

ACT IScene 1

SETTING: *The drawing room of the Villa Diodoti, a luxurious house on the shores of Lake Geneva, rented for the summer of 1816 by the famous poet George Gordon, Lord Byron. Upstage are Byron's writing desk and a large picture window overlooking the lake. The typical arrangement of sofas, tables and chairs occupy the remainder of the room. The room has but one exit that leads into the front hall.*

AT RISE: *Late afternoon. Lights up on a young man, JOHN POLIDORI, Byron's personal physician and traveling companion. He is sitting at Byron's desk, writing a poem. He scribbles furiously for a moment, then stops, picks up the paper and reads aloud.*

## POLIDORI

"Who are you, Genevan Lady, that I should love you so well? Your pale face glows like the moon in the summer sky of your dark tresses..." Summer sky? No, no, *midnight* sky...

*(POLIDORI scratches out one word and adds another.)*

Yes, that is much better. "... the *midnight* sky of your dark..."

## BYRON (O.S.)

Polidori? Polidori, where are you?

*(POLIDORI stops writing and furiously waves his poem in the air, in order to dry the ink. Byron's voice gets closer.)*

Polidori?

*(Frantically searching for a hiding place, POLIDORI finally shoves his poem into the top drawer of the desk and manages to strike what he hopes is a nonchalant pose as BYRON enters. BYRON is in his late twenties, very handsome, and because of a clubfoot, walks with a limp.)*

BYRON

Poli...oh, there you are. What are you doing?

POLIDORI

Nothing. Leaning.

BYRON

Well, stop leaning and come along. We are already late. No doubt Shelley wonders where we are.

POLIDORI

Shelley? Shelley is to join us?

BYRON

Yes, now make haste.

POLIDORI

I was not aware... I fear I am too ill to go sailing today, Byron.

BYRON

Nonsense.

POLIDORI

No, really. I am quite unwell.

*(He sneezes and blows his nose noisily.)*

As you see, I am not at all capable of joining you. Please give Shelley my regrets.

BYRON

I refuse to accept your excuse, Polidori. You are always "unwell." It simply will not do. You must come.

POLIDORI

Are you implying that my illness is imaginary?

BYRON

I would never imply such a thing to your face. I was merely wondering what possessed me to hire a personal physician so predisposed to disease.

POLIDORI

If those are your feelings on the subject, sir, perhaps you should reconsider your decision. I shall pack my bags at once.

*(POLIDORI starts to cross to the door.)*

BYRON

Don't be ridiculous.

*(POLIDORI keeps going.)*

Polidori. Polidori, I *apologize*.

*(POLIDORI stops.)*

POLIDORI

I accept.

BYRON

Now may we go sailing?

POLIDORI

But it is about to rain. Do you not hear the thunder?

BYRON

What thunder?

*(We hear a distant rumble of thunder.)*

POLIDORI

That thunder.

BYRON

That is not thunder. That is the army practicing its maneuvers.

POLIDORI

We are in Switzerland, Byron. The Swiss have no *army*. They are a neutral nation.

BYRON

And they have neutral weather. Now *go!*

POLIDORI

Byron, please. Go without me instead. Indeed, I am certain you and your new friend *Shelley* would have a much more pleasurable outing without my presence to distract you.

BYRON

Ah, now I see. You are put out because *Shelley* is joining us. Am I right?

POLIDORI

I confess I do not much like him.

BYRON

You only made his acquaintance two weeks ago. What could he possibly have done to offend you in so short a time?

POLIDORI

He... He calls me "PollyDolly."

BYRON

A nickname given out of affection.

POLIDORI

I do not care for it at all.

BYRON

Then tell him so. Now, I must insist that we leave.

POLIDORI

Are you quite certain you are desirous of my companionship? I would certainly hate to intrude...

BYRON

Polidori, I could never be happy again were you not to join us.

POLIDORI

Well, then – if you insist. However, I must change my clothes.

BYRON

Hurry, man, hurry! We must make haste if we are to avoid the rain.

*(A flash of lightning, a crack of thunder, the sound of pouring rain.)*

POLIDORI

Too late.

BYRON

Damn!

*(He glares at POLIDORI.)*

POLIDORI

Pray do not look here. I told you to leave without me.

*(BYRON crosses to the window and looks out. Beat.)*

BYRON

The sky is changed! – and such a change! Oh night  
And storm, and darkness, ye are wondrous strong...

*(BYRON crosses to the desk, sits and writes furiously.)*

POLIDORI

How do you *do* that?

BYRON

I am a genius. Yes, this shall do quite nicely for the Third Canto...

*(BYRON opens the desk drawer to put his piece away, discovers  
Polidori's poem and holds it up.)*

Ah-ha! What is this?

*(POLIDORI tries to grab it from him.)*

POLIDORI

Nothing! Give that to me!

*(BYRON holds it out of reach and reads from it.)*

BYRON

“Ode to a Genevan Lady.” Why, Polidori, this is *your* handwriting.

POLIDORI

Byron, I beg you, return it to me this instant.

BYRON

*(Reading aloud)*

“Who are you, Genevan Lady, that I have loved you so well? Your pale face glows...”

*(BYRON reads the rest of it silently. POLIDORI is mortified.)*

Oh, dear. This is dreadful.

