had fallen under his spell. After his affair with Lady Caroline Lamb, she publically described Byron as “mad, bad, and dangerous to know.” I believe he took Lady Lamb’s portrayal as a badge of honor, and worked hard to live up to it.

Lord Byron was proud of the two-story manor he’d rented, and soon after we had settled into our simple abode near the lakefront, he arranged a tour of Villa Diodati. Byron himself escorted us through the first floor, commenting on the paintings and sculptures throughout the living areas, the exceptionally fine library and grand ballroom, but he left it to Anastasia to guide us through the upper story.

We all knew Byron was sensitive about his malformed foot. I personally felt he was overly sensitive, as we paid little heed to his impediment, which was vastly overshadowed by his genius. Even so, he seemed loath to lead us up the stairs in those preternaturally darkened conditions for fear he might stumble or appear ungainly, I supposed.

Anastasia had followed us through the first part of the tour, hanging at a distance, as was sometimes her habit when Byron was on the move, as though she might be summoned to fulfill some duty for her master, which I’m sure she did on a regular basis.

Byron turned slightly and gestured to Anastasia, who moved swiftly to his side.

“Anastasia, my sweet Greek melon, will you be so kind as to continue the tour for our visitors?”

Addressing us, he said, “I am close to completing the third canto of my poem and eager to return to it.” With that he left us with Anastasia.

Even though it was midday, the house was dark, as I’ve mentioned, due to the leaden skies. Anastasia carried a magnificently styled candle lamp with a glass shade, which looked like it may have come from the Court of Louis XVI. She stepped forward to lead the way up the staircase. The candlelight flashed on her silver bracelet, a heavy and well crafted ornament, with the patina of ancient Greece.

The bracelet caught Percy’s eye. He was much more traveled than I, and had some knowledge of Grecian antiquities. “My God, that bracelet, where did you find it? It’s the image of the Heracles knot masterpieces I’ve seen in the Athens Historical Museum, made popular in the second and third century.”

He moved to her side to examine the bracelet more closely. “This is truly remarkable craftsmanship. Is it a family heirloom?”

Anastasia raised her arm, studying the bangle on her arm as if she hadn’t seen it before. She set her lamp on the first step of the stairway and slipped the bracelet from her wrist. “It is but a poor copy, I think.” She extended her hand towards Percy. “You can have it if you wish.”

Percy’s eyes widened, and he remained silent for a moment before shaking his head. “No, I really couldn’t accept it. If this is genuine it would be a priceless treasure. How did you come by it? Was it a gift from Lord Byron?”

She offered a sly smile. “Not at all. I found it in a small village so many years ago I’ve forgotten the name of the place.”

I thought then it was a curious thing to say from someone so young, but I assumed she was making a small joke.

She collected her lamp, and moved toward the staircase, saying, "Please watch your step."

Upstairs we were introduced to the dining room where we would spend the next three nights in conversation, drinking wine and eventually reading ghost stories.

"The house was built in 1710 by its original owner Giovanni Diodati," she informed us in a slow cadence, as though she thought we might not understand her accented English. "Professor Diodati was born in Geneva, but his family was Italian."

We were inside one of the large bedrooms at the end of the hall where a portrait of a dour man in robes was displayed. "This is the Professor," she said, pointing to the portrait.

Claire, who had taken an instant dislike to Anastasia, spoke up in her most imperious tone; "You refer to him as 'Professor.' He looks to me to be nothing more than a common parish minister."

Anastasia turned from the portrait, the flickering light from the lamp she carried accenting her high cheekbones and flawless olive skin. She stared at Claire for an uncomfortably long time, inclining her head in that peculiar way I mentioned, not saying a word. Anastasia finally spoke. "He was only twenty-one when he was named professor of Hebrew at the Genevan Academy, and in 1608 became professor of theology."

Flustered, Claire replied with a hint of sarcasm in her voice, "Oh, is that all?"

"Not quite," Anastasia said. "The Professor also is known for translating the Bible into Italian in 1603."

I stood amazed at the breadth of her knowledge, and assumed she'd been educated in Switzerland, which turned out not to be the case.

She continued staring at Claire, perhaps anticipating another question. When none came, she opened the doors leading onto a balustrade balcony surrounding three sides of the house. A damp wind blew off the lake, and I crossed my arms over my breasts to warm myself.

Villa Diodati was perched upon a small hill with an impressive view of Lake Geneva and the Jura Mountains in the distance. That day the heavily overcast skies obscured the snow-capped mountains.

"It is a shame we're unable to enjoy the beauty of this view," Percy said, adding, "The lake is one of the largest in Switzerland, is it not?"

Anastasia turned her gaze on Percy. "Lac Léman, as the locals call it, is by far the largest and deepest body of water in Switzerland, and one of the largest in Western Europe."

She paused, studying us, and I noticed for the first time how her dark eyes held the meager light from her lamp and cast it back like the a beacon in the night.

"While much of the geography surrounding the Alps dates back to man's prehistory, the formation of these lakes is fairly recent, perhaps only ten thousand years ago, created by a retreating glacier."

Almost in unison, Claire, Percy, and I turned from looking out at the crescent shaped lake to gape at this servant girl who had uttered what was one of the wildest fabrications I'd ever heard

in my eighteen years. I could only shake my head at her audaciousness. We looked at one another for a moment.

Claire snorted. Percy coughed and smiled politely.

Anastasia merely pointed to the open doors, the exquisite bracelet sliding along her wrist, and led us silently through the bedroom Percy and I would occupy for the next few nights, and back down the stairs.