

ACT ONE

Scene One

March 1814. The mouth of the Thames. MARY is standing alone on the deck of a ship. There is a book in her hands.

MARY (*reading*). ‘Her first thought had led her to Battersea Bridge, but she found it too public. It was night when she arrived at Putney, and by that time it had begun to rain with great violence. The rain suggested to her the idea of walking up and down the bridge until her clothes were thoroughly drenched and heavy with the wet.’

We are plunged into MARY’s imagination. Darkness. Rain lashes down.

We see a woman – MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT – holding out her arms to the elements, drenching herself. Then she climbs onto the edge of the bridge and jumps into the water. We hear the sound of the water pounding in her ears, see her struggle to stay under, groaning and wailing with frustration. Finally she becomes senseless, giving herself to the water.

Mother...

Scene Two

A wharf. London docks. MARY has disembarked and stands on the quay. It is noisy and crowded. People hurry past her. A SAILOR puts her trunk down next to her. She gives him a penny and he leaves.

FANNY approaches her through the crowd.

FANNY. Mary! Mary!

MARY. Fanny!

FANNY *rushes to her. They embrace.*

FANNY. Oh, Mary. You're home. You're home at last.

MARY. Are you alone? Father wrote that he would come.

FANNY. He wanted to, indeed he did. But he got called to a meeting with some lawyers and...

MARY. Lawyers?

FANNY. Don't worry. But how cold you are. Why didn't you stay below?

MARY. Oh, you know I can't bear to be below. It makes me feel sicker than ever. And besides, I was reading this – (*Holds out the book.*) and I wanted to read it with water churning beneath me and a wild wind banging in my ears.

FANNY. What is it?

MARY. Fanny... it's Father's memoir of our mother. And I cannot tell you what a revelation it has been.

FANNY. Mary...

MARY. I've read it over and over. I feel as if I know her and love her a hundred times better than I did before. I feel as if she could be standing here right now, and I would slip my arm through hers and kiss her cheek quite naturally, for she is real to me.

FANNY. Where did you get this?

MARY. Did you know that our mother tried to kill herself? It was after your father left her. She was so desperate, broken. She threw herself into the river. This river.

FANNY. Hush.

It's against the law, Mary.

MARY. Did you know? Did you?

FANNY. I thought something like that had happened. Yes.

MARY. When I first read it, I was sitting alone on a beach in Scotland, with the waves coming towards me and coming towards me. I almost knew what was going to happen before

I saw the words. They're Father's words, so they are quite measured and restrained, but I could imagine it all beneath the lines – her agony, her desire to have it all stop. I almost wished the waters had taken her, for that is what she truly wanted, but then, if they had, I would not be here upon this earth – whatever this earth might be.

FANNY. Where did you get this from?

MARY. It was on Father's shelves. He said I could take whatever I liked before I left.

FANNY. But he didn't mean this.

MARY. Why not? It's a published work. Hundreds of people have read it. He wouldn't want to hide the truth from us. Truth is omnipotent.

FANNY. Truth. I sometimes think our family speaks a great deal too much truth. I wish we could be like normal people, and keep our thoughts to ourselves.

MARY. But that would be cowardly.

Are we not normal people then?

FANNY. You know we aren't.

MARY. Oh, don't be cross, Fanny. This is a precious discovery. I mean to read it to you.

FANNY. No.

MARY. Yes. We'll read a little every night. Our mother would have wanted that. I know she would.

FANNY (*gazing at the book*). 'Your real mother was only too ready to leave you behind.'

That's what Mama said. 'Your real mother didn't even think of you when she tried to end it all.'

MARY. She said that? When? How dare she say that to you?

FANNY. It doesn't matter. I didn't tell you so you would be cross with Mama.

MARY. Don't call her Mama. She's not our mama. She's just the dreadful creature who my father has the misfortune to be married to.

FANNY. Mary...

MARY. Your real mother did think about you. She must have felt that you would be better off being raised by others. She was so wretched.

FANNY. Perhaps.

MARY. Our poor mother. You could not cheer her with all your sweetness, and I... I was the cause of her death.

FANNY. Please don't make trouble with Mama – I mean, with Mrs Godwin – when we get home. You won't, will you?

MARY. No. I won't. I have come home determined to rise above the dreadful Mrs Godwin. I intend to remain completely aloof.

How are things at Skinner Street? How is dear Papa?

FANNY. He is very much occupied, but in reasonably good spirits.

MARY. And have you been lonely, with everyone away?

FANNY. I haven't had time. Mama has started another translation, so there's been a great deal of copying to do. And I've been writing letters for Papa and running errands and minding the shop. Jane arrived home from school two days ago. She was going to come with me to meet you, but then she discovered I was walking here and...

MARY. That's so like her.

FANNY. We shall get a chaise back, of course. Papa put some money by.

And we have some new friends.

MARY. Do we?

FANNY. Do you remember a young man – one of Papa's disciples – who wrote him all those elaborate letters that he used to read out to us?

MARY. Do you mean the man called Shelley?

FANNY. Yes. Well, he's in London now. He talks and talks philosophy with Papa. He says *Political Justice* is his bible.

MARY. Isn't he a baronet or something of the sort?

