

# Lord of the Dead

The Secret History of Byron

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Lord  
of the  
Dead

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*For Sadie, my beloved*

But first, on earth as Vampire sent,  
Thy corse shall from its tomb be rent:  
Then ghastly haunt thy native place,  
And suck the blood of all thy race:  
There from thy daughter, sister, wife,  
At midnight drain the stream of life;  
Yet loathe the banquet which perforce  
Must feed thy livid living corse:  
Thy victims, ere they yet expire,  
Shall know the demon for their sire,  
As cursing thee, thou cursing them,  
Thy flowers are wither'd on the stem . . .  
Wet with thine own best blood shall drip  
Thy gnashing tooth and haggard lip;  
Then stalking to thy sullen grace,  
Go—and with Gouls and Afrits rave;  
Till these in horror shrink away  
From spectre more accursed than they!

LORD BYRON, *The Giaour*

*But I hate things all fiction . . . there should always be some foundation of fact for the most airy fabric—and pure invention is but the talent of a liar.*

LORD BYRON, LETTER TO HIS PUBLISHER

# Postscript

The face of the corpse did not bear the slightest resemblance to my dear friend—the mouth was distorted & half open showing those teeth in which poor fellow he once so prided himself quite discoloured by the spirits—his upper lip was shaded with mustachios which gave a totally new character to his face—his cheeks were long and bagged over the jaw—his nose was quite prominent at the bridge and sank in between the eyes—his eye brows shaggy & lowering—his skin like dull parchment. It did not seem to be Byron.

JOHN CAM HOBHOUSE, *Diaries*

# Chapter I

The whole Memoirs would damn Lord B. to everlasting infamy if published.

JOHN CAM HOBHOUSE, *Journals*





**M**r. Nicholas Melrose, who was head of his law firm and an important man, did not like to feel upset. He was not used to it, and hadn't been for many years.

"We never give the keys to anyone," he said rudely. He stared with some resentment at the girl opposite his imposingly large desk. How dare she unsettle him like this? "Never," he repeated. He jabbed with his finger, just in case there was still any doubt. "Never."

Rebecca Carville stared at him, then shook her head. She bent down to pick up a bag. Melrose watched her. Long, auburn hair, at once elegant and untamed, spilled over the girl's shoulders. She swept it back, glancing up at Melrose as she did so. Her eyes glittered. She was beautiful, Melrose thought, quite upsettingly so. He sighed. He ran his fingers through his thinning hair, then stroked his paunch.

"St. Jude's has always been a special case," he muttered, in a slightly more conciliatory tone. "Legally speaking." He gestured with his hands. "Surely you see, Miss Carville, that I have no choice? I repeat—I'm sorry—but you cannot have the keys."

Rebecca took some papers from her bag. Melrose frowned. He really was getting old, if a mere girl's silence could unsettle him like this—no matter how lovely she was, and no matter what her

business was with him. He leaned across the desk. "Perhaps," he asked, "you would tell me what you hope to find in the crypt?"

Rebecca shuffled her papers. Suddenly the chill of her beauty was thawed by a smile. She handed the papers across. "Look at these," she said. "But be careful. They're old."

Melrose took them, intrigued. "What are they?" he asked.

"Letters.

"And how old is old?"

"1825."

Melrose stared at Rebecca over his glasses, then held a letter up to the desk light. The ink was faded, the paper brown. He tried to make out the signature at the bottom of the page. It was hard, in the gloom, with only the single lamp. "Thomas—what's this—Moore?" he asked, looking up.

Rebecca nodded.

"Should I be familiar with such a name?"

"He was a poet."

"I'm afraid, in my line, one doesn't have the time to read much poetry."

Rebecca continued to stare at him impassively. She reached across his desk to take the letter back. "No one reads Thomas Moore now," she said at last. "But he was very popular in his day."

"Are you an expert, then, Miss Carville, on the poets of the period?"

"I have good reasons, Mr. Melrose, for my interest."

"Ah, do you?" Melrose smiled. "Do you? Excellent." He relaxed in his chair. So she was an antiquarian, nothing more, some worthless academic. At once she seemed less threatening. Melrose beamed at her in relief, fortified again by a sense of his own importance.

