There Shall Be No Moon!

Roger Zelazny

“Percy.”

“Yes George?”

“I believe you have finally overextended yourself.”

The younger man threw his head back and laughed. Anyone but his companion might have thought him demented. The larger man knew better, however. He shifted his gaze to the placid surface of Lucerne, gesturing with his walking-stick.

“That pink cloud reminds me of Southey.”

“Oh?” chuckled the other. “In what way?”

“It makes a great show of being huge and colorful, and inside it’s as miasmic and weightless as a London fog—and about as valuable.”

“Well-turned, but I daresay you are changing the subject.”

“...and those peaks in the distance, my! how they must echo with the turning of the spheres—as my poor ears with the sounds of your Project.”

“Now, that’s unfair!” protested the other. “I haven’t seen you for two weeks, and I’ve made great progress.”

“Doubtless you are producing something of great merit and exquisiteness...but, if I doubt its efficacy along the lines you have professed, pray forgive me my doubts and grant me leave to remain a Thomas until I have thrust my hands into the wounds.”

He smiled. “Ah! Whenever you are being irreligious, George, I’ll concede almost everything. But this time you are mistaken.”

“Then advise me.”

“I conjured a fog last night, and an image.”

“This is foggy country.”

“A fog that tries to speak?”

“How much sleep have you had this week—not to mention wine, and perhaps a touch of brain fever?”

“No more than usual. But the rhythms are almost perfect now.”

“Then why the delay? Bring him forth! There are some things I have always wanted to ask!”

“The moon will not be full for another week—and the land, I am afraid the land must be dispensed with.”

“Oh? You have purchased a balloon from the Montgolfiers? —I fancy brother Bill might be a trifle distressed to awaken several hundreds of feet above the ground.”

“No, no! The land is too stable an element—too firm, too venerable a métier—the invocation must be spoken upon untrammeled waters, there—where the wilder powers hold sway!”

His eyes dimmed as he spoke, and he swayed slightly, himself.

The other lit a cheroot, partly to end the flight of his friend’s imagination in its stinging blue cloud.

“You have rented a barge?”

“A small boat. I have been purifying it all week. I’ll anchor offshore when the moon shows full. —I wish you could be there.”

His friend tossed his dark locks, and a sinister gleam danced deep in his eyes.

“The son of the Devil at his father’s Mass? No, I’m sure you are qualified to manage it without me.”

“It’s not the Black Mass!” he protested. “It is a personal ritual, designed to summon up the shade of William Shakespeare!”

“I’ll try to be there, Percy, but I can’t promise. I have a delightful engagement which I trust shall last well into the next day.”

He smiled his lopsided smile, managing to condemn his thoughts and enjoy them at the same instant of reverie.

“Noblesse oblige,” smirked the other. Then, changing back to his original proposal, “But seriously, I think you, of all men, would be best qualified for the undertaking. When you only dabbled at it you had better results than anyone else...”

“My dear Shelley, I will tell you the trouble with your invocation, without having heard it.

“You invite, you entreat, you appreciate—that is wrong. You must command!

“You approach whatever power you call upon as you do the English language,” he finished, “a bit too humbly. You must order it to do your bidding like the lackey that it is!”

“But that is not in my nature.” He shook his head. “I sometimes wish that I could, but I lack your seigniorial prowess.”

The other hung his head.

“Noblesse oblige,” he muttered more softly. “But come! you say you have some fresh Kirschwasser!”

“Ah, yes! Red as the lips of one’s beloved, and far more lingering!”

“Ha!” The other turned to the road with surprising agility. “Let there be no more talk of spells and incantations—only spirits! Tonight we drink!”

They started up the road.

“But this one, Byron! I know this one will do it! I’ve worked so hard on the metrics, have chosen words with all the right vibrations...”

Silently, the other limped along beside him.

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“Mary! Another bottle, please! The peerage is a bottomless lake!”

“Hollow hoof,” snorted Byron, and he closed his eyes as Mary entered with the ruddy liquors. She smiled, but small lines on her attractive face betrayed a mood which had not been present two weeks previously.

Byron’s eyes blinked open and bored into hers.

“You are troubled,” he announced.

“And you still sober. Goodness!”

She placed the drink before him.

“There is that within me which never sleeps, nor drunken grows, though seas of grapes surround.”

“Is that from Childe Harold?”

“No, it is from the moment. What’s the matter?”

She bit her lower lip.

“Oh, nothing. Doctor Frankenstein and his problems,” she offered. “I’m following your suggestion and writing it out, since you men are too busy—”

She started to say “with,” but chewed the sentence off.

