

A Roving in England, No More

By Brett J. Talley

Of the man, I can say only that I met him once. It was a gloomy late April day when I fled to that tavern on the Channel shore, seeking shelter from a chill wind that cut through skin and bone.

When spring should have been blooming and summer just beyond the horizon, instead the cold grip of winter's fingers remained tight around our throats. On that grey evening, I wondered if ever I would look upon the sun again.

He sat in the tavern corner, beside a fire that roared with all the ferocity one might raise against a January night. A glass of clear liquid on the table before him, the fingers of his limp hand only barely caressing it, as he slouched against a stone wall.

Gin and water, I thought to myself. *The concoction that sets his mind a'fire*. For as an Englishman recently in London, I could not doubt that this was he—Lord Byron had come to the continent.

Should I approach him? Did I dare? His name was immortal already, and his words had burned into my memory when first I read them. I knew even then that his wild heart would be pulled to the East. Into mystery and myth, he would vanish there, to return only in legend.

"Lord Byron, I presume," I said, when courage had come. He glanced up with a sigh, though his countenance softened when he saw that I carried with me two drinks.

"You presume correctly," he said, eying the gin as he finished his own. "Please, dear fellow, have a seat. A man should not drink alone, I think."

Down I sat, sliding the glass over to him.

"To what do I owe the honor of your acquaintance?" he asked as he took it.

"It is my honor, sir. I'm recently come from London and I admit, I was quite surprised to see you here."

He laughed, of melancholy rather than mirth. "London, grand city of my birth. Yes. It is likely I shall never look upon its face again." He punctuated that pronouncement by raising his glass to me, as if in toast, then downing half of it.

I scarcely contained my surprise. I'd heard the stories, of course, and the scandal that had chased the poet from the capital of the world would not die away soon. But die it would. One day, at least.

"Surely not," I said.

"Yes, my new friend. Surely."

"The gossip of old maids will soon be forgotten."

"The gossip? A convenient excuse for doing what I must." He grinned. "I am sorry for speaking in riddles. An old habit, you might say. Poetry is often riddle, if the poet is worth his salt. I will not deny that many of the stories you have heard are true."

His face sank, and a memory passed over it. "Which is not to say that I have not lost, or that I have no regrets. Ah Winnie, how I miss you..." His fingers rested only barely on the glass, and I thought it might slip from his grasp.

Lady Gwendolyn Goatham, I thought to myself. So, they had loved one another after all.

He leaned back in his chair, and his eyes filled with memory. I wondered if he would speak again, but I need not have worried. His gaze leveled back on me.

"A man with a secret is the last of his race. He is doomed to whither alone, as it haunts his soul. I had sworn to take my secret down to my tomb, buried in my heart. But I see now that is not what fate would decree. In your happy coming, I see the hand of that self-same fate. So, fetch us another drink and stay awhile, and I will tell you why I'll go no more a roving in England..."

* * *

I do not deny the charges laid against my character. I have loved much and freely, wherever—and to whomever—love may take me, without recourse or care for the judgment of the world. I know myself a villain, but no man will call me a hypocrite. I have stood boldly where others tread only in their hidden dreams. Fie on them. It was not from such timid souls that I fled England. Ah, but I am speaking in riddles again. Let me return to when the thing began.

My line is an old one, having arrived on the shores of England in service of the Conqueror. But madness stalks it. There are those who say the Barony of Byron is cursed. It is only now that I have come to understand just how much truth is in that slander.

My father was the fifth Baron Byron, having assumed that position when my grandfather, known by his contemporaries as the Wicked Lord for acts of unspeakable violence, died raving in an insane asylum. My father wore the name 'Mad Jack' himself, and he wore it well. A Captain in the Coldstream Guards, he might have risen to even greater heights, had his mind remained intact. It is said that he stumbled upon something while in service during the American rebellion, a mass of stone in the wilds of Massachusetts

that should not have been there, an edifice not raised by the hands of European settlers and certainly not the native tribes that whispered curses if they spoke of it at all. Whatever the case, he returned to England, discharged for an illness that was never quite diagnosed. My mother kept me away from him. Something in the way he mumbled about the stars disquieted her.