FANNY. He's the heir to a baronetcy. His grandfather is Sir Bysshe Shelley of Sussex.

MARY. How grand.

FANNY. He wants to help us. He wants to invest in the bookshop.

MARY. Really?

FANNY. And he is quite... extraordinary.

MARY. In what way?

FANNY. He's... I don't know how to explain it... He's so vibrant. More vibrant than anyone I ever met. And he speaks to me so easily. I feel I could talk to him about anything.

MARY. Fanny Godwin... I do believe you are in love.

FANNY. I'm not. I'm not. He's married.

MARY. But that doesn't stop you from falling in love.

FANNY. His wife is... quite lovely. Quite a fine lady. But you shall see all this. Come now, my poor cold girl. Let's find a chaise and get you home.

Scene Three

The parlour. Skinner Street. A window looks out onto the street, and from outside the noise of a crowd can be heard.

MARY and FANNY set the trunk down. MRS GODWIN enters.

MRS GODWIN. Move that trunk out of the way, Mary. What makes you think we want that in the middle of the parlour?

MARY. I'm a little tired. I'll move it soon.

MRS GODWIN. You went away for your health, you shouldn't have come back tired.

MARY. I'm tired from the journey, that's all.

MRS GODWIN. Well, we're all tired. Now move it.

FANNY. I'll move it.

MARY. No, leave it, Fanny. I'll do it.

MRS GODWIN. Go and help Jane with the tea things, Fanny.

FANNY. Yes, Mama.

FANNY leaves. MRS GODWIN begins to set up a small table for tea. MARY moves the trunk.

MARY. Can't the maid see to the tea?

MRS GODWIN. The maid doesn't work today. She does three days now. We had less need of her with everyone away. Everyone has to do their bit, that's all.

(Calling.) Mr Godwin! Tea!

Charles is doing awfully well in Edinburgh.

MARY. Yes. He wrote to me.

MRS GODWIN. But you didn't see him, I suppose?

MARY. No.

MRS GODWIN. I would have thought you might want to visit your stepbrother, with him being so close.

MARY. It's quite some distance from Dundee to Edinburgh. We made do with letters.

MRS GODWIN. I don't know why he had to go so far away. There are plenty of apprenticeships to be had in London. Why go all the way to Scotland?

MARY. I can't imagine.

MRS GODWIN (calling). Mr Godwin! If you don't come out, we shall come in!

Every day.

MARY. There's really no need to disturb his work. I can see him at dinner.

JANE *enters*. MARY goes to the window and looks out.

JANE. Maman, Fanny wants to know if we should put all the sugar buns out?

MRS GODWIN. All of them? Of course not. One each. We're not elephants.

JANE *goes to the window*.

JANE. Gracious, what a crowd. I wonder who they're hanging?

MRS GODWIN (*to MARY*). And you left the Baxters tolerably well, I hope?

MARY. I'm sorry...?

MRS GODWIN. The Baxters. You left them tolerably well?

MARY. Yes. They were fine, thank you.

MRS GODWIN. Did they send their regards to me?

MARY. To my father and to you, yes.

MRS GODWIN. Oh. Then you should pass them on. Not leave me to prise them out of you.

(Calling.) Mr Godwin!

She leaves. JANE and MARY listen to the crowd passing by.

JANE. Isn't hanging the most awful thing? So primitive, don't you think, Mary? So utterly barbaric.

GODWIN *enters from the study*.

GODWIN. What is utterly barbaric?

MARY. Hanging.

GODWIN. Ah, yes. That would qualify.

MARY. Hello, Papa.

MARY *goes to him and kisses his cheek with great affection.*

GODWIN. Well, well. Hello to you too.

MRS GODWIN *enters, holding a tablecloth.*

MRS GODWIN. Finally, he emerges.

GODWIN. I'm sorry, Mrs Godwin, am I horribly late? Have I missed tea?

MRS GODWIN. No. But I should have thought you might want to come out sooner when your only daughter is back from a six-month visit.

GODWIN. Mary understands.

MARY. Of course I do.

GODWIN. And I had three daughters last time I looked.

MRS GODWIN. You know very well what I mean – the only one as is the fruit of your loins.

JANE. Maman, must you? Must you use such awful words?

MRS GODWIN. Oh, don't you start that.

JANE. What?

MRS GODWIN. You've been doing it all day – making out there's some sort of coarseness in me which you don't like to be associated with.

JANE. I've done nothing of the sort.

MRS GODWIN. A few weeks at boarding school and you think you can look down on me. Well, you can't.

JANE. But...

MRS GODWIN. I'm just as good as you – (*Pointing at MARY.*) and you, and I shan't be treated like this in my own home.

JANE. Maman, I didn't mean anything. Really...

MRS GODWIN. Loins is a perfectly respectable word. I'm sure it is in Mr Johnson's Dictionary. I'm sure everyone has loins. Do you have loins, Mr Godwin?

GODWIN. I'm rather afraid I do.

MRS GODWIN. There. And I'm sure most people would be happy to admit to it.

FANNY *enters, carrying a tray of tea things.*

FANNY. I didn't get an answer, Jane.

JANE. Oh, sorry, Fanny. I forgot.

