

ACT FOUR

Scene One

A hot, late-summer's day. GODWIN's study. Skinner Street. Sun is pouring through the windows. GODWIN enters. He has been out, and is very hot and exhausted. He sits down and puts down the newspaper he is carrying. He loosens his collar, wipes the sweat from his brow. FANNY hurries in.

FANNY. Papa?

GODWIN. This summer seems to be going on forever.

FANNY. Are you unwell?

GODWIN. A little, perhaps.

FANNY *pours him a glass of water from a carafe.*

Thank you.

It seems I am a radical designed for moderate climates.

FANNY *waits until he has recovered a little.*

FANNY. Did you see my aunts?

GODWIN. Yes. We had an hour together.

FANNY. Are they going to come here?

GODWIN. Sit down, Fanny.

She does so. She stares at him, expectantly.

Fanny... your aunts are no longer prepared to have you at the school in Dublin.

FANNY. Why?

GODWIN. I'm sure you can imagine why. They read the newspapers like everybody else. They have read about your sisters' latest exploits with Lord Byron in Switzerland. They are very angry. They believe, with some justification, that the family connection is damaging their school's reputation.

FANNY. But surely they don't believe those reports? You don't believe them?

GODWIN. I don't know what to believe.

FANNY. I have had several letters from Mary. They have made Lord Byron's acquaintance – that much is true. They happen to have taken villas close to each other. It would be strange if they had not become friends. But anything else is simply scurrilous gossip. The newspapers will say anything about Lord Byron...

GODWIN. And about Shelley. And about your sisters, it appears. (*Taking up the newspaper.*) There is another tale in here today. A gentleman has returned from travelling in the Alps, to say that 'he saw Lord Byron being rowed across a lake in Geneva, dressed in flowing robes, like a latter-day Caesar, and with those two wicked women dancing attendance upon him.' They do not give your sisters' names. They content themselves with saying that they are my daughters – 'daughters of the infamous radical, William Godwin.'

FANNY. But it's nonsense. It must be. They probably simply went for a row on the lake. People see what they want to see.

GODWIN. Your aunts have accepted that Mary has entered into a liaison, albeit unconventional, with Shelley. They seem more concerned about Jane. Her position is certainly more spurious. They wanted an assurance that I would never allow Jane to return to this house.

FANNY. But why would Jane return here? Even if she does, it won't be for months – years perhaps.

GODWIN. On the contrary, I think they will return to England in the very near future. According to my lawyer, Shelley is being urgently petitioned to return. He needs to be here to conclude the dealings with his father. It was madness for them to leave when they did. If Jane were to ask to return here, I would not be able to refuse her. For Mrs Godwin's sake.

Pause.

Your aunts' is not the only school. We could consider placing you elsewhere.

FANNY. Where? Who would have me?

GODWIN. I will make enquiries. Please give it some consideration.

FANNY. I know I must find the means to pay my way. As Mama says, you cannot support me forever.

GODWIN. I will support you for as long as it takes.

Now. Shall we have some tea?

FANNY *stands*.

New dress, is it?

FANNY. It's one of Mary's old ones. I wanted to look tidy – for my aunts.

GODWIN. It looks very well on you.

FANNY. It suited Mary better.

Scene Two

Two months later. The drawing room of SHELLEY's house in Bath. It is a bright, airy room, filled with fine furniture. MARY is sitting at a desk, writing.

SHELLEY (*off*). Mary!

MARY. Here!

SHELLEY rushes in.

SHELLEY. Mary...

MARY. You're back. And sooner than I'd hoped.

SHELLEY (*kissing her*). Hello, my darling.

MARY. How did you fare? What did the lawyer say?

SHELLEY. I'll tell you all about it soon. But first I have a surprise for you. Close your eyes.

MARY. What sort of a surprise?

SHELLEY. Close your eyes. Something I found on the street.

MARY *closes her eyes*. SHELLEY *beckons to FANNY to enter*. She does so. She is dressed for travelling and carries a small bag.