His end came at his own hand and Mad Jack made a show of it; he slit his throat from ear to ear. They say they found him with a smile frozen on his face. I was three years old.

If the dark history of my family stalked me, I chose to ignore it. If madness was to be my fate I would welcome it gladly, like an old friend. How naïve I was.

When I came of age, Napoleon was ravaging the continent, ruining any plans I had to take the grand tour. Very inconsiderate of him. But being an enterprising young lad, I made the best of it, setting off for the eastern parts of Europe, about which Napoleon had little interest. For me, though, it was magnificent. If you haven't seen Greece you cannot imagine it, my friend. The ancient and the new. Pagan splendor, Christian piety, and the wild Muhammadans all crashed together under a Mediterranean sun. It felt old there, old the way Egypt is old, with the marble remains of the ancients staring down upon us. Watching, and waiting. I would ask myself, what may come in a place like this? What dreams and terrors? What visions of untold splendor and magic?

I would have my answer to that question. Oh yes, I would.

It came on an evening where the setting sun seemed to light the sky ablaze. My spirit was aflame as well, and I, along with some fellows of similar means that I had met during my sojourn, were looking for something to quench that flame.

"A séance," said one. "A séance is what we need. In a place like this, we might just touch the next world."

It was agreed. There was an old gypsy woman that was known to the group. She read palms and told fortunes and was said to have a knack for such things. Who better, we thought, to open doorways to a threshold we could not cross?

We found her in the shadow of the acropolis, on an old side street where respectable people did not tread. She was wrapped in a shawl that concealed most of her head, a few strands of tangled white hair covering the deep recesses of her face. One of my party had done business with her before, so it fell to him to approach with our proposal. It was only when he leaned down to speak to her that I realized she was blind.

“A séance?” she croaked in English far better than I would have expected. “The young master does not know what he asks.”

Laughter rippled through our company. “Come now, madam, surely this is not beyond your legendary powers?” I said. And we laughed again. But she was not laughing. Her head had jerked up when she heard my voice, as if her chin were on a string.

“Who is that who spoke?” she asked, her blind eyes searching. I was startled when her empty gaze fell on me. “I know your voice. Come forward.” I could have turned then, I suppose. Or at least refused her command. And yet, I could not. I would say that it was foolish pride that drew me forth, that I did not wish to face the ridicule from my friends if I refused. That’s the lie I tell myself, at least. I was propelled forward, no more in control of my own mind than if I were a slave.

She reached out her hand, took mine. A silence had fallen over our company, one of surprise and fear entwined. “We have met before, I think.”

“No, madam,” I all but whispered. “That is not possible.”

“More is possible than you know, young man. The world of dreams is vast, and a soul may live on after a body dies and might,

just might, live again." Her gnarled fingers, bent and crooked, stroked my cheek. "Your line is ancient and carries with it an ancient curse. Did you know that?"

I shook my head, as if she could see it. Yet somehow, she could.

"No, you would not. You have a poet's heart. That is true. But you have dead eyes. Open them," she said, passing her hand across my vision, "and see what your fathers saw."

Can I tell you what happened in that moment? Can I explain it? The flash of light that blinded me. Then I was falling, down and away, through endless spheres of existence, until I came to rest in a place far from Greece, if it even was of this earth at all. I looked up and saw.

An ocean wave, red as blood, crashing on a dead shore. Lightning crackling along a blank sky, and shapes moving in the flashes. Massive, unholy things that towered before the stars and made hope flee. What madness is this, I thought? A stench of fetid putrefaction filled my nostrils, and I wretched onto black sand that moved with creatures beyond counting. Then, recognition, for behind me towered the massive white cliffs of the Dover shore. This was England, by God. England where Hell had come. I screamed, and I did not stop until I came to rolling on my back and shrieking like a mad man on a dirty, cobblestone street in Athens.

My fellows peered down at me, horror masking their faces. One reached for me and I slapped away his hand, though that exertion was enough to break me from my lunacy. I knew where I was and who I was again. There was no gypsy in sight, and when I inquired as to where she had gone, my friends' astonishment had doubled. We had seen no woman, they said. We'd only, just now, set out to find her.