MRS GODWIN. One each. One each.

FANNY. Good. That's what I thought.

MARY. We're not elephants.

FANNY *carries the tray to the table.*

MRS GODWIN. Bring your chair round, Mary. Don't just stand there.

JANE. Who are they hanging, Papa? Do you know?

GODWIN. A man called Bates. Theft of a gun.

FANNY. Shall I go down and sit in the shop?

MARY. No, Fanny.

MRS GODWIN. Oh, I've closed the shop. We shan't get any customers now with this going on. I always said this was a stupid place to open a children's bookshop. We're so close to the gallows we can almost hear the necks snap.

JANE. Maman!

MARY. At least we get passing trade.

MRS GODWIN. Oh, yes. I'm sure any number of these louts is likely to pop in for a copy of *Pilgrim's Progress*.

GODWIN. I don't remember you saying this was a stupid place to open a bookshop, Mrs Godwin.

MRS GODWIN. Well, that just shows how seldom you listen to me.

Oh, do come away and sit down, Jane. Let's all just sit down nicely and have tea, like normal people.

They sit together, and tea commences. In the street below, someone in the passing crowd is shouting, and there is a burst of laughter. GODWIN raises his teacup to MARY.

GODWIN. Welcome home, Mary.

MARY. Thank you.

JANE. Yes. Welcome home.

GODWIN. How was the dreaded voyage?

MARY. It passed quite quickly. And the weather was so beautiful this morning. I was on deck to see the sun rise.

GODWIN. You look well, at any rate. The Scottish air obviously agreed with you.

MARY. It did.

MRS GODWIN. She didn't see Charles.

GODWIN. And a new dress, eh?

MARY. Yes. Thank you for sending the money.

GODWIN. You put me in mind of one of Walter Scott's heroines.

JANE. I've never been sure about tartan. I mean, I'm sure it looks very fine in its natural... habitat, as it were. The Highlands, and the glens. Kilts, and so on.

FANNY. I think it's a very pretty dress.

JANE. Oh, so do I. In fact, I should love to have one just like it.

MRS GODWIN. You've had your new dress this season.

JANE. Yes, I know. I only meant...

She trails off.

GODWIN. And how did you spend your days?

MARY. Walking, mostly. Bathing a little. Though the water was ferociously cold.

MRS GODWIN. The Baxters send their regards. Evidently.

MARY. I have letters for you from Mr Baxter, Papa.

MRS GODWIN. Letters. Oh. Very nice.

GODWIN. Thank you.

And I hope you did some writing.

MARY. I did. I've begun a new story.

FANNY. What's it about?

MARY. It's about... But I won't say yet. Because I'm not quite sure if it's going to take. You understand.

GODWIN. Only too well.

MARY. But when I've finished it, I'll show it to Papa, and if he thinks it's good enough, I shall read it to you all.

MRS GODWIN. I have begun a new translation – *The Swiss Family Robinson*. It is very taxing.

JANE. Did Fanny tell you about Mr Shelley, Mary?

MARY. Yes.

JANE. I can't wait for you to meet him.

MARY. You've met him already?

JANE. He was here yesterday. And he really is the most extraordinary man. Quite the most... vibrant human being I have ever met.

GODWIN. Yes. I'm afraid you will find that both your sisters are rather taken with my young friend Shelley.

FANNY. Papa, really.

JANE. Is he coming this evening?

GODWIN. Tomorrow.

MARY. He's doing some business with you – is that right?

GODWIN. Of sorts. I am helping him with a rather complicated financial transaction, and he is showing a kind interest in our little enterprise here.

JANE. He's giving Papa some money.

GODWIN. Lending me some money, Jane. Lending me some money so that I might be able to discharge one or two of the difficulties which have built up of late, and so that I might begin to concentrate on my writing again. Which is the most important thing.

MARY. Yes.

MRS GODWIN. Well, I shall believe it when I see it. I wouldn't be at all surprised if we never saw a penny of this alleged money from Mr Shelley.

JANE. Maman.

MARY. Why?

MRS GODWIN. Firstly, because he doesn't have any money.
He's having to borrow it himself, against his future fortune...

GODWIN. I would rather we didn't speak of business at tea.

MRS GODWIN....at an exorbitant cost. And secondly, because the only reliable thing about Mr Shelley is that he is completely unreliable. He turns up here when he isn't invited, and then when he is invited, he doesn't turn up. I've lost count of the number of dinners I've prepared for him, only to have them wasted.

GODWIN. You cannot dismiss a man's character on the basis of a few discarded chops.

MRS GODWIN. Chops which have to be paid for, and with money we haven't got. And then there was the time he disappeared altogether. What's to stop him doing that again?

FANNY. That was a long time ago, Mama.

MRS GODWIN. And what of that?

FANNY. I... I think he's become more reliable lately. I think...

MRS GODWIN. 'Come to my hotel, Mrs Godwin. Dine with us, Mr Godwin.' And then we get there and he's gone. Packed up and left. I've never been so humiliated.

MARY. Do we need the money badly, Papa?