MARY. Oh, no. It's not a dog, or a cat, is it? We can't...

SHELLEY. Open them.

MARY *opens her eyes and sees FANNY*.

MARY. Fanny! Fanny...

FANNY. Hello, Mary dear.

MARY *rushes to her and they embrace*.

MARY. My darling, darling girl. But what are you doing in Bath?

FANNY. I hope you don't mind. You said I should come and visit.

MARY. How did you get here?

FANNY. The stagecoach. I travelled overnight. It's not so very far from London.

SHELLEY. I was on my way home in the carriage, and I saw this figure standing in the square by the Pump House, looking about as though she had landed on a distant planet. And then I thought – that's a very familiar figure.

FANNY. I would have found the right street eventually.

MARY. My dear girl. Sit down, you must be exhausted.

SHELLEY. If only I'd known – you could have travelled with me.

FANNY. I didn't know you were in London.

MARY. He's there far too often at the moment.

FANNY. Where's the new baby? I'm longing to see him.

MARY. He's asleep. We can't wake him. Nurse would be livid. It took her an age to get him down. He hates to sleep.

SHELLEY. You shall see him as soon as he's awake. He's beautiful.

MARY. He looks like his father.

SHELLEY. Like his mother.

MARY. We call him Wilmouse. Did I tell you that in my letter?

FANNY. No.

SHELLEY. He's a soft, downy, curious creature.

MARY. You'll adore him. And he'll adore you.

FANNY. And he's well? Quite well?

MARY. Yes. He is.

FANNY. I'm so glad for you.

MARY *takes her hand.*

MARY. I can't believe you're real.

FANNY. What a lovely house this is.

SHELLEY. We were lucky to find it at short notice. We've taken it for three months.

MARY. We have servants, can you believe it?

SHELLEY. Well-paid servants, I should add, who have two days off a week.

FANNY. Of course.

MARY. And we brought William's nurse with us from Switzerland. And I'm managing to get lots of work done.

SHELLEY. Mary's writing a novel.

FANNY. Good.

SHELLEY. It's exceptional. It's going to astonish the world.

MARY. There's still a lot of work to do.

SHELLEY. And I'm writing another poem. It's almost finished.

FANNY. I'm glad you're both writing. It's what you ought to do.

So you don't mean to stay in Bath for long?

MARY. No. We shall go back to Geneva as soon as we can. We love it there.

FANNY. Yes. Your letters have been making me quite jealous.

SHELLEY. A few more meetings with the lawyers and we shall be gone. I hope your father got the cheque I sent to him last week?

FANNY. Yes. He did. Thank you.

SHELLEY. Once things have been properly settled, I will be able to give him a more substantial sum.

FANNY. I'm afraid he couldn't cash the cheque.

SHELLEY. Oh?

FANNY. You... made it out to him. His name. Perhaps you've forgotten – he can't be seen to be accepting money from you. Not with...

SHELLEY. Ah.

FANNY. If you could make a cheque out to his lawyer, then he...

SHELLEY. Yes. Of course.

MARY. So much for honest transactions.

FANNY. I'm sorry. We do really need the money...

SHELLEY. I shall send a cheque to his lawyer.

FANNY. Thank you.

MARY. So how are things at Skinner Street?

FANNY. I don't want to talk about Skinner Street. Not now. If you don't mind?

How's Jane? Where is she?

MARY and SHELLEY glance at each other.

SHELLEY. I... think...

MARY. She's lying down.

SHELLEY. I'll go and fetch her, shall I, Mary?

MARY. Yes. She'll want to know that Fanny's here.

SHELLEY. And I'll look in on William. I'll make as much noise as I can.

He leaves.

FANNY. It's wonderful to see you so happy.

MARY. There's something I should tell you about Claire – Jane. She's having a baby. That's partly why we came to Bath and not to London. No one must know. Not yet, at least.

FANNY. You aren't serious?

MARY. There's no need for anyone to make a fuss about it. It's perfectly natural.

FANNY. Whose is it? Is it his? Is it Shelley's?

