

~~LADY CROOM I will do it.~~

~~JELLABY Yes, my lady. (To Septimus) Lord Byron left a letter for you with the valet, sir.~~

~~SEPTIMUS Thank you.~~

~~Septimus takes the letter off the tray. Jellaby prepares to leave. Lady Croom eyes the letter.~~

~~LADY CROOM When did he do so?~~

~~JELLABY As he was leaving, your ladyship.~~

~~Jellaby leaves. Septimus puts the letter into his pocket.~~

~~SEPTIMUS Allow me.~~

~~Since she does not object, he pours a cup of tea for her. She accepts it.~~

→ LADY CROOM I do not know if it is proper for you to receive a letter written in my house from someone not welcome in it.

SEPTIMUS Very improper, I agree. Lord Byron's want of delicacy is a grief to his friends, among whom I no longer count myself. I will not read his letter until I have followed him through the gates.

She considers that for a moment.

LADY CROOM That may excuse the reading but not the writing.

SEPTIMUS Your ladyship should have lived in the Athens of Pericles! The philosophers would have fought the sculptors for your idle hour!

LADY CROOM (Protesting) Oh, really! ... (Protesting less.) Oh really ...

Septimus has taken Byron's letter from his pocket and is now setting fire to a corner of it using the little flame from the spirit lamp.

Oh ... really ...

The paper blazes in Septimus's hand and he drops it and lets it burn out on the metal tray.)

CROOM-SEPTIMUS

SEPTIMUS Now there's a thing—a letter from Lord Byron never to be read by a living soul. I will take my leave, madam, at the time of your desiring it.

LADY CROOM To the Indies?

SEPTIMUS The Indies! Why?

LADY CROOM To follow the Chater, of course. She did not tell you?

SEPTIMUS She did not exchange half-a-dozen words with me.

LADY CROOM I expect she did not like to waste the time. The Chater sails with Captain Brice.

SEPTIMUS Ah. As a member of the crew?

LADY CROOM No, as wife to Mr Chater, plant-gatherer to my brother's expedition.

SEPTIMUS I knew he was no poet. I did not know it was botany under the false colours.

LADY CROOM He is no more a botanist. My brother paid fifty pounds to have him published, and he will pay a hundred and fifty to have Mr Chater picking flowers in the Indies for a year while the wife plays mistress of the Captain's quarters. Captain Brice has fixed his passion on Mrs Chater, and to take her on voyage he has not scrupled to deceive the Admiralty, the Linnean Society and Sir Joseph Banks, botanist to His Majesty at Kew.

SEPTIMUS Her passion is not as fixed as his.

LADY CROOM It is a defect of God's humour that he directs our hearts everywhere but to those who have a right to them.

SEPTIMUS Indeed, madam. (Pause.) But is Mr Chater deceived?

LADY CROOM He insists on it, and finds the proof of his wife's virtue in his eagerness to defend it. Captain Brice is *not* deceived but cannot help himself. He would die for her.

SEPTIMUS I think, my lady, he would have Mr Chater die for her.

LADY CROOM Indeed, I never knew a woman worth the duel, or the other way about. Your letter to me goes very ill with your conduct to Mrs Chater, Mr Hodge. I have had experience of being betrayed before the ink is dry, but to be betrayed before the pen is even dipped, and with the village noticeboard, what am I to think of such a performance?

SEPTIMUS My lady, I was alone with my thoughts in the gazebo, when Mrs Chater ran me to ground, and I being in such a passion, in an agony of unrelieved desire—

LADY CROOM Oh...!

SEPTIMUS —I thought in my madness that the Chater with her skirts over her head would give me the momentary illusion of the happiness to which I dared not put a face.

Pause.

LADY CROOM I do not know when I have received a more unusual compliment, Mr Hodge. I hope I am more than a match for Mrs Chater with her head in a bucket. Does she wear drawers?

SEPTIMUS She does.

LADY CROOM Yes, I have heard that drawers are being worn now. It is unnatural for women to be got up like jockeys. I cannot approve.

She turns with a whirl of skirts and moves to leave.

I know nothing of Pericles or the Athenian philosophers. I can spare them an hour, in my sitting room when I have bathed. Seven o'clock. Bring a book.

She goes out. Septimus picks up the two letters, the ones he wrote, and starts to burn them in the flame of the spirit lamp.

SCENE VII

Valentine and Chloë are at the table. Gus is in the room.

Chloë is reading from two Saturday newspapers. She is wearing workaday period clothes, a Regency dress, no hat.

Valentine is pecking at a portable computer. He is wearing unkempt Regency clothes, too.

The clothes have evidently come from a large wicker laundry hamper, from which Gus is producing more clothes to try on himself. He finds a Regency coat and starts putting it on.

The objects on the table now include two geometrical solids, pyramid and cone, about twenty inches high, of the type used in a drawing lesson; and a pot of dwarf dahlias (which do not look like modern dahlias.)

CHLOË 'Even in Arcadia—Sex, Literature and Death at Sidley Park'. Picture of Byron.

VALENTINE Not of Bernard?

CHLOË 'Byron Fought Fatal Duel, Says Don'... Valentine, do you think I'm the first person to think of this?

VALENTINE No.

CHLOË I haven't said yet. The future is all programmed like a computer—that's a proper theory, isn't it?

VALENTINE The deterministic universe, yes.

CHLOË Right. Because everything including us is just a lot of atoms bouncing off each other like billiard balls.

VALENTINE Yes. There was someone, forget his name, 1820s, who pointed out that from Newton's laws you could predict everything to come—I mean, you'd need a computer as big as the universe but the formula would exist.

CHLOË But it doesn't work, does it?