GODWIN. There is no question of Shelley disappearing. I have great faith in him. You cannot sit for hours with a man, discussing my *Political Justice* without learning something of his true nature. There are certain principles upon which we disagree, yes, but he knows as well as I what constitutes just treatment of one man by another. Now can we please stop discussing business at tea.

MRS GODWIN. You are too trusting, Mr Godwin.

GODWIN. And you are too cynical, my dear.

MRS GODWIN. I'd rather be cynical than an old fool.

There is a moment of shocked silence.

MARY. It's possible to be both. It's possible to be a cynical old fool.

FANNY. Mary...

MARY. I only said it's possible.

MRS GODWIN. Is that in some way directed at me?

(To GODWIN.) Are you going to let her speak to me like that?

GODWIN. I'm sorry, I must have missed that.

MRS GODWIN. Oh, I see. Return of the selective deafness.

GODWIN. Now, now, my dear.

MARY. I also did a great deal of reading in Scotland.

GODWIN. I hope you kept a list.

MARY. I did. *Clarissa*...

GODWIN. Ah, yes.

MARY. And I read your memoir of my mother. (*Looking at FANNY.*) Of our mother. *Memoirs of the Author of the Rights of Woman*.

GODWIN. Did you?

MRS GODWIN. You read the *Memoirs*?

GODWIN. First or second edition?

MARY. First.

MRS GODWIN. Is that all you've got to say?

MARY. It's a beautiful piece of writing, Papa. Aside from anything else. I couldn't be more proud of you. Or of my wonderful mother.

GODWIN. Yes. I see. I am gratified.

JANE. What memoir?

MARY. A memoir of Mary Wollstonecraft. Papa tells the whole story of her life. Her politics, her philosophies, her travels. Her love affairs.

MRS GODWIN. Well, I suppose I am expected to keep quiet on this occasion. But I must say, I shouldn't have thought it suitable reading at all for a sixteen-year-old girl.

MARY. Why not? I think it should be compulsory reading for all sixteen-year-old girls. To learn about such a woman. So courageous. So liberated.

MRS GODWIN. Well, I don't want Jane reading it.

JANE. Maman!

MARY. Why not?

FANNY. I think we should change the subject.

MARY. Why don't you wish Jane to read it?

MRS GODWIN. Oh, I couldn't possibly say. Because it's none of my business, is it?

MARY. No, it isn't. It isn't any of your business.

GODWIN. Mary...

MRS GODWIN. How dare you speak to me like that?

MARY. I do dare. I suppose you're going to threaten to slap my wrists? Send me to bed without any supper? I came back here determined to be civil to you but it is impossible. No one in the whole of Scotland ever spoke to me in such a rude and disrespectful way.

MRS GODWIN. Disrespectful? Huh! That's very high and mighty, I must say.

MARY. The Baxters did not even speak to their dogs in such a way!

GODWIN (*standing*). Time to get back to work, everyone. I'm sure we all have things we should be doing.

MRS GODWIN. Oh, that's right, Mr Godwin – run off back to your study.

The noise of a great roar from the nearby crowd is heard.
JANE rushes to the window.

MARY. So rude!

GODWIN. Please attempt to control your temper, Mrs Godwin.
Remember what we spoke about.

JANE *bursts into tears.*

MRS GODWIN. What's the matter with you?

JANE. He's dead.

MRS GODWIN. Who is?

JANE. The poor man. All he did was steal a gun and now he's
dead, dead, dead.

MRS GODWIN. Well, he was nothing to you, you silly girl.

JANE. He was a fellow creature. A fellow creature and now
he's dead.

MARY (*going to leave*). I've had enough of this.

MRS GODWIN. Don't you think of flouncing out. If anyone is
going to flounce out, it's me!

MRS GODWIN *leaves*. JANE *sobs loudly*.

GODWIN. Well. Thank you for tea.

GODWIN *exits to the study*.

FANNY. Mary, did you have to?

MARY. Yes. Yes, I did.

Scene Four

*Evening. GODWIN's study. Windows look out onto the street.
Above a large fireplace there is a portrait of Mary
Wollstonecraft. Books line the walls, and lie in piles on the floor.
Between the windows there is an old leather sofa. GODWIN is
working at his desk. MARY enters quietly. There is a small
bundle of letters in her hand.*

MARY. The letters from Mr Baxter, Papa.

GODWIN (*without looking up*). Thank you. Place them there.

MARY puts them on the desk. She waits, but he continues to work.

MARY. Shouldn't you stop now? It's quite late.

GODWIN. One or two things more.

MARY. What are you working on?

GODWIN. It doesn't deserve to be called work. Calculations. Business. Commercial drudgery.

MARY. All the more reason to stop.

She goes to stand before the portrait and stares up at it.

How old was she in this portrait?

GODWIN. About thirty-eight. She was pregnant with you.

MARY. She looks content.

GODWIN. You have grown more like her.

MARY. Have I?

GODWIN. A little in your looks. A great deal in your stridency of expression.

You went away a girl, and have returned a young woman.

GODWIN *finishes his work and sets his pen down. They smile at each other.*

So, am I forgiven for sending you away?

MARY. I wasn't cross. Just a little nervous, I suppose.

GODWIN. I knew it was time for you to make a foray into the outside world.

MARY. You were right.

