Don Zolidis
donzolidis@gmail.com

Monster

A play in one-act

By Don Zolidis

©2016 Don Zolidis ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

Copyright Protection. This play is fully protected under the copyright laws of the United States of America and all countries with which the United States of America has reciprocal copyright relations, whether through bilateral or multilateral treaties or otherwise, and including, but not limited to, all countries covered by the Pan-American Copyright Convention, the Universal Copyright Convention and the Berne Convention.

Reservation of Rights. All rights to this play are strictly reserved, including, without limitation, professional and amateur stage performance rights; motion picture, recitation, lecturing, public reading, radio broadcasting, television, video, and sound recording; rights to all other forms of mechanical or electronic reproduction now known or yet to be invented, such as CD-ROM, CD-1, DVD, photocopying, and information storage and retrieval systems; and the rights of translation into non-English languages.

Performance Licensing and Royalty Payments. Amateur and stock performance rights to this play are controlled exclusively by Don Zolidis. No amateur or stock groups or individuals may perform this play without obtaining advance written permission from Don Zolidis.

Restriction of Alteration. There shall be no deletions, alterations, or changes of any kind made to the play unless directly authorized by Don Zolidis. The title of the play shall not be altered.

Author Credit. Any individual or group receiving permission to produce this play is required to credit Don Zolidis as the sole and exclusive author of the play.

AI training. For avoidance of doubt, Don Zolidis reserves the rights in any manner for purposes of training artificial intelligence technologies to generate text, including without limitation, technologies that are capable of generating works in the same style or genre as the play.

Cast of Characters

MARY GODWIN, 18,
PERCY SHELLEY, 21, ethereal and brilliant.
CLAIRE CLAIRMONT, 18, Mary's step-sister,
LORD BYRON, 27, the most infamous man of letters of his day. Flamboyant.
JOHN POLIDORI, 24, Lord Byron's doctor, Italian.
ELISE, 21, nurse to Mary and Percy's infant son, William.
HARRIET SHELLEY, 21, Percy's wife.

ENSEMBLE – the Ensemble portrays all the characters inside the horror stories, changes the settings, etc…

A Note on Historical Accuracy: This play is historical fiction. Although its subject is the famous gathering in Switzerland and is based on real events and real people, I have not constrained myself to portraying history as accurately as possible (if such a thing is doable). I have felt free to amend and alter the story in order to create a theatrical play. I have altered the time line of certain events, but in the whole this hews fairly closely to the historical record. For a more accurate depiction of events, I recommend Miranda Seymour's biography of Mary Shelley, which I have leaned on heavily.

Setting: Switzerland. June 16-18, 1816. Various rooms inside a lake house.

How to act the narrated sections: At any given moment in a story read from a book, the narrator may inhabit one of the characters in the horror story. The narrator and character should do all movements synchronously, almost as if the narrator was a puppet master and the character was a marionette. The narrator of the story will not inhabit a character for very long, and will switch back and forth as he or she narrates the tale.

All words spoken by all characters in the horror stories, unless otherwise indicated, are spoken by both the Narrator and the character. This will have the effect of "doubling" every word spoken in the horror stories. The effect should be disconcerting and, hopefully, frightening.

Crash of thunder.
Lights up on a masked ball, frozen.
A WOMAN, elegant and masked, stands center-stage.
The other GUESTS of the party, also masked, cluster around the edges, staring at her.

LORD BYRON, 27, dressed for the country, holds an old book in his hand. He glides through the scene, reading from the text in his hand, directing the action.

LORD BYRON

She was the subject of immense curiosity.
She neither answered nor addressed a word to her neighbors.
But the general opinion was that some unhappy passion for Fillippo was the cause of this extraordinary conduct.

LORD BYRON arrives at FILLIPPO and inhabits him.

Simultaneously, all the GUESTS, (including FILLIPPO and LORD BYRON) begin to move – The WOMAN remains still.

FILLIPPO glances at the woman, then approaches a WAITER.

FILLIPPO and LORD BYRON

Champagne please.

The servant pours the glass as BYRON mimes it.

The WOMAN approaches. Holds out her glass.

FILLIPPO and LORD BYRON

I'm afraid we have not met.

She says nothing.

Or have we?

She raises her glass as if to toast him.

FILLIPPO raises his glass as well.

Cheers.

BYRON steps out.