*(POLIDORI snatches it away from him.)*

POLIDORI

It is only the first draft.

BYRON

Better it were the first, last and only. Who is this “Genevan Lady”?

POLIDORI

No one of consequence, I assure you.

BYRON

But where did you meet her? Come, I insist. I must know her identity.

POLIDORI

So you can mock me? Nay, I think not.

BYRON

I would never *mock* you... well, perhaps I would, but that is not the point. This Genevan Lady, does she return your feelings?

POLIDORI

I am not certain she is aware of them.

BYRON

Oh, poor Polidori. The pain of unrequited love.

POLIDORI

Which is why I was writing a poem, to express my fervent admiration and regard...is it really that bad?

*(BYRON is spared a reply by loud voices in the hall. After a moment Byron's valet/butler FLETCHER enters. He is quite flustered and hastily closes the door behind him.)*

BYRON

Good God, Fletcher! What is all that hullabaloo?

FLETCHER

Mr. Shelley and Miss Godwin are here, my lord.

BYRON

Are they?

POLIDORI

*(At the same time)*  
Oh, no.

BYRON

Why this is excellent! The very distraction I need. Send them in, Fletcher.

FLETCHER

And Miss Clairmont, my lord? Shall I send her in, too?

BYRON

Miss Clairmont? Claire is here?

POLIDORI

Really, Byron, where else would she be? After all, she lives with them.

BYRON

Fletcher, I thought I gave you explicit instructions on this matter. You were never to let Miss Clairmont through the door.

FLETCHER

Yes, my lord, and I assure you I tried to prevent her. It is just that she, that Miss Clairmont...well, my lord, she rather *shoved* her way right through me and before I knew it, she was in. I am sorry.

BYRON

It is all right, Fletcher. I am certain you could not help it. Miss Clairmont has that effect on every man she meets.

FLETCHER

I must confess she frightens me, my lord. I have not met her like since Lady Byron.

BYRON

Indeed, they are two of a kind. Nevertheless, I suppose you must send them in. *All* of them.

FLETCHER

Very good, my lord.

*(FLETCHER bows and starts to exit.)*

BYRON

Damn. This is rotten luck

POLIDORI

Byron, I must have your word that you will say nothing of my poem to anyone, especially Shelley.

BYRON

Of course, of course...

*(CLAIRE CLAIRMONT enters.)*

CLAIRE

Byron! There you are, you naughty, naughty man.

FLETCHER

Miss Clairmont, my lord.

BYRON

So I see, Fletcher. Thank you.

CLAIRE

I am sorry to burst in upon you this way, my lord, but Fletcher was gone for what seemed an inordinate amount of time. Perhaps on the next occasion, Fletcher, you will be more prompt with your announcements.

BYRON

Stop frightening him, Claire.

CLAIRE

Pray do not be ridiculous. You are not frightened of me one whit, are you, Fletcher?

FLETCHER

I try not to be, madam.

*(PERCY SHELLEY and MARY GODWIN enter.)*

Mr. Shelley and Miss Godwin, my lord.

*(FLETCHER bows and exits.)*

SHELLEY

Hello, Byron.

BYRON

Shelley. Hello, Mary.

MARY

Lord Byron. Please pardon our intrusion, sir. I hope we are not disturbing you.

BYRON

Not at all, although I must confess to some surprise. What on earth brings you out in this storm?

SHELLEY

Claire had decided that she and Mary should join us for a sail and had accompanied me to the boat when the storm broke. It was a much shorter dash up here to get out of the wet, so naturally...

BYRON

Naturally.

SHELLEY

Thus here we are, sodden yet deliriously happy to be standing inside the hallowed halls of the Villa Diodoti, where resides one of the greatest poets in all Europe, George Gordon, Lord Byron.

BYRON

*One of the greatest?*

SHELLEY

Well, I cannot very well call you the greatest if I am standing in the room, can I?

BYRON

That depends. What have you written lately?

SHELLEY

As it happens, sir, I am working on a poem of epic proportions. I think you shall be very impressed.

*(POLIDORI sneezes violently.)*

And here is our PollyDolly. Still have that nasty head cold, eh? Well, you know what they say, old man – “physician, heal thyself.”

*(POLIDORI glares at SHELLEY then bows to the women.)*

POLIDORI

Miss Clairmont. Mary.

MARY

I am sorry to see you are still feeling unwell, John.

POLIDORI

Oh, I shall manage to survive somehow, I suppose.

BYRON

Of course he shall. That is why I pay him. Shall we drink?

SHELLEY

I think we must – our reputations depend on it.

BYRON

Quite right.

*(Calling offstage.)*

Fletcher!

*(As if waiting for his cue, FLETCHER enters with a tray of drinks and a bottle.)*

FLETCHER

My lord?

BYRON

Fletcher, fetch our guests some... Oh, I see you've anticipated our needs. Thank you, Fletcher.

*(BYRON grabs a drink for himself and MARY. SHELLEY takes a glass for himself and CLAIRE.)*

With my compliments, madam.

MARY

Thank you, my lord.

SHELLEY

Claire...

CLAIRE

Thank you, Shelley. I am grateful that *someone* is considerate of my needs.

FLETCHER

Doctor...?