GODWIN. Your mother was a great believer in girls experiencing life outside the home. Within reason, of course.

MARY. Papa, are there more books about my mother which I can read? Or can I read the other books she wrote?

GODWIN. Hum. I can't remember what you've read already.

He goes to the bookshelves.

MARY. Not that much. *The Rights of Woman*. You read us that.
View of the French Revolution.

GODWIN. Her travels in Sweden?

MARY. No.

He hands it to her.

GODWIN. I think Fanny has read that one. Of course, there's a great deal in there about Fanny, as a baby. Your mother took her with her on her travels.

MARY. Yes. Anything else?

GODWIN (*hesitating*). There are the letters.

MARY. The letters?

GODWIN. I edited a volume of her letters. But perhaps that's for another day.

MARY. Please let me see it. I feel as though I've been sleeping on top of buried treasure.

GODWIN (*handing it to her*). Very well.

MARY. Thank you.

GODWIN. Mary...

MARY. I'm sorry I lost my temper with Mrs Godwin. But she seemed to be implying that there was something wrong about my mother – about the way she lived. And there wasn't, was there?

GODWIN. No. But, Mary, you are old enough to understand now that there are many people who cannot view the world as openly as your mother did. Or as you and I do.

MARY. You mean small-minded people. Like Mrs Godwin.

GODWIN. That is not what I mean.

MARY. But she spoke about your book as though it were contaminated.

GODWIN. Mrs Godwin has worked hard – tremendously hard, as have I, to achieve the relatively settled life which we have given you. And all our children. If she is a little alarmed, or

decidedly averse to anything which seems to... veer towards scandal, then she is understandably so.

MARY. Scandal?

GODWIN. The *Memoirs* were not well received. It is only right that you be made aware of that.

In fact, I was vilified.

MARY. But...

GODWIN. And not only in the reactionary press. Some people – friends even – thought I was wrong to write in detail about her private affairs. Some thought I was wrong to write so quickly after her death. I was only trying to make something useful out of tragedy...

MARY. Yes.

GODWIN. But I was judged – we were both judged, very harshly. The suicide attempt... the circumstances of Fanny's birth... many people thought I should have left those things unstated. It was a shock to me. I had not realised until then how entirely out of step I had become – even with radical society.

In the second edition, I tried to remedy some of the damage. Her sisters in Ireland – your aunts – had been very upset by the book. One or two of her friends...

MARY. But you don't regret writing it? Surely you don't.

GODWIN. No. Although, in hindsight, I am not at all sure that I should have had it published.

MARY. But surely for every person who balked at it, there was someone like me... who found it inspiring?

GODWIN. I simply want you to be aware that there are certain sensitivities surrounding your mother's reputation, which we must be mindful of. Not least because we are reliant upon a business. A shop which sells books for children.

MARY. Then perhaps we should not be. If it means we cannot be true to our principles and to your philosophies. If it means I cannot be openly proud of my mother.

GODWIN. Well. I'm afraid we must deal with things as they are.

Come and kiss me.

She does so. She hugs him.

MARY. Poor Papa.

GODWIN. You even smell the way your mother used to smell. Is that possible, do you think?

MARY. I'm sure it is.

GODWIN. My dearest girl.

You are right to be proud of your mother, Mary. But we must be patient, cautious with those who do not have our capacity and strength of mind. Always remember who you are. And ask more of yourself.

Goodnight now.

MARY. Goodnight.

She starts to go.

I wish she hadn't died. I wish we were together now. My mother and you. Fanny and I. That was how it was meant to be.

She leaves.

Scene Five

Late at night. GODWIN's study.

There is the sound of knocking on the front door of the house. It stops. After a few moments, GODWIN enters, with SHELLEY behind him. GODWIN is carrying a candle.

GODWIN. We had better come in here.

SHELLEY. I didn't realise it was so late.

GODWIN *lights a lamp.*

You weren't in bed?

GODWIN. Yes. But no matter.

SHELLEY. Was I expected here this evening? I felt sure I was.

GODWIN. We expected you tomorrow, Shelley.

SHELLEY. Ah. Tomorrow. Then I'm early.

GODWIN. Yes. Early and late, it would seem. A walking challenge to the laws of physics.

SHELLEY. I went to the Fleet this afternoon. The first time I've been in a prison. It shook me rather.

GODWIN. I'm sure it did.

SHELLEY. I went for a walk by the river. I must have lost track of time. And the days are getting longer now, aren't they? Perhaps it was that. A trick of the light.

GODWIN. What took you to the Fleet? Sit down for a moment.

SHELLEY. A friend of mine was arrested for debt yesterday. He has a wife and five children to support.

GODWIN. I'm sorry to hear it.

SHELLEY. It's the perversity of it which enrages me. To confine a man, to shackle him, at the very moment he has most need to be industrious.

GODWIN. Does your friend have private rooms, at least?

SHELLEY. No, no. He shares a cell with three others. I thought I knew what it was to be in prison. But the reality... I took him a copy of *Caleb Williams*.

GODWIN. Did you?

SHELLEY. He had read it, of course, but he was glad to have it with him. A lone voice of sanity amidst the madness. 'Go, go, ignorant fool and visit the scenes of our prisons, then show me the man shameless enough to rejoice and say, "England has no Bastille".'