LORD BYRON

He glanced downward at his glass.

The champagne in FILLIPPO's glass is as red as blood. He stares at it as the WOMAN drifts off, drinking.

BYRON inhabits another guest, CARMILLA'S FATHER, as he approaches.

CARMILLA'S FATHER and LORD BYRON

You seem disquieted.

FILLIPPO and LORD BYRON

The wine is red! I thought there had been no red champagne.

CARMILLA'S FATHER and LORD BYRON

There is none.

LORD BYRON and FILLIPPO

Then this is…

He looks –

The WOMAN has intermingled between other GUESTS, but stares at him, drinking. BYRON and FILIPPO rush to her.

LORD BYRON and FILLIPPO

Excuse me! Everyone!

The GUESTS turn to look at him.

I must ask that you remove your masks.

FEMALE GUEST and LORD BYRON

What is the matter with you?

LORD BYRON and FILLIPPO

Please.

Reluctantly, EVERYONE removes their masks except for the WOMAN, who still stares at him.

BYRON and FILLIPPO take a few steps towards her.

LORD BYRON and FILLIPPO

Miss? Will you kindly remove your mask?

BYRON steps out.

LORD BYRON

His skin was chilled to the bone. It cannot be, he thought. The woman before him had the shape, the aspect, even the very scent of Carmilla. And yet she was gone. Slain by his own hand only two night prior. He had seen the light escape her eyes, he had felt the impact of his blade into her breast. She was dead. Did the others know? Could they sense it?

BYRON inhabits FILLIPPO, who turns –

Wherever he looks, the GUESTS act out the murder in front of him in the exact same way. A man stabbing a woman, who clutches her heart. They do it quickly, then return to normal, staring at him.

GUEST and LORD BYRON *(quietly)*

Murderer.

LORD BYRON

Did he imagine that? Did he truly hear it?

OTHER GUEST and LORD BYRON *(louder)*

Murderer.

With each repetition, another GUEST joins in.)

GUESTS and LORD BYRON *(louder)*

Murderer. Murderer. MURDERER. MURDERER.

They stop.

LORD BYRON

It cannot have been. The words could not have spoken. No one knew. No one could know. And yet… this woman… was she a ghost?

BYRON inhabits FILLIPPO again.

FILLIPPO and LORD BYRON

You must forgive my impertinence, but I'm afraid I must remove… your mask.

LORD BYRON

His hands stretched out.

Everyone is watching.

He felt the coarse fabric of the mask in his fingers –and then…

He yanks it away with a crack of THUNDER! Blackout.

PERCY

Aaaaaah!

Lights up on the audience for this tale, sitting in comfortable furniture near a fireplace. PERCY, MARY, CLAIRE, and JOHN applaud mightily.

LORD BYRON bows.

JOHN

Well done!

MARY

Bravo!

PERCY

My heart is about to burst! I nearly saw her visage in my mind!

CLAIRE

Masterful, Lord Byron! I am so frightened I won't be able to sleep alone tonight!

JOHN

I find that a small dose of laudanum is able to quiet any nightmare. I can give you some –

LORD BYRON

And a large dose gives you the most extraordinary visions!

He raises a glass.

MARY

I hear that is how Coleridge writes his poems.

LORD BYRON

Coleridge is a boob.

PERCY

Could you imagine seeing the dead bride? The blood not yet dry. Oozing worms crawling from her eye sockets.

MARY

She was dead two days, my love.

PERCY

It might have happened.

CLAIRE

Is that truly how the story ended?

LORD BYRON

I may have amended it for dramatic effect.

CLAIRE

Was it her? Was it the dead bride?

LORD BYRON

The subtitle of the book is "Ghost Stories," so I believe that may provide us a clue.

JOHN

It was certainly a ghost! I would bet money on it if I had any!

PERCY

I prefer not to know. The mystery is at the heart of the fear. I had little chills running up and down my spine the entire time, Byron. I will need to be chained to my bed this evening!

LORD BYRON

What you do in your own time is your business. I seek not to judge your relationship.

MARY *(joking)*

You are awful!

LORD BYRON

So I have heard. Besides, if there is anyone that needs to chain Percy to a bed it is his wife. Where is she these days?

laughs from JOHN, BYRON, and CLAIRE.

MARY

In London.

LORD BYRON

Right.