Rebecca watched him, not answering his smile. "As I said, Mr. Melrose, I have good reasons." She stared down at the sheet of paper in her hands. "For instance—this letter, which was written to a Lord Ruthven, at an address in Mayfair—Thirteen, Fairfax Street." She smiled slowly. "Isn't that the same house to which St. Jude's is attached?"

Rebecca's smile broadened as she watched the lawyer's reac-

tion to her words. The color had suddenly drained from his face. But then he shook his head, and tried to answer her smile. "Yes," he said softly. He dabbed at his forehead. "So what if it is?"

Rebecca glanced at the letter again. "This is what Moore wrote," she said. "He tells Lord Ruthven that he has what he calls 'the manuscript.' What manuscript? He doesn't elaborate. All he does say is that he is sending it, along with his letter, to Fairfax Street."

"To Fairfax Street . . ." The lawyer's voice trailed away. He swallowed, and tried to smile again, but his expression was even more sickly than before.

Rebecca glanced at him. If Melrose's look of fear surprised her, she betrayed nothing. Instead, face calm, she reached across the table for a second letter, and her voice, when she spoke again, seemed bled to a monotone. "A week afterwards, Mr. Melrose, Thomas Moore writes this. He is thanking Lord Ruthven for his acknowledgment of the receipt of the manuscript. Lord Ruthven had clearly told Moore what the fate of the manuscript was to be." Rebecca held up the letter and read. "'Great is Truth,' says the Bible, 'and mighty above all things.' Yet sometimes, Truth must be concealed and buried away, for its horrors can be too great for mortal man to bear. You know what I think on this matter. Bury it in a place of the dead; it is the only place for it. Leave it hidden there for eternity—we are both agreed on that now, I hope.'" Rebecca allowed the letter to drop. "'Place of the dead,' Mr. Melrose," she said slowly. She leaned forward and spoke with sudden vehemence, her expression at once one of passion and dread. "Surely—surely—that can only mean the crypt of the chapel of St. Jude's?"

Melrose bent his head in silence. "I think, Miss Carville," he said at last, "that you should forget about Fairfax Street."

"Oh? Why?"

Melrose stared up at her. "Don't you think he may be right, your poet? That there are truths which should indeed remain concealed?"

Rebecca smiled faintly. "You speak as a lawyer, of course."

"Unfair, Miss Carville."

"Then as what are you speaking?"

Melrose made no answer. Damn the woman, he thought. Memories, dark and unbidden, were crowding his mind. He stared around his office, as though to find comfort in the gleam of its modernity. "As—as someone who wishes you well," he said at last, lamely.

"No!" Rebecca scraped back her chair and rose to her feet with such violence that Melrose almost flinched in his chair. "You don't understand. Do you know what the manuscript was, the one that Ruthven may have hidden away in the crypt?"

Melrose made no answer.

"Thomas Moore was the friend of a poet much greater than himself—much greater. Perhaps even you, Mr. Melrose, have heard of Lord Byron?"

"Yes," said Melrose softly, resting his head upon his clasped hands, "I have heard of Lord Byron."

"When he wrote his memoirs, Byron entrusted the finished manuscript to Thomas Moore. When the news of Byron's death reached his friends, they prevailed upon Moore to destroy the memoirs. Sheet by sheet, the memoirs were torn to shreds, then tossed onto a fire lit by Byron's publisher. Nothing was left of them." Rebecca stroked back her hair, as though to calm herself. "Byron was an incomparable writer. The destruction of his memoirs was desecration."

The lawyer stared at her. He felt trapped, now that he was certain why she wanted the keys. He had heard these arguments before. He could remember the woman who had made them, all those years ago, as lovely a woman as this girl was now, with the same strange, drawn look, the same urgent need.

And still the girl was talking to him. "Mr. Melrose—please—do you understand what I have been telling you?"

He licked his lips. "Do you?" he replied.

Rebecca frowned. "Listen," she whispered softly. "It is known that Thomas Moore was in the habit of copying any manuscript that he received. Only one copy of the memoirs was burnt. People have always wondered if Moore had made a duplicate. And now here"—Rebecca held up the letter—"we have Moore writing about a strange manuscript. A manuscript which he then says has been deposited in 'a place of the dead.' Mr. Melrose—

please—surely now you can understand? We are talking about Byron's memoirs here. I must have the keys to the crypt of St. Jude."