The next day, I set sail for home by way of Constantinople and Malta.

I told myself that nothing had changed. I tried to ignore the things I saw, the shapes dancing in the waves, the massive forms gliding silently, just below the surface of the water. I took to brooding in my cabin on the ship, praying for England. When dry land was once again beneath my feet, only then did I feel safe. Oh, how sweet the ignorance of a fool!

I had barely stepped off the dock when it began. It was as if my senses were sharpened, as if I was seeing things that heretofore I was unable. Who were the squat creatures that huddled in the shadows of the wharf? What of the cloaked and hooded figures that walked the streets at twilight, their faces mercifully covered? And why did no one else seem to see them?

At first, I asked passersby if they saw what I saw. But after the third or fourth quizzical and even pitying look, I ceased. I wonder now if some madmen simply see farther than the rest of us, if there is truth in their insanity. I know there was truth in mine.

When I passed the faceless black horsemen at the crossroads on the way to my estate, I could no longer doubt that I must reach the bottom of the matter.

But I did not seek it immediately. With this new vision came new awareness, too, and a period of creativity that I fear I will never grasp again. Fame came, as I am sure you know, and for a while I drank my visions away. The parties, the events where I was feted by kings and nobles. Not that I enjoyed them. I hated masked balls the most, you know? For there are some things in this world that wear no mask, that need no mask.

It was something that happened at the end of those parties that finally steeled my resolve, that finally drove me to seek out the truth. I had been imbibing, of course, and there are some who would say what I saw that night was no more than the confusion of a drink-addled mind, but I know better.

He was standing in the center of a dancing hall at an estate of some duke or earl, whose name is no longer known to me. Music was playing, but the gentlemen and ladies who spun around that creature seemed not to notice him at all. In fact, they seemed to part like the Red Sea of old, so that I could see him, and he could see me without obstruction. He had a hooked nose and oozing sores across a bald head. His face was too long, too narrow. He stared at me, then smiled, his teeth a streak of perfect porcelain. "Welcome to he who prepares the way," he said. Then he bowed. I'll never forget those words. I'll never forget that bow. Before I could ask him what he meant, he was gone, disappeared into the crowd. Or maybe he was never there at all.

That night I wrote to my mother and asked to see my father's papers.

They arrived a fortnight later. In large part, they were useless, the detritus of a life at war. For days I pored over them, frustration building as I found nothing of interest. And then, in my father's journal, I found what I was looking for. I found the day his ship dropped anchor in Piraeus, only a short time after his sojourn in America.

It was all there. How he and his officers had made landfall. How they had drank their fill, how they had stumbled upon an old woman, blind and infirm, who offered to tell them their fortunes. How my father had lost consciousness, only to come to the shore of a dead ocean where titans awoke.

I did not stop to wonder how it could be true, how it could be that my father met the same woman as I had decades later. It simply was. I'd seen enough to accept the impossible without question.

The discovery spurred me on to even more fevered review of the written history of my father's life. Alas, when I turned the last page, I had found nothing more, no other clues to the mystery. I was at an impasse, with no roads open to me.

The message came just as my despair reached its depths and the bottom of many bottles of absinthe. It was from my mother. Attached to it was another letter, one sealed in red wax with what I recognized as my father's signet ring. My heart leapt, and I ripped into my mother's note. It explained that my father had written to me, just before he took his life. She had hesitated to give me the letter, fearing what it might say. But, given my recent obsession with his writings, she could keep it from me no longer. She closed with the hope that it would answer my questions and quench my curiosity.

With shaking hands, I broke the seal.

* * *

{Letter from Captain John Byron}

My son,

If you read this now, then you know that I have gone on to whatever lies beyond this life. I hope that my heavenly Father can forgive me for what I do. I hope that I can find the rest in the next world that has been denied me in this. Yet, after what I have seen, I wonder if the beyond is not far darker than we imagined. If there is no heaven, no hell. Only something much worse.