CLAIRE

I should like to read a ghost story! Hand me the book, hand me the book!

LORD BYRON

Are you up for it?

CLAIRE

I'm up for anything!

LORD BYRON

Truly? Anything?

JOHN

Watch yourself, Claire.

CLAIRE

I hadn't realized I had brought a nanny on the trip.

LORD BYRON

You must forgive John. As a physician by trade, he is chiefly concerned with the health of your body. As am I.

PERCY

My goodness, shall this story be read or not?

LORD BYRON

Percy you must enjoy a good seduction.

PERCY

It's not a seduction when an antelope lies down in front a lion and invites him to dinner.

MARY

Will you pick one or not, Claire?

CLAIRE

They all look terrifying. I don't know which one to pick.

Thunder.

JOHN

The weather is frightful this evening.

LORD BYRON

Is it? I hadn't noticed with all the thunder and lightning.

JOHN

I am just saying it is very stormy.

LORD BYRON

John, perhaps you are not versed in the art of conversation. Allow me to instruct you. When someone asks for a weather report, that is when you provide it. None of us are deaf or blind – we are perfectly capable of determining whether it is stormy or not.

JOHN

I apologize –

LORD BYRON

No no no – I thank you for mentioning the weather for eleventh time this evening. I was sitting on the edge of my seat wondering just what the weather was. Do you think we're stupid? I mean, is that the purpose of continuously mentioning the storm? Are you under the apprehension that your commentary is *fascinating?* It isn't! Stop mentioning the damn storm.

JOHN

It is good for the stories, yes?

MARY

Yes it is and Claire is taking much too long.

PERCY

I believe it was my turn in any event.

MARY

Hand him the book.

CLAIRE

No!

LORD BYRON

Give him the book, I'm tired of watching you attempt to read.

CLAIRE

I can read perfectly well!

LORD BYRON

None of us have any evidence of that.

CLAIRE

Fine. But I must protest this treatment.

Claire hands the book to Percy.

LORD BYRON

You can lodge your protest in private in later.

PERCY

Let's see, let's see… how about The Grey Room?

CLAIRE

That sounds perfectly dull. Grey isn't even an interesting color.

JOHN

Grey isn't a color at all, in fact.

CLAIRE

Thank you John. I was wondering about that.

MARY

Go ahead my love I'm certain it will be terrifying.

PERCY

I'm already trembling. Look! Very well…

THUNDER.

JOHN

Ooh!

LORD PERCY

Shut your mouth.

Lights change.

PERCY

It was late on a winter evening in his travels when Tobias reached his childhood home. It had been many years since he had been home, and though his aging father was overjoyed to see him, he was unprepared for the brief visit.

TOBIAS and FATHER enter soundlessly – embrace.

For you see, though he had spent many happy years growing under his father's care, the old home they shared was dark and full of secrets. They spoke long into the night, and when it came time for him to lay down –

PERCY inhabits FATHER.

PERCY and FATHER

My son, I wish I could accommodate you more adequately. I have a boarder in your old room. You may take my chamber and I shall lay on the floor.

PERCY and TOBIAS

Nonsense. You are old – I shall pass the time on the floor.

PERCY steps out.

PERCY

It was then that a servant interrupted.

SERVING GIRL enters.

PERCY and SERVING GIRL

Sir, there is one room in the house with a made-up bed. The grey room.

Crash of thunder.

PERCY and FATHER

I would not have you stay in that room.

PERCY and TOBIAS

Why not?

PERCY and FATHER

In the grey room? Have you forgotten… the ghost?

PERCY and TOBIAS

You really must be going senile, father. No ghost will do me any harm for no ghost exists. I will happily spend the night in the grey room.

PERCY and FATHER

You would have the heart? Well then. You have much changed.

PERCY steps out.

JOHN

I would not have spent time in the grey room. There is clearly a ghost.

LORD BYRON

Why are you interrupting?

JOHN

I am failing to understand why this room is in the house. Why does it exist?

PERCY

He went with the girl up two flights up stairs. The last room of this deserted wing was the grey room.

SERVING GIRL leads TOBIAS into the room as the company sets up the Grey Room.

SERVING GIRL and PERCY

Your life is in your own hands, Tobias.

She leaves.

Skipping Forward

MARY and TOBIAS

Aaah!

He gets up, runs to the window, tries to open it.

MARY

But the woman caught up with him as he fled!