A gust of rain swept against the windows. Melrose climbed to his feet, almost wearily, and locked the catches, as though barring the night. Then, still silent, he rested his forehead against a windowpane. "No," he said at last, staring into the darkness of the street outside, "no, I cannot give you the keys."

There was a silence, broken only by the sobbing of the wind. "You must," said Rebecca eventually. Her voice was so low it was almost a hiss. "You have seen the letters."

"Yes—I have seen the letters." Melrose turned. Rebecca's eyes were narrowed, like those of a cat. Her hair seemed to glow and spark in the light. Dear God, he thought, how very like that other woman she looked. It was all quite upsetting. The memories of that other time . . .

"Miss Carville," he tried to explain, "it is not that I doubt you. Indeed, quite the reverse." He paused, but Rebecca said nothing. The lawyer wondered how he could explain himself. He had never been easy with his own suspicions, and he knew that when spoken they would sound fantastic. That was why he had always kept quiet—that was why he had tried to forget. Damn the girl, he thought again, *damn her!* "Lord Byron's memoirs," he muttered at last. "They were burnt by his friends?"

"Yes," said Rebecca coldly. "By his old traveling companion, a man named Hobhouse."

"Do you not feel, then, that this Hobhouse may have been wise in what he did?"

Rebecca smiled bleakly. "How can you ask me that?"

"Because I wonder what secret these memoirs contained. What secret so terrible that even Lord Byron's closest friends thought it best to destroy all records of it."

"Not all records, Mr. Melrose."

"No." He paused. "No, maybe not. And so—I am agitated."

To his surprise, Rebecca did not smile at his words. Instead, she leaned across the desk and took his hand. "Agitated by what, Mr. Melrose? Tell me. Lord Byron has been dead for almost two hundred years. What is there to be agitated by?"

"Miss Carville." The lawyer paused, and smiled, then shook his head. "Miss Carville . . ." He gestured with his hands. "Forget everything else I have been saying. Please—just listen to what I tell you now. Here is the bottom line. I am legally obliged to withhold the keys. There is nothing I can do about that. It may seem strange that the public be barred from a church, but it is the legal position nevertheless. The right of entry to the chapel belongs exclusively to the heir to the Ruthven estate, to him and to other direct descendants of the first Lord Ruthven. It is for them alone that I hold the keys to St. Jude's, as my predecessors in this firm, for almost two hundred years, have similarly held the keys. So far as I know, the chapel is never used for worship, or indeed opened at all. I could, I suppose, put forward your name to the present Lord Ruthven, but I must be frank with you, Miss Carville—that is something I shall never do."

Rebecca raised an eyebrow. "Why not?"

Melrose watched her. "For many reasons," he said slowly. "The simplest is that there would be no point. Lord Ruthven would never reply."

"Ah. So he does exist, then?"

Melrose's frown deepened. "Why do you ask that?"

"I tried to see him before coming to see you. In his house by St. Jude's—on Fairfax Street." She smiled, then shrugged. "The fact that I'm sitting here now suggests what success I had."

"He is not often in residence here, I believe. But oh yes, Miss Carville—he exists."

"You've met him?"

Melrose nodded. "Yes." He paused. "Once."

"No more than that?"

"Once was enough."

"When?"

"Does it matter?"

Rebecca nodded wordlessly. Melrose studied her face. It seemed frozen again and emotionless, but in her eyes, he could still see the deep-burning gleam. He leaned back in his chair. "It was twenty years ago, almost to the day," he said. "I remember it vividly."

Rebecca didn't blink. "Go on," she said.

"I should not be telling you this. A client has the right to confidentiality."

Rebecca smiled faintly, mockingly. Melrose knew that she could tell he wanted to talk. He cleared his throat. "I had just been made a partner," he said. "The Ruthven estate was one of my responsibilities. Lord Ruthven phoned me. He wanted to talk with me. He insisted I visit him in Fairfax Street. He was a rich and valued client. I went, of course."

"And?"

Again, Melrose paused. "It was a very strange experience," he said at last. "I am not an impressionable man, Miss Carville, I do not usually speak in subjective terms, but his mansion filled me with—well—there's no other way to put it—with the most remarkable sense of dread. Does that sound strange? Yes, of course it does, but I can't help it, that's how it was. In the course of my visit, Lord Ruthven showed me the chapel of St. Jude's as well. There, too, I was conscious of an almost physical oppressiveness, catching at my throat, choking me. And so you see, Miss Carville, it is for your own sake I am glad you won't be visiting there. Yes—for your own sake."