Byron climbed to his feet, glass in hand.

“A toast! To goblins, werewolves, demons, and gods,” he pronounced.

Shelley raised his glass drunkenly. Mary hurried from the room.

“To William Shakespeare, Englishman and Greek,” he said.

Byron quaffed his drink and seated himself once more.

“You have her worried,” he began.

“Huh?”

“Mary is troubled. The climate of your pursuits has upset the poor girl.”

“Nonsense,” he slurred. “She’s fascinated by the stuff.”

“Nevertheless, entertain a friend’s suggestion. A holiday in Italy might be in order.”

“Go to, m’lord—I shan’t say where. What’s in Italy?”

“It’s warm, sunny, healthy—just the opposite of this place. Life is focused upon itself in the latin climes, not the metaphysics of involution.”

“Ha! The pa’ calling the kethle brack! You go to Italy! You won’t help me here!”

“It would not particularly amuse me to speak with Shakespeare. He’d probably be tongue-tied, anyhow.” He smiled his twisted smile.

“No one could speak like one of his characters—which is both their tragedy and ours.”

“Don’t be so subtle when you’re drunk. Lemme read you some Wordsworth.”

“I’m afraid I have to be leaving soon.”

“What have you got against Wordsworth?”

“As I said, I must depart shortly. I can’t afford the entire night.”

“All right.” He closed the edition of Lyrical Ballads which he had stealthily inched from a drawer.

“...But next time,” he observed, “I shall convince you.”

Byron spun his cloak like a great wing, and it settled about his shoulders. He retrieved his stick from the chair.

“Say good-night to Mary, lay in more wine, and write me at the inn.”

Shelley snored softly.

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The innkeeper’s son tapped gently but impatiently. Finally, his knocking produced a yawn on the other side of the door. After another five minutes, that great oaken panel creaked inward. Resplendent in scarlet silk, Byron regarded the youth.

“A letter for you, m’lord.”

“Very good—here, lad. Spend it not on one wench.”

“No sir, I shall buy chocolate.”

“Mm. To each his vice. —Thank you.”

He pushed shut the door and crossed to his writing table. Seated, he brushed aside a mountain of cantos and unfolded the letter.

“Hm.”

Two bold sentences uncoiled in his hands and slipped into his drowsy mind: “Tonight the moon is full. Your presence is requested.”

“Damme!” he announced, rising again.

“Shelley! Why do you do these things? —Do you know what you ask?”

He crossed to the window and slapped the casement.

The day was bleak. The boy ran across the yard and stood beneath a willow. He began tossing stones into the stream.

Of course!

Hastily, Byron reseated himself and sharpened a quill. Without pausing, he filled a page with bold strokes:

Dearest Ariel,

Though you dwell in the Empyrean, doubtless you have not looked about of late. Pray do! The gods frown down today, and the heavens darken. There shall be no moon!

As above, so below,

Manfred

Smiling, he melted a piece of red wax and dripped it on the overlap. He looked about for a bell-pull and remembered there was none. Hurrying to the casement, he flung it wide.

“Boy! Catch this letter. Take it to the man who gave you mine. —And buy some more chocolate!”

The boy had recovered the letter and the coin before the window was closed.

Byron returned to his table to write another dozen cantos as he awaited breakfast.

A murmur: “Schedules must be maintained...”

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“He’s right,” she observed, reading over his shoulder. “You said yourself that the moon must be full and clear.”

“It may yet clear,” he muttered, rubbing his blond stubble. “Come, let’s walk down by the lake.”

She took his arm.

“I will enjoy it more if you talk to me, and stop staring at the sky.”

“It will clear,” he stated.

“Perhaps,” she sighed. “Why do you want to summon Shakespeare, anyway? What do you wish to ask him?”

“I don’t know. I will know when I see him.”

“There may be a storm.”

“And there may not.”

“I have finished Frankenstein.”

“Good.”

“Will you read it?”

“Tomorrow.”

“Percy, you are impossible!”

“I trust you are correct.”

“Perhaps that is why my concern is almost maternal. You are a careless child with a new toy.”

“Then, daedal before the gods, shall I spin it.”

“Byron will not be here.”

“Who needs him?”

“You. So let me take his place.”

“Never. A woman would vitiate the incantation.”

“If it clears, I shall worry all night.”

“Your privilege.”

They drew near the cove where the boat was moored.

“I am sorry, you may not come aboard.”