She puts her hand against the window

He felt the coldness of death down his whole spine as she filled her grave-silent arms with him.
His life seemed to be no longer her goal, but something more horrifying.
His love.

MARY and TOBIAS

Aaaaah!

TOBIAS breaks free, opens the door

Behind it is the Ghost of HUGO. A skeleton.

MARY

There a skeleton stood – the hideous shape of Count Hugo –

MARY inhabits the skeleton –

It pulled the door shut behind him.

Both spirits lunge at TOBIAS.

Blackout.

PERCY

Aaaaah!

Lights up on the audience again.

The guests applaud.

JOHN

That might have been better than Lord Byron's tale!

CLAIRE

Brava, Mary! You are truly frightening! I'm sure it's your modern ideas that let you say such things!

PERCY gives her a hug.

PERCY

This is why I left my wife.

LORD BYRON

I must say, brilliantly done. I'm certain John lost his wits all over again. What say you, John, is it still storming?

JOHN

It is.

LORD BYRON

My friends I have an idea. As long as the oh-so-interesting weather keeps up imprisoned in this house, I'd like to suggest a contest. We each compose our own.

JOHN

Our own what?

LORD BYRON

It is tiring knowing you.

JOHN

Our own what I don't know.

PERCY

Our own ghost story.

JOHN

Oh! Ohhh…

LORD BYRON

Tomorrow we shall frighten each other all over again – supernatural occurrences encouraged –

CLAIRE

I love it!

MARY

You'll write one, Claire?

CLAIRE

Oh no I shall be the judge. Who shall frighten me the most?

MARY

And what shall the winner get?

LORD BYRON

Winner?

MARY

You said a contest.

LORD BYRON

I did. Well – the winner gets whatever he wants.

MARY

Or she wants.

LORD BYRON

Certainly. In my experience, women are full of horrors. Take my mother, for instance. She once put around a noose around her neck and waited for me to find her. There is nothing so monstrous as an unfit mother, don't you think?

THUNDER.
Lights change.

The nursery. Quite dark. ELISE is rocking a sleeping baby.
MARY enters quietly.

Mary sneaks in to watch the baby sleep.
She watches as Elise sets the baby in the cradle.

ELISE

Would you like to watch him sleep?

MARY nods.

MARY

Was he in good spirits this evening?

ELISE

No need to whisper. He sleeps like a stone.

MARY

I suppose that's good. Is that good?

ELISE

Maybe. A little good yes. Maybe a little bad.

MARY

Why do you say bad?

ELISE

A little bad.

MARY

Yes, but why?

ELISE

Sometimes they don't wake up. But this one is strong. This one lives. You should see him eat. He's like a monster. Yes you are.

MARY

I know.

ELISE

As soon as he gets teeth he's going to try to eat me. I know it.

MARY

Thank you, Elise.

ELISE

Will you be needing me more tonight?

MARY

You may go to bed.

ELISE

Thank you.

MARY

Elise?

ELISE

Miss?

MARY

Are you certain he'll live?

Lights shift to PERCY's bedroom, reading a letter.
HARRIET, his wife, appears elsewhere on stage.

HARRIET

Dear Mr. Shelley –

I am writing to you to inform you of the events transpiring at your home, even though that home exists in name only.

I am with child. You may expect an addition to your family in the next few months. I confess that I am ambivalent about this newest creature, as you have shown precious little interest in the prior two. Should you wish to fulfill your husband's duties, I reside in the same house, in the same location, with the same crumbling roof. Your father, who I believe enjoys our current poverty, has declined all my entreaties for assistance. Soon I will be begging in the streets, which I suppose is a fitting place for the family of a great nobleman.

The weather remains miserable. Rain and gloom. There has not been a warm sunny day all season. There is a profusion of toadstools behind the cottage house – I have not seen their like before. There are days when I hope they are filled with poison, and I might take some measure of peace by ingesting them. I would do it, except that there are small children whom I love deeply that I would then leave without a father or a mother, seeing as how you are so unfit for the role.

I imagine you sometimes. Wherever you might be in Europe, with that slut and the other one. I hear she has borne you children as well, and the first one died not long after being born. Please send her my sympathies on the death of her child, and I hope that this newest one is a delight to you as your legitimate progeny are so disgusting to you.

I have included a lock of Charles' hair so that you might remember him. If you do not, no matter. We shall be of no consequence soon.