You have heard, I know, that our family is cursed. It is more than an old woman's fable. The curse did not come to us by gypsy folk or the evil eye of one done wrong. No, we asked for it.

The Byron name is ancient and honored, but there was one man in our lineage that sought power beyond that which this world can provide. The Holy Scripture says that no man shall suffer for the sins of the father, yet this man's sins of 250 years ago stalk us still.

Sir John Byron haunted the halls of Queen Elizabeth's court, where might and magic were intertwined. I could deduce but few of the details of his life, but what I can say without question is this –

Sir John came to know a certain man named John Dee, and that esteemed sorcerer did much to seal our family's fate.

There came a time when Sir John procured a stone that Dee needed for one of his unholy rites. In exchange, Dee told your ancestor of a certain crossroad where on a certain night, at a certain hour, a certain man would be walking. From that man could be had many things, for a price of course.

At the appointed time, on that moonless night, Sir John stood at the crossroads and waited. As one day passed into another, he saw a figure moving toward him, black on black, night on night, silhouetted in the shade so that even in the utter dark he could still make him out from a great distance. Yet, as he approached, the form coalesced into that of a man, a traveler, from the East, John reckoned. Perhaps a pilgrim from Jerusalem come to more Christian climes. His golden eyes though, they told a different truth. Those eyes that shone, even in darkness.

The two men met and stopped, standing apart, each assessing the other. When the dark one spoke, his voice was strange and unwholesome to the ear. For his tongue was as of one mimicking language, as if he had never uttered words before.

“Why come ye here?”

“To meet with you,” John muttered.

“Who came ye by?”

“John Dee.”

“What brought ye to offer?”

“Anything you ask.”

“What came ye to seek?”

At that question, Sir John's tongue was stilled. He had wanted much. Glory, fame, power. How to convey it all? He needn't have worried.

"Your mind is open. You shall have what ye seek. For fifty and two hundred years your family name shall ascend to the heavens. Then the price in your blood will come due. But be not afraid, for it will be your name and your kin who open the way to they who sleep in death and wait among the spaces between the stars. In this place, in this land, when the stars come right. Indagei. Ultaheli. Iä! Iä!"

In an instant, the figure was gone, and the sun was rising in the East. Where the hours went—where the man went—Sir John could not say. The deal was struck. He rose, and with him our family name. For 250 years it was so. Now the bill has been called.

I have seen what is to come. I have dreamt which was not all a dream. I know that I am to be the one to open the gate, and I have seen what will come through it. This, I shall not do. I go to my end now. It is the only way. When I am gone, the lot shall pass to you. I cannot tell you what path to take. Forgive me, my son.

* * *

The letter was not signed. It was as if that step would have been one too far for my father to take. He was sentencing me to death, or at least that is how he saw it. He could not bring himself to sign my warrant. But it was dated. The same day as he took the blade to his own throat.

I read that letter three months ago. I realized something my father did not. The prophecy was very specific. Whatever was to come, would come in England. So, I absented myself from that isle that I love. I do not know if I ever shall return. The stories, the scandals. They make for an excellent excuse.

I head east now. I go first to Geneva, to see old friends I may never see again. Something tells me that this weather will follow me,

the palpable gloom marking my footsteps. It would surprise me not at all if the thing that haunts me infects even the minds of my companions. Who knows what nightmares I may bring them? Who knows what horrors they may see?

And then on to Greece to find a woman who once opened my eyes. If she knows how to open, maybe she also knows how to close.

You think it strange, do you, that I should make such momentous decisions on such little evidence? Well, there is one bit of this story left to tell. My father's letter did not come alone. There was a clipping, you see, from a newspaper story, quoting the Royal Academy of Science in London. It claimed that the number of planetary alignments this year is extraordinarily high. But it was what was written at the bottom in my father's hand that caught my eye. A prophecy it seemed, from an unnamed source, about an alignment with Algol — that ancient demon star — the planet Saturn, and the dying moon, to take place on April 30, the May Eve, Walpurgis Night. Easily visible to the observer. To the observer in England, that is. A once in a million-year opportunity.

When the stars come right, indeed.