He vaulted over the rail, commencing a soft chant and paced from bow to stern, counting his steps. Everything above and below the deck was painted white. Black pentacles decorated the floorboards. Shelley opened a locker and checked a brazier, a supply of incense, and his herbs. From his pocket, he produced a roll of foolscap which he placed alongside them.

He closed the chest and looked up.

“All right. All is in readiness. I’m going to remain aboard until it is time. You might as well return now.”

“It’s starting to rain.” She held forth a pale hand, palm upwards, for an instant reminding him of a child beggar he had seen at Charing.

“It will pass.”

Silently, she turned and walked back, wiping rain from her eyes.

\* \* \*

The moon was a blind eye, peering from a lightless room through broken panes. Sightless, through opaque shards of sky, it looked down, past and through the trees, walls and people of the city.

Byron cursed.

“Why? Why have I a nonsense conscience? —A gift of the gods for my blasphemies? Giving up a warm fireside—and more!”

His drenched cloak plastered his muscular limbs. The thunder prowled tentatively, then belched a long rumble.

“Cochon!” he spat. “Ariel stands beneath your moon, mouthing iambs at you! —Nature, you lack breeding! You should smile, not slap his face in insults of wind!”

He vaulted into the saddle, clucking at the soaked animal.

“We ride, my poor mount, though a beast deserves better tonight.”

\* \* \*

The beast of ink raised its thousand hands, jerking the boat to starboard.

“Oh Winds of Time that wash Elysium...”

An instant study in black and gray was followed by a crash. The boated dipped to the left.

“Tides of Time, receding forever...”

He choked on the aromatic fumes from the brazier. The smoke lay flat upon the deck; the pop and hiss of the fire emerged between passing gusts.

“I do conjure thee...”

A devil-throated howl crossed the waters, racing footless the sweeping clouds.

The moon did not blink, staring down, past and through the boat, the man, the waters. Shelley’s words were cipher within the demon-siren of the passer.

Then all lay still.

The smoke flumed upwards, the moon blazed beacon, the ship was an arrow, quivering in the dark, flat field where it had fallen.

“Appear before me here, I charge thee...”

A sudden spark, and the smoke billowed in all directions. In the distance, a sound like Atlas dropping the sky; an island of cloud crossed the moon, like its wandering pupil, seeking the center of the retina...

“Speak!”

The dark land shrugged, raising its hands once more; it grasped the arrow out, with a twist of fury, threw it flat, then bled rivers upon it.

“I do hear thee!”

\* \* \*

Byron drew upon the shore. The tiny blink of the brazier beckoned his gaze. The rain hesitated, then held back a moment.

“Good Lord, why so far out?” he groaned. “The next one will catch you!”

Dismounting, he drew off his boots and unclasped his cloak.

The waters grew still.

He finished undressing and plunged in, swimming with the powerful strokes of a man who knew he could cross the Hellespont. The waves did not beat about him; the lake was as placid as a mountain rill on a sunny afternoon.

He bore toward the bobbing flicker—and the mountain fired its heavy artilleries. Like a boxer fighting an omnipresent opponent, Byron lashed out with double fury.

“Shelley! I’m coming!”

The waves fell upon him like a collapsing wall. He went under. Seconds later he bobbed to the surface and began to wrestle his adversary, timing his movements to give way before each buffet.

Then the light tipped and went out.

With quick strokes, he tried painting a mental picture of its last location. He fought forward until the dim hulk loomed before him.

“Shelley!”

He heard something that sounded like a sobbing choke. He beat his way about the fallen vessel.

“Shelley?”

This time the choke-sound was louder. He reached out through the darkness...

Flesh! Shelley was clinging to the side of the boat.

He pried loose his weakening grip, then seized him cross-chest.

Then he began the long return toward what he hoped was shore.

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“Jester of the gods!” he panted. “What moves a man to such extremes?”

Shelley coughed and did not answer him. Byron pulled on his boots.

“You should have tried the balloon,” he snarled. “They don’t sink!”

Shelley coughed again.

“Couldn’t you have put it off for a month?”

“He came,” said Shelley.

“Who?”

“Shakespeare answered my summons.”

Byron shook out his cloak and threw it over his friend’s shoulders.

“I suppose you had time for a lengthy colloquy?”

“No, only a few words.”

The horse nuzzled him, suggesting that people with good sense did not stand out in the rain.

“What did he say?”

“I’m not certain.”

He assisted Shelley to mount, then climbed up behind him.

“What did you ask him?”

“I asked him the meaning of a man’s life.”