Your wife,
Harriet Shelley.

Mary enters. Percy puts the letter away.

MARY

I thought I might find you asleep.

PERCY

I had thought to begin my ghost story. I confess I'm a little traumatized by the entire ordeal.

MARY

Perhaps it's best to write it during the daylight and read it at night.

PERCY

Perhaps. Did you fall asleep in the nursery again?

MARY

For a moment.

PERCY

I missed you the other night.

MARY

You should sleep as well. You're not immortal. Not yet anyway.

She kisses him.

PERCY

I… uh… Harriet sent a letter.

MARY

No wonder you can't sleep. What bile is she spewing?

PERCY

She's pregnant.

MARY

Why is that a concern of yours?

PERCY

It may be… a concern.

MARY

In what sense?

No response.

In what sense?

PERCY

Mary. Where we were… in London… before we left for France… I saw her.

MARY

You saw her.

PERCY

I wished to see my children and… I have never lied to you, I do not subscribe to the antiquated notion that -

MARY

Spare me the damn speech! You were with her in London?

PERCY

I should explain.

MARY

You were with her in London. When?

PERCY

I suppose it would have been February.

MARY

February. When I was as round as a boulder with William. Then. That is when you saw her.

PERCY

Yes.

MARY

When I could scarcely move –

PERCY

I am sorry.

MARY

I thought you didn't wish to lie to me.

PERCY

I am truly sorry, I had no intention of –

MARY

You are not sorry! You have no conception of what that word means! Damn it! Truly?! You ran off with your wife when I was –

PERCY

You make it sound sordid – `I *ran* off with' –

MARY

Quite right. That is what you did with me. You ran off with me. And Claire. And you somehow seem to keep running back to that bitch. Make up your damn mind.

PERCY

Why?

MARY

--

PERCY

I have never been false to you. I don't hold a monopoly on your love, and you don't hold a monopoly of mine – free love is what –

MARY

It is never free for the woman. It's your freedom you wish. As if I were your jailor.

PERCY

That is precisely what I do not want. An exclusive arrangement is a transactional arrangement. You give me this, I give you that. It sows discord and resentment.

MARY

You're doing a fine job sowing discord and resentment right now!

PERCY

Mary -

MARY

You shit-tongued bastard. I was about to give birth to your son! Is it too much to expect that you keep yourself sheathed for a week or two?!

PERCY

Listen to yourself, you're being ridiculous –

MARY

And how are you so certain that this brat is yours?! Or that it even exists and is not some additional desperate ploy to force your return?

PERCY

I don't know -

MARY

Will you go to her now?

Skipping Forward

PERCY

You will.

MARY

Do not change the subject.

PERCY

What more do you want? I have apologized. I have submitted myself to you – I shall see her if you wish it, I won't go if you don't.

MARY

I told you what I wanted –

PERCY

And I cannot do it. Perhaps you are right – this child is not mine –

MARY

It doesn't matter, don't you understand that? If you are married to her, the child is yours. She has your name. I don't. William doesn't.

PERCY

I have explained my position –

MARY

I don't care about your *position*! I am telling you the truth. If the consumption comes back, and you are gone from us, we will be in the same position as Harriet. Is that what you want from every woman in your life?

PERCY

No. No it is not.

MARY

Then fix it.

He holds her.

MARY

I dreamt of our daughter last night.

PERCY

MARY

She would be nearly two now. Now a cold thing. Like the way a bird's corpse is so light it feels like a shadow. So still. We should have named her, Percy.

PERCY

I know.

MARY

Some writers we are. Not even one word for our daughter. There is nothing on her gravestone.

PERCY

We could name her now.

MARY

And what would be the point of that other to assuage our guilt at her death?

PERCY

Her death was not your fault.

MARY

Wasn't it?

Lights change to the central room.
Night.
They have gathered. JOHN is reading his story.

JOHN

Monsieur Le Comte waited in the room.

JOHN inhabits MONSEIUR LE COMTE.
MONSIEUR LE COMTE enters, frantic.

He heard the noises outside.

Scratching noise.

Scratch. Scratch.

LORD BYRON

Is it a cat?

CLAIRE

Shhh!

LORD BYRON

That sounds like a cat. Perhaps a large cat.

JOHN

It is not a cat.

Back to reading.