GODWIN. Yes. Those passages were the result of bitter experience. I dare not think of the hours I have spent visiting men in prison cells. Good men. Wasted lives.

SHELLEY. I am going to take up the cry. I don't know how yet, but I shall. Godwin, when will we have the money? I have sworn that I will help him. I won't use any of your share, of course, but I shall use mine – all of it, if need be.

GODWIN. We are making progress, certainly. I saw the lawyers this afternoon.

SHELLEY. What did they say?

FANNY enters. *She is in a nightdress and dressing gown.*

FANNY. Oh. Mr Shelley.

SHELLEY. Miss Godwin. Forgive me. I have come rather...

GODWIN. Early.

SHELLEY. Yes.

FANNY. Please don't worry. I only wondered if anyone had need of anything. Are you staying, Mr Shelley?

SHELLEY. Staying? Yes. Yes. Thank you. If that would be agreeable?

GODWIN. By all means, stay a while.

SHELLEY. It's true I have no wish to be alone tonight. If I could lie down amongst friends it would mean a great deal to me.

FANNY. Oh.

GODWIN. Ah. Staying.

SHELLEY. It has been a day of great emotion.

FANNY. Yes. I must see if the spare room is... Sometimes it is rather full of books and so on.

SHELLEY. But I can sleep in here. If you don't object, Godwin?

GODWIN. No.

SHELLEY. When I get tired I can sleep anywhere. I shall sleep curled up on the rug there. Or on the sofa.

FANNY. Yes.

SHELLEY. A blanket, perhaps, for the early hours? And a glass of water, please. If it isn't too much trouble.

FANNY. Not at all. I'll fetch them.

SHELLEY. Thank you.

FANNY leaves. GODWIN and SHELLEY sit down together.

GODWIN. I was imprisoned once. For debt. Did I tell you that?

SHELLEY. No.

GODWIN. In the early days. When I was trying to make my way.

People assume that philosophers can live on air. My friends and I were completely reliant upon one another. If one of us went under, another would always try to help him out.

SHELLEY. That's how it should be.

GODWIN. Nothing has changed really. Except these days there are a great many noughts on the amounts which we owe.

SHELLEY. What did the lawyers say?

GODWIN. Yes. So. It seems the purchasers of the bond are now satisfied on the question of life insurance.

SHELLEY. Good.

GODWIN. But they have now come back with two further questions. The first concerns existing borrowing against the estate. They wish to be certain that when your grandfather dies, they will not find that there are prior and sweeping claims upon his property and land.

SHELLEY. How absurd this is.

GODWIN. Do you know if your grandfather has borrowed against the estate?

SHELLEY. I'm quite sure he hasn't.

GODWIN. And your father?

SHELLEY. No. He is entirely opposed to borrowing. It's one of the reasons why he is entirely opposed to me.

GODWIN. With your permission, I will write to your family's lawyer to ask for a statement on the subject.

SHELLEY. How long will that take?

GODWIN. I can't say exactly. We could consider a direct approach to your grandfather, but...

SHELLEY. What is the matter with these people? If they didn't want to buy the bond, why did they bid for it? They're already getting it for a lot less than it is worth. Surely they should understand that there is some risk attached to it?

GODWIN. No one was prepared to bid higher. We must remember that.

Do not be disheartened. We're drawing close now.

SHELLEY. What is the second question?

GODWIN. I think we should leave that for the morning. We can talk before breakfast, if you prefer.

SHELLEY. Please, Godwin. I am not a 'wait until the morning' sort of person.

GODWIN. As you wish. It concerns your marriage.

SHELLEY. My marriage?

GODWIN. They are not convinced that your existing certificate of marriage would stand up to scrutiny in an English court. If you were to die, and there were any challenges to the legitimacy of your heirs, their claim could stall – or be rejected completely.

SHELLEY. I don't understand.

GODWIN. You were married in Scotland, I think? In some form of chapel?

SHELLEY. Yes. We eloped.

GODWIN. Well, what they are asking is that you marry again. In an English church. In the Church of England.

Do you foresee any difficulty with that?

Will Mrs Shelley be in London at all this week?

SHELLEY. No. She is staying in Windsor with the baby.

GODWIN. Then could you arrange to be married there?

Tomorrow, I can accompany you to get a certificate. You could consider a marriage the following day. And if you have need of witnesses...

SHELLEY. You know my views on marriage, Godwin. They are the same as yours. They were forged by you.

GODWIN. Yes. And yet we both sit here, married men.

SHELLEY. I married in haste. I could see no other way of protecting Harriet.

GODWIN. Precisely.

SHELLEY. I was young then.

GODWIN. Really, Shelley...

SHELLEY. It did not seem too abhorrent, to stand in a chapel and make some vows. It did not even seem like a church. To do so again – in cold blood. I don't think I can.

I'm sorry. They will have to accept my marriage as it is.

They are quiet for a moment.

GODWIN. We must apply philosophy to this situation. Once you have the money – we have the money – the use we can make of it will far outweigh the small but necessary evil of your repeating your wedding vows. We must use convention to defeat convention.