Rebecca smiled again faintly. "But was it the chapel," she asked, "or Lord Ruthven who unsettled you so much?"

"Oh, both I think, both. Lord Ruthven I found—indefinable. There was a grace to him, yes, a real grace, and a beauty too . . ."

"Except?"

"Except . . ." Melrose frowned. "Yes. Except . . . that in his face, like his house, there was the same quality of danger." He paused. "The same funereal gleam. We didn't talk long—by mutual consent—but in that time, I was aware of a great mind grown cancerous. Calling for help, I would almost have said, except that . . . No, no." Melrose suddenly shook his head. "What nonsense am I talking? Lawyers have no right to be imaginative."

Rebecca smiled faintly. "But was it imagination?"

Melrose studied her face. It seemed suddenly very pale. "Maybe not," he said quietly.

"What had he wanted to talk to you about?"

"The keys."

"To the chapel?"

Melrose nodded.

"Why?"

"He told me not to surrender them to anyone."

"Not even to those who were entitled to them?"

"They were to be discouraged."

"But not forbidden?"

"No. Discouraged."

"Why?"

"He didn't say. But as he talked to me, I felt a presentiment of . . . of . . . of something terrible."

"What?"

"I couldn't describe it, but it was real"—Melrose stared around—"as real as the figures on this computer screen, or the papers in this file. And Lord Ruthven, too—he seemed afraid. . . . No—not afraid, but appalled, and yet all the time, you see, it was mingled with a terrible desire—I could see it burning in his eyes. And so I took his warning to heart, because what I'd glimpsed in his face had horrified me. I hoped, of course, that no one would ask me for the keys." He paused. "Then three days later, a Miss Ruthven came to call."

Rebecca's face betrayed not a flicker of surprise. "For the keys?" she asked.

Melrose leaned back in his chair. "The same as you. She wanted to find the memoirs of Lord Byron hidden in the crypt."

Still, Rebecca's face seemed passionless. "And you gave them to her?" she asked.

"I had no choice."

"Because she was a Ruthven?"

Melrose nodded.

"And yet now you want to try and stop me."

"No, Miss Carville, it is not a matter of trying, I *will* stop you. I will not give you the keys." Melrose stared into Rebecca's narrowing eyes. He looked away, rising to his feet, crossing to a window and the darkness out beyond. "She vanished," he said at



last, not turning around. He waited to hear if Rebecca would start; but there was no noise; only her presence, as insistent as before. Melrose coughed, then continued. "It was a few days after I gave her the keys. The police never found her. There was never anything, of course, to link her disappearance with Lord Ruthven, but I remembered all he had said, and what I had glimpsed in his face. I didn't tell the police—afraid of seeming ridiculous, you understand—but with you, Miss Carville, I'm prepared to risk seeming comical." He turned around to face her again. "Go away. It's getting late. I'm afraid our meeting has come to an end."

Rebecca didn't move. Then, slowly, she smoothed her hair back from her face. "The keys are mine," she said softly.

Melrose raised his arms in anger and frustration. "Didn't you hear what I said? Can't you understand?" He slumped into his chair. "Miss Carville, please, don't be difficult. Just go, before I have to ring for you to be taken away."

Rebecca shook her head gently. Melrose sighed, and reached across his desk to press an intercom. As he did so, Rebecca took a second sheaf of papers from her bag. She pushed them across the desk. Melrose glanced at them, then froze. He took up the first page and began to skim down it, glassily, as though unable, or unwilling, to read it through. He muttered something, then pushed the papers away from him. He sighed and for a long time said nothing more. At last, though, he shook his head and sighed a second time. "She was your mother, then?"

Rebecca nodded. "She kept her maiden name." She smiled faintly. "I was four when she . . . went. I can still remember her, though."

Melrose breathed in deeply. "Why didn't you say?"

"I wanted to know what you thought."

"Well, you know. Keep away from Fairfax Street."

Rebecca stared at him, then smiled. "You're not serious," she said. She laughed. "You can't be."

"Would it make any difference if I say again that I am?"

"No. None at all."

Melrose stared at her. "So drawn," he murmured softly.