There were many heavy things on his heart that day.

LORD BYRON

Such as stones?

JOHN

Lord Byron –

LORD BYRON

I am sorry. With prose I am forced to take things literally. It's a curse. Does this get interesting soon?

JOHN

I assure you it does. Quite interesting.

LORD BYRON

Excellent. Can you wake me when that part of the story arrives?

JOHN

He had been a cruel man. And now – as he waited for news of his latest conquest, the noise again.

Scratch.

The SKULL-HEADED WOMAN enters, robed.

And as he turned, he saw a shadow pass over the keyhole.

The SKULL-HEADED WOMAN looks in.

JOHN and SKULL-HEADED WOMAN

Monsieur Le Comte. Monsieur Le Comte!

LORD BYRON

Oh! She appears to know his name. Surprising.

JOHN

It was indeed a woman. Or a semblance of a woman. For instead of a head, she had upon her shoulders…

JOHN inhabits the Skull-headed woman.

the SKULL-HEADED WOMAN throws off her shawl revealing a skull.

A skull!

Pause. No reaction from the audience.

MARY

Is something about to happen?

JOHN

That's all I've got so far. I can't quite figure out what the skull-headed woman is doing.

LORD BYRON

John, you are a physician. Be glad of it. For you have no future in letters.

CLAIRE

I quite liked it.

PERCY

Which story were you listening to?

CLAIRE

I think it's interesting. She has a skull for a head. Most people wouldn't think of that.

LORD BYRON

Everyone has a skull for a head! It's what our heads are composed of!

CLAIRE

You know what I mean.

LORD BYRON

No, my dear. I do not know what you mean. Because my ears heard something along the lines of "this was interesting" which could not possibly be true, as the story had no beginning, less middle, and an ending that resolved no questions other than whether or not John would ever be a writer.

JOHN

Very well. I admit defeat. I attempted to come up with something original and –

LORD BYRON

Failed utterly.

JOHN

I would not put it so bluntly –

LORD BYRON

John. If there is one thing you are good at, it's being blunt. Embrace that about yourself. The story failed. You failed.

JOHN

I suppose I did Lord Byron. I do not share your talents. But let's not be cruel about it, shall we?

LORD BRYON

Life is too short to forgo cruelty.
Your turn, Shelley.

PERCY

I need another day. Surely, you've written something Lord Byron?

LORD BYRON

I have. But let us hear what Mary has first.

MARY

I have no story yet.

LORD BYRON

Yet.

MARY

Yet.

LORD BYRON

I'll read mine then. This is, admittedly, a fragment.

CLAIRE

You weren't able to finish it in a night?

LORD BYRON

My dear I have many gifts. But finishing early is not one of them.

He begins his story.

A MAN is writing a letter. Byron inhabits him, but the MAN does not speak his lines this time.

My Dearest Catherine –

It is with amazement and trepidation that I must write to you. I must recount my tale, and such as you must, with all your heart, believe my words, for I fear that they will appear impossible and strange to you. I have no wish to frighten you, but the world is darker and wilder than it seems, and if this letter gives you some weaponry to use against the cruel forces of the world, then I will have acquitted myself admirably.

His name was Augustus Darvell. Or is. For in truth, I do not know if the man in question is alive or dead, or if those categories hold any meaning for him. He was dead when I knew him, and is alive now.

AUGUSTUS enters.

LORD BYRON inhabits AUGUSTUS.

AUGUSTUS and LORD BYRON

I require your companionship.

MAN and LORD BYRON

You do?

AUGUSTUS and LORD BYRON

I am sailing home to Bulgaria. It is a long and terrible journey. I need a young man to assist me on my way.

LORD BYRON

I accepted the charge, but when he spoke…

Thunder

I felt a chill in my blood. This man, Augustus, was not –

AUGUSTUS and LORD BYRON

Are you frightened?

Skipping Forward

Baby crying.
MARY gets up, a little shaky, heads for the nursery.
Elise. William –
She enters the nursery.
Willmouse. Where's Willmouse? It's all right.
She takes up the baby, holds him. The baby still cries.
Shhh… Shhhh… Mama's here Willmouse. Mama's here.
She rocks him. No use.

ELISE enters.

ELISE
Very sorry Ma'am. I fell asleep. Very sorry.
MARY hands the baby over to ELISE.
He sounds hungry.

MARY
I thought he might be scared.