MARY. Shelley's? No. Why on earth would you say that? The father is...

FANNY. Is it Lord Byron?

MARY. Yes.

FANNY. Oh, my God...

MARY. It was... unexpected. But it has happened. It's happening. We're glad. Another addition to our family.

FANNY. When... will it be born?

MARY. Around Christmas time, we think.

She met Lord Byron in London. Before we even went to Geneva. I don't know what possessed her – well, I do. She wrote to him at Drury Lane. His play was being performed there. She said she wanted to become an actress – as though she isn't an actress already. She begged him to help her. She went to see him. Met him in one of the dressing rooms. Anyway... she introduced us to him. He adores Shelley, as you can imagine. They argue – but they love to argue. When Byron said he was going to Geneva, we decided to go too. We had been planning to go abroad.

It's sad, in a way. When he found out about the baby, he was horrified. He doesn't care for Claire. He doesn't even like her. He treats her with contempt. Plays tricks on her. Makes her a fool.

JANE *enters*.

JANE. Fanny! Dearest sister! What a wonderful surprise.

FANNY. Hello...

JANE. And now you know my surprise. Isn't it thrilling? Has Mary told you who the father is?

FANNY. Yes.

JANE. You see – she has her poet and now I have mine. Isn't it funny? And mine is the most notorious poet in the whole world! But you mustn't tell Mama. Or Papa. We shall tell them when the time is right. Shan't we, Mary? How is Mama? As dreadful as ever, I suppose?

FANNY. I... I don't know.

JANE. You don't know? Haven't you come from Skinner Street?

FANNY (*standing*). I think I should go.

JANE. Go? But...

MARY. Don't be silly, Fanny. Sit down.

FANNY. I... There's a coach on the hour. I should be able to catch it if I leave now.

JANE. But you've only just arrived.

FANNY. Yes. But... it was a mistake... for me to come.

JANE. Why? Fanny...?

MARY. Let her go. She clearly can't bear to spend another moment in this house of iniquity.

FANNY. That isn't what...

MARY. Yes, it is. She has spent too long with Mrs Godwin.

FANNY. I'm not judging you.

MARY. Yes you are. You're judging Jane and you're judging me. You always have done.

JANE. Really, Fanny. Surely you're not so 'worldly' that you object to having babies out of wedlock? You were born out of wedlock. Or have you forgotten that?

FANNY. That's not what...

MARY. What then? Just say it. Say what it is you wish to say.

FANNY. I just wish you would... think about others a little before you act. Think about the effect on others.

FANNY *has tears in her eyes*. MARY *can see her distress*.

JANE. We can't spend all our lives thinking about everybody else! In my opinion, the greatest sin in this world is sitting around your whole life and waiting for things to happen. Far too many women do that. Waiting, waiting, hour after hour and day after day.

FANNY. And that's what you think I do, I suppose?

JANE. Yes. Yes, I do.

FANNY. You don't think I have dreams and ambitions like you do? You don't think I want to walk in the sunlight, and write or... paint, or...

JANE. Well, it doesn't seem so. Because you don't do anything.

MARY. Don't, Jane. That's enough.

JANE. You're too busy running about, doing as you're told, trying to keep everyone happy, happy, happy. Well, life isn't like that.

FANNY *stares down at the floor*.

MARY. Please sit down, Fanny. At least stay tonight. Stay and meet William.

JANE. You're Mary Wollstonecraft's daughter. Doesn't that mean anything to you?

FANNY. It means a great deal.

MARY. Fanny...

JANE. Well, she wouldn't look down her nose at us. She wouldn't judge us. She'd be proud of the way we're living. Wouldn't she, Mary?

SHELLEY *enters. He looks at them all with bewildered concern*.

FANNY. I think I should go.

She takes up her bag and leaves the room.

Scene Three

A street, Bath. FANNY and SHELLEY arrive at the place where the coach stops.

SHELLEY. Ten minutes to spare.

FANNY. Thank you for walking with me. You should go back now.

SHELLEY. No. I'll wait for the coach.