The alternative is... what? That we lose the sale. I need not tell you, I think, the consequences that would have.

I sympathise. Believe me. Sometimes, when I look back on my own life, it seems...

SHELLEY. What?

GODWIN. One learns to live with compromise. A horrible bed-bound relative in a secret room.

Pause.

SHELLEY. I will speak to Harriet.

GODWIN. Yes.

SHELLEY. Though I do not feel at all comfortable about doing so. Our relations at present would not naturally tend towards a renewal of vows. In fact...

MRS GODWIN *is heard from outside the door* –

MRS GODWIN (*off*). Mr Godwin? What is going on?

GODWIN (*to SHELLEY*). Excuse me one moment?

GODWIN leaves. There is the sound of whispering. After a moment, FANNY enters. She is carrying some blankets and a glass of water.

SHELLEY. I appear to have woken the whole house.

FANNY. Don't worry.

FANNY *begins to make up a bed on the sofa*.

I think you should sleep on here tonight. Please don't sleep on the floor.

SHELLEY. If anyone had told me, when I was at school, that one day I would lie down to sleep in the study of the great William Godwin – with Mary Wollstonecraft gazing down upon me – I would have thought it too much a fantasy to be believed. And to have her legendary daughter as my companion...

FANNY. I am hardly legendary.

SHELLEY. But you are. You must know you are. No child has ever been so lovingly described. Your joy in being, your inquisitiveness.

FANNY. I am glad to have those descriptions to look back upon.

SHELLEY. You know, when Harriet first discovered she was pregnant, I gave her a copy of your mother's thoughts on raising daughters. In case we had a girl. And then we did –

FANNY. Has she found it useful?

SHELLEY. Yes. Though she has not taken it to heart entirely – in the way I hoped she would. On education she is completely agreed. But she would not feed the baby herself. That I found very difficult. She hired a wet nurse. I would have snatched the child away and fed her myself if I could.

FANNY. I'm sorry. I suppose it is a very personal... It's very personal.

SHELLEY. Yes.

FANNY. But your daughter is well, isn't she?

SHELLEY. Yes. She is thriving.

FANNY. That's the most important thing. I feel sure my mother would say so.

SHELLEY. We are to have another. Harriet told me this morning.

FANNY. Oh. Another baby.

SHELLEY. Some time in the autumn.

FANNY. That's wonderful. That's wonderful news.

SHELLEY. I suppose it is.

FANNY. You aren't sure?

SHELLEY. It's very hard... this question of responsibility... to one's own children. I wish... I want to take responsibility for the whole world, and yet I am expected to reserve a vast share of my attention for one or two individual creatures, whom I had a part in creating. Do you understand what I mean?

FANNY. I think I do.

SHELLEY. Today... I saw a small boy being thrown into the river.

FANNY. Oh, no.

SHELLEY. He was on a coal barge that was passing by. He was arguing with a large man. And the man suddenly picked him up and tossed him over the side. Quite casually. As though he were emptying his piss-pot. The boy was floundering. I ran down to the edge of the water and made as much commotion as I could. I can't swim, or I would have gone in to get him.

FANNY. Yes.

SHELLEY. He was picked up and rowed to shore. I felt so much for him. I wanted to keep him.

I would have taken him home, but all he wanted was to run to catch up with the barge. I gave him all the money in my pockets. I felt so much for him, in his plight. As much as I have ever felt for my own child. Does that seem wrong?

FANNY. No. No, not at all. I have often felt quite overwhelmed with love for the children I visit in the poor schools.

SHELLEY. Have you?

FANNY. I have often thought there could be no greater vocation in life – no greater use of energy – than to rescue a whole class full of those children from the evils of poverty and ignorance.

SHELLEY. A greater vocation than motherhood?

FANNY. Yes.

SHELLEY. How right you are. How wise.

Why don't you stay with me, and talk to me all night?
Really. I don't feel at all sleepy. Do you?

FANNY. No, but... I would like to, but...

SHELLEY. But what? Have you ever stayed up and talked all night?

FANNY. No...

SHELLEY. Then you must. It is one of the great pleasures of life.

FANNY. I don't think... I don't think Mama would allow it.

SHELLEY. Why not? Would you stay if I were a woman?

FANNY. Yes.

SHELLEY. Then stay. Surely your father, of all people, would not insist upon the proprieties?

Are we such animals that we cannot control our desires?

FANNY *cannot answer*. GODWIN enters.

FANNY. I'll say goodnight.

GODWIN. Yes.

FANNY (*to SHELLEY*). Goodnight.

SHELLEY. If goodnight it must be.

She leaves. He gazes after her.

Scene Six

Morning. GODWIN's study. SHELLEY is lying on the sofa under a blanket. The sounds of the busy street below are drifting into the room.

MARY enters. She is wearing a dressing gown, and her hair is undone. She does not see SHELLEY. She heads towards her father's desk, but then changes her mind and goes to the window and draws back the curtains.

SHELLEY. But soft, what light through yonder window breaks?

MARY gasps with surprise. SHELLEY sits up, smiling. He is in a state of half-undress.

Sorry. I couldn't resist... Oh.

MARY. I didn't realise there was anyone in here.