ELISE
That's a different sort of crying.
ELISE settles in to nurse him.
Again I'm so sorry.

MARY
No it's quite all right.
WILLIAM quiets.
I was less than successful this evening. Trying to… you know… the muse is fickle… I shan't bore you with it. Once more into the breach.
MARY starts to leave, stops.
Might I stay?

ELISE
Of course. He'll be asleep soon.

MARY
Yes I imagine he will.

ELISE
The storm is terrible tonight.

MARY
Yes.

ELISE
Are you all right, Mary?

MARY

Hmm… yes.

ELISE

You seem…

MARY

It is late.

ELISE

It is.

MARY

I shouldn't hound you. I heard him crying… so…

ELISE

Of course.

MARY

My other baby I nursed myself. So… with William we thought we ought to do it differently – of course it is difficult to travel with one so young, as Percy and I have done. Still, when I hear his wails I… it pains me not to be able to remedy the situation. Of course perhaps it was my milk that was at issue with our daughter, so…

ELISE

I'm sure that wasn't it.

MARY

I wish I shared your certainty.

ELISE

Sometimes they die. The way of the world and all that. No one can change it but God.

MARY

ELISE

Of course I know you're one of those atheists.

MARY

I am. We are.

ELISE

Where do they go, then, I wonder? If there's no God and no Heaven? Your little baby, what was her name?

MARY

Hmm?

ELISE

The one that died.

MARY

I didn't name her. She was very… she was very small… the midwife said she'd never seen one so small – she was – red and grasping, eyes shut tight, her hands enclosed around my finger like a watery tendril – I didn't – no one thought she would survive long. So I gave her no name.

ELISE

Did she live long?

MARY

ELISE

Madame?

MARY

Three weeks. More. Three and a half. If there were a God, I suppose he would know… what she would be called. I fancy myself a writer. My husb- Percy is a great poet, and yet we had no words sufficient for our baby.

ELISE

This one's got a name.

MARY

He does. He has one. It's important. Vital, really, to give names to things. But I – I suppose I didn't want to name my impending sorrow, so I hoped that to not speak its way name would somehow inure me from it. It did not, of course. Grief comes whether you give a name to it or not. I had begun to hope, you know, I began without hope that she would live, but little by little I began to conceive of a future in which she lived, a future in which the three of us were a family – I had declared that if she lived a month I would name her. Perhaps my hope was what called down the fates. She died in the night. Went cold. And I was no longer a mother. I lost that name as well.

ELISE

That was Adam's job, you know. To give names to things. But I suppose you don't believe in him neither.

MARY

No.

ELISE

Sad to have so little to believe in.

MARY

I believe in quite a lot. Freedom. Science. The primacy of the human intellect.

ELISE

But when you look at a baby, don't you want to believe in God?

MARY

What I want has precious little bearing on what is.

ELISE

Do you really think there's no plan for this one? His little soul – if he died now – there'd be nothing, no evidence he ever existed, like a stump or a stone.

MARY

He'll live.

ELISE

He might. I had a boy. Not much older than this one. Strong as a bull. Sometimes they don't wake up, even when you think they must. He's in Heaven with God now. I asked the priest what happens to the babies in heaven. Are they babies forever, or do they grow up there? And if he grows up, how will I recognize him when I die? I suppose I'd like him to wait for me. But then again, what do those babies in heaven do without their mothers?

If I had one wish for heaven, it would be for him to be a baby when I get there. So I can be his mother again. Teach him. Watch him grow up. Maybe God will let me do that.

MARY

Maybe He will.

ELISE

I suppose you're just saying that. Well your science isn't much use to the dead now, is it?

MARY

I don't suppose God is much use either.

ELISE

Some day… some day we'll live again. Science can't do that.

MARY

Not yet. But what man can learn is a daily revelation. I have attended lectures in London of natural philosophy where it appears they are near to solving the mystery of life. Whence does it originate? How might it be rekindled?

ELISE

Impossible.

MARY

I have seen it. A dead arm, immobile in all aspects, with an electric current run through it, animates, as if possessed by life, only for a moment before going dead once again.

ELISE

Might a person be brought back that way?

MARY

Perhaps.

ELISE

But if there's no soul, then what would come back?

Lights change.

End of Excerpt.
To purchase this play or read it in its entirety, visit www.yourstagepartners.com