FANNY. I'd rather be alone. Please.

SHELLEY. I'm not going to leave you like this.

FANNY. I'm not fit company. For anyone.

SHELLEY. Fanny. Fanny, this is madness. Why don't you come and live with us? Come back to Geneva with us. Whole new worlds, new vistas would open up to you. You don't realise... I don't think you realise how trapped you are.

FANNY. Oh, I do.

SHELLEY. Then come to us. Leave Godwin and come to us.

Pause.

FANNY. In here – (*Shows him her bag.*) I have a nightdress, and a hairbrush and a change of clothes. I wanted to stay.

SHELLEY. Then stay.

FANNY. In all my letters to Geneva, I tried to make it clear... how much I wanted to come to you, to be with you all. It frightened me a little, the thought of it, but I decided to put my fears aside. And every time Mary wrote to me I would hope, hope to see those words – 'come to us'.

SHELLEY. And I'm saying them now. Dear Fanny, come to us.

FANNY. I can't. Even if I thought that Mary wanted it, I can't come to you. I can't live the way you live. I realise that now. Because I don't think it's right. There. I've said it. You can put me in a box with the reactionaries and the cowards and push us out to sea. People get hurt. Children get hurt. Children grow up feeling unloved, unvalued. Out of place.

SHELLEY. William won't feel unloved.

FANNY. I know that...

SHELLEY. I will love and care for all my children. I've asked Harriet for custody of our son.

FANNY. And what of Ianthe? Have you asked for her?

SHELLEY. I...

FANNY. And why should Harriet have to give up her child?

SHELLEY. I ask her, repeatedly, to come and join us...

FANNY. This isn't... I'm not judging you. I just know that I cannot live as you live. I want you all to be happy.

SHELLEY. We only have one life, Fanny. We must make use of every second. The powers that be – the rich, the government, society – they do everything they can to close us down, to shackle us... We have to live bravely. We have to strive towards enlightenment. You have so much to offer to the world...

FANNY. Don't. Please. I can't bear any more.

SHELLEY. Fanny...

FANNY. I'm tired. Will you go now? Please?

SHELLEY. What if I went to sit on those steps over there...?

FANNY. No.

SHELLEY resigns himself to leaving.

SHELLEY. I'll write to you.

FANNY nods.

He kisses her hand. He leaves. FANNY remains, staring at the ground, for some time. Then she suddenly picks up her bag, and walks away into the streets.

Scene Four

Bath. MARY dreams of FANNY. FANNY is climbing onto the edge of a bridge over a river – just as her mother did. She jumps. She is overwhelmed by the water.

MARY (*calling out*). Give me your hand! I'm here! Reach out to me! Reach out to me!

Scene Five

A room at an inn in Swansea. Night. A MAID, carrying a candle, shows FANNY into the room. FANNY takes in the simple bed, the small table beside it. She puts her bag down.

MAID. Will there be anything else, miss?

FANNY. No, thank you. I shall see to the candle myself.

MAID (*handing her the candle*). I'll bid you goodnight then, miss.

FANNY *hands the MAID a coin.*

Oh. Thank you, miss.

FANNY. Goodnight.

The MAID leaves. FANNY stands still.

In GODWIN's study at Skinner Street, GODWIN is trying to immerse himself in Shakespeare. MRS GODWIN rushes in. She is holding a letter in her hand.

MRS GODWIN. A letter from Fanny.

GODWIN. Are you sure?

He jumps up and takes the letter.

Thank heavens.

He opens it.

MRS GODWIN. Posted in Bristol.

GODWIN. Then she isn't with them.

MRS GODWIN. What is she doing in Bristol? Do we know anyone in Bristol?

GODWIN *is reading the letter. His legs almost give way beneath him.*

What is it? What does it say?

GODWIN. No. No.

In the room at the inn, FANNY places the candle on the small table. She sits down on the bed. She takes off her hat and her jacket, and places them neatly on the end of the bed. She unpins her hair and lets it down.