“Is that all? —Well, what do you think he said?”

“It sounded like, ‘Though his bark cannot be lost, yet it shall be tempest-tossed.’ ”

“Hm. Appropriate enough. —That’s from Macbeth, by the way—the Third Witch. —You heard me calling and filled in your own words.”

“No, it sounded like Shakespeare—the way I expected him to sound.”

They plunged around the bend.

“Mary will probably have dry clothes waiting. Some rum too, I hope.”

Shelley coughed again. They approached the welcoming windows of the cottage.

“George— There are no words—but no other man could have beaten the waters... Thank you.”

The other laughed.

“Foul Weather Jack Byron would have sailed onto the Styx, and Mad Jack bearded Jove and a bolt or two, I’ve heard. Is the son to be less than his fathers?”

“In your case, never.”

They dismounted, and Byron led the horse into the shed. Shelley paused on the step.

“I keep a messy journal, George—and I know you are writing your memoirs. Include this please, that I may acknowledge a perpetual debt—and future generations may be inclined to remember me when they read it.”

“They will remember you without it, Percy. But, as you wish—some future Mad Jack may be amused.”

“Your memoirs will blaze through all generations.”

“I daresay. Now, get inside, it’s chilly out here.” He pushed him.

Mary opened the door, a twisted handkerchief at her waist. She peered out, blinking heavily.

“I’m sorry, Mary,” said Shelley.

Her eyes blazed as she stepped aside.

“Tempest-tossed, indeed!” noted Byron.

Notes

The Percy, Mary and George in this story are poet Percy Shelley, novelist Mary Shelley, and poet George Gordon, Lord Byron. In the long, rainy summer of 1816, they challenged each other to write ghost stories after reading from Fantasmagoriana. The three writers speculated about science reanimating a corpse, prompting Mary Shelley to have a waking nightmare which inspired her to write Frankenstein. The poets quickly abandoned their stories; however, Byron did write the gothic poem “Manfred.” The Southey Byron mentions was Robert Southey, a poet with whom he had an ongoing feud; the two attacked each other through their poems.

Byron calls Shelley Ariel in a letter, alluding to Shelley’s repeated prediction of his own drowning. He did drown when another boat deliberately struck his schooner Ariel, and it sank.

Miasmic is an unpleasant atmosphere. Grant me leave to remain a Thomas until I have thrust my hands into the wounds refers to the doubting apostle Thomas who declared he would not believe Jesus had risen until he could thrust his fingers into his Master’s wounds. In 1783, Joseph and Etienne Montgolfiers created the first hot air balloon and remained aloft in it for ten minutes. Métier is a person’s specialty. Brother Bill is William Shakespeare, whom Percy wishes to contact. Seigniorial pertains to a feudal lord or other man of rank. Noblesse oblige requires those of noble birth or high social standing to act with honor. Kirschwasser is a German brandy made from double distillation of black cherry. Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage is Byron’s lengthy poem which recounts the world travels of a disillusioned young man.

Lyrical Ballads was a book of poetry by William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Cantos are the major divisions of a very long poem. Empyrean is the highest heaven, or the visible heavens. Daedal before the gods means to be extremely clever and inventive; the word derives from Daedalus, who created wings to enable himself and his son Icarus to fly. Vitiate means to weaken. Cochon means pig. Iambs are two-syllable units or feet in poetic meter, usually consisting of one stressed and one unstressed syllable, or one short and one long syllable.

Ariel is the spirit of the air who helps Prospero in Shakespeare’s Tempest. Elysium is the final resting place in the underworld of the souls of the heroic and the virtuous. Atlas is one of the Titans whom Zeus condemned to stand at the western edge of the Earth and hold up the Sky on his shoulders. Hellespont is the old name for Dardanelles, a strait connecting the Aegean Sea and the Sea of Marmara. Though his bark cannot be lost, yet it shall be tempest-tossed is a quote from the first witch in Shakespeare’s Macbeth; it means although I can’t make his ship sink, I can still make his journey miserable with stormy weather. The end of the story indicates that Mary Shelley’s anger is part of the tempest that Percy must endure for his foolish behavior and for excluding her.

Lord Byron’s grandfather Vice-Admiral John Byron was known as Foul Weather Jack because of frequent bad luck with weather, while Byron’s father John Byron was known as Mad Jack for his unstable behavior. The Styx is one of the main rivers in the underworld, across which Charon ferries the dead. Jove is another name for Jupiter, the Roman equivalent of the Greek god Zeus.