SHELLEY. I'm sorry. I thought you were Miss Godwin.

I stayed the night.

Shelley. Percy. Bysshe.

MARY. Ah. Of course.

SHELLEY. And you? Are you...?

MARY. Mary. Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin.

SHELLEY. Mary. You're back.

MARY. Yes.

SHELLEY. No one told me.

The immediate rapport between them is tangible.

MARY. I'll go and tell Mrs Godwin you're awake.

She starts to go.

SHELLEY. But what did you come for?

MARY. Oh. It doesn't matter.

SHELLEY. A book? I would be the last person on earth to deprive you of a book.

MARY. I came for some paper.

SHELLEY (*jumping up*). Paper! Let me help you find some.

MARY. It's all right. I think I know where it is. My notebook's full, and I just need a few sheets of paper, until I can get another one.

SHELLEY. Are you writing? Your sisters told me that you write. You cannot know how happy I was to hear that. What are you writing?

MARY. A story.

SHELLEY. I write poetry.

MARY. Do you?

SHELLEY. Yes. I have recently finished a poem. It's my best work. I have had several copies printed.

MARY. That's wonderful.

SHELLEY. Yes. It's a long poem. Epic, I suppose one could say. I can't put my name to it – the content is too dangerous. It's not that I'm afraid to take on the authorities. But I don't want to find myself in prison when I've only just begun.

MARY. What's it about?

SHELLEY. It is very much inspired by your father's work.

MARY. Is it really?

SHELLEY. Although I showed it to him and he was rather critical. He thinks I should stick to prose. Prose and politics.

MARY. But my father has never been fond of poetry. You ought to hear him on the subject of Lord Byron.

SHELLEY. Really? I adore Byron.

MARY. So do I. But Father likes things to be said in a... logical way. I'm sure it is not the fault of your poem.

JANE enters.

JANE. Oh. Mary. You're here.

MARY. Good morning, Jane.

SHELLEY. Miss Jane! How sweet and fresh you look today.

JANE. Do I? I've only just woken up.

But look at you two. You've met at last.

SHELLEY. Yes.

JANE. It's not fair. It's really too unkind. I wanted to be the person to introduce you. I told him all about you, Mary. Now, is she as lovely as I said she is?

MARY. Jane.

SHELLEY. Certainly, she is.

MARY. Jane, please.

JANE. What?

MARY. Please don't say such silly things.

JANE. Oh, don't be embarrassed. Embarrassment is so petty. But, Shelley, I must tell you something quite extraordinary.

SHELLEY. That's a very promising beginning.

JANE. When Mama told me just now that you had stayed the night, I wasn't at all surprised, because I knew. Because all night... all night I had the strangest feeling that you were close by.

SHELLEY. Did you really?

JANE. I was finding it hard to sleep, you see, because I had been so upset yesterday about the poor man being hanged. Hadn't I, Mary? I was quite inconsolable. I can't bear any sort of cruelty, can I, Mary?

MARY. No.

JANE. But then I started to feel quite calm suddenly, and I started to feel that there was a presence close by – a good, strong presence – and then I realised that it was you.

SHELLEY. That's fascinating.

JANE. And then I slept quite happily. And calmly. How can I describe it? I felt very... soft. And relaxed.

SHELLEY. How extraordinary. I'm glad to have been of service.

JANE (*laughing*). Did you know? I mean, were you... thinking...?

SHELLEY. I wasn't conscious of anything.

JANE. You didn't come upstairs at all?

SHELLEY. No. But who knows where our souls wander when we sleep?

GODWIN *enters and goes straight to his desk*.

GODWIN. Ah, you're awake, Shelley. Good. (*Calling*.) Fanny! She was afraid we might disturb you, but I see we are too late for that.

JANE. He was awake when I came in, Papa.

GODWIN (*to MARY and SHELLEY*). So you've met.

SHELLEY. Yes. We introduced ourselves.

FANNY *enters*.

FANNY. Good morning.

SHELLEY. Good morning, my dear Miss Godwin.

FANNY. Rather an invasion, I'm afraid. Would you like a little privacy?

SHELLEY. No. This is the perfect start to my day.

FANNY. How are you, Mary? Rested?

MARY. Yes, thank you, dear.

GODWIN. This is the letter I wish you to copy, Fanny.

FANNY (*crossing to the desk*). Jane, go down and mind the shop please.

JANE. Now?

FANNY. Yes.

JANE. But I don't want to. Surely if anyone comes they can ring the bell? No one will come anyway.

GODWIN. Will it be clear enough?

FANNY. Yes, I think so.

GODWIN. Shelley, I've ascertained where we must go for the certificate, but the office will close at midday, so we must start out as soon as you're ready.

SHELLEY. Right. Yes. What time is it now?

MARY. It's almost half-past ten.

SHELLEY. Is it really?

JANE. I'm always losing track of time.

MRS GODWIN *enters*.

MRS GODWIN. What on earth is going on in here?

I do apologise, Mr Shelley. I gave orders that you were not to be disturbed.

JANE. Mary was here before I was.

SHELLEY. But it's been splendid, Mrs Godwin. Really. It reminds me of being a child again. Waking up surrounded by my sisters.

MRS GODWIN. Well