In the drawing room in Bath, MARY opens a letter from FANNY. She gasps. SHELLEY enters and goes to her.

SHELLEY. Mary?

MARY. Oh, my God. Oh, my God...

He takes the letter from her and reads.

SHELLEY. I'll leave at once.

MARY. I'm coming with you.

SHELLEY. No. It will take too long in the carriage. I'll ride. Help me get my things together.

He rushes to the door. MARY is rooted to the spot.

Mary!

She goes after him.

In the room at the inn, FANNY opens her bag and takes out a bottle of laudanum. She puts it in her lap. Then she takes out a folded note, and opening it out, reads it quietly.

FANNY. 'I have long determined that the best thing I could do was to put an end to the existence of a being whose birth was unfortunate, and whose life has only been a series of pain to those persons who have hurt their health in endeavouring to promote her welfare. Perhaps to hear of my death will give you pain, but you will soon have the blessing of forgetting that such a creature ever existed as Fanny.'

She stares at the note for a moment, then folds it again, and places it on the table. Then she takes up the bottle of laudanum, opens it, and drinks from it, in longer and longer draughts.

She puts it on the table. She blows out the candle. She lies down on the bed, and closes her eyes.

Scene Six

Day. The inn at Swansea. The MAID leads SHELLEY to the bedroom.

MAID. This is the room, sir. The coroner said he would take the body to the poor house if we needed it, but we didn't like to send her there. She seemed a very sweet lady.

SHELLEY. Can we go in?

The MAID leads him into the room. FANNY's body is on the bed. SHELLEY stares at her.

MAID. Do you know her, sir? Is she the one you're looking for?

SHELLEY picks up the note from the table, and reads it.

SHELLEY. Who else has seen this note?

MAID. The coroner. The man from the newspaper.

SHELLEY tears off the name from it.

Sir – the coroner said we should leave things just as they are until he comes back...

SHELLEY gives her a sovereign.

SHELLEY. I don't want anyone else to know this name.

MAID. But it'll be in the paper tomorrow most likely.

SHELLEY. I'll speak to the paper. And to the coroner.

MAID. Yes, sir. No use in adding to her shame. You know her then? I don't mean to speak out of turn, sir, but if you do, you should claim her body. Else it'll be a pauper's grave. And she'll not be long in the ground before the robbers come. They always take the ones who no one misses.

SHELLEY touches FANNY's face. Then he hurries from the room.

Scene Seven

The parlour. Skinner Street. MRS GODWIN accompanies GODWIN into the room. GODWIN has just arrived home. He is ashen-faced and exhausted. He slumps into a chair. He looks up at MRS GODWIN, and shakes his head.

GODWIN. Too late.

I got to Bristol and made enquiries. But she'd already left. She'd gone on to Swansea. She went there with her aunts once, do you remember?

MRS GODWIN. Yes.

GODWIN. I was going to follow her, but then someone came in on the coach from Swansea with a newspaper. It said the body of a fair-haired young woman had been found.

She'd left a note. There was no name.

MRS GODWIN (*upset*). The stupid girl. Why would she do such a thing?

GODWIN. I must write to Mary and Shelley.

MRS GODWIN (*surprised*). Write to them?

GODWIN. Yes. I must tell them not to go to Swansea. If this gets out... the scandal would be catastrophic. We must all stay away from Swansea.

How I wish... she had told me... how she was feeling.

MRS GODWIN. She was her mother's daughter. It was in the blood.

GODWIN. She was a dear... dear girl. Fanny.

He breaks down in tears. MRS GODWIN kneels beside him and holds him.

MRS GODWIN. Oh, Mr Godwin. Don't. Oh, my poor, poor love. My poor love.

In Bath, MARY is waiting, with the baby in her arms. JANE is standing close by. SHELLEY enters and walks towards MARY. He puts his arms around her. JANE begins to cry.

SHELLEY. She was buried in a churchyard. It's a peaceful spot. It was the least that I could do for her.

JANE comes to them and puts her arms around them as best she can. They are locked in grief.

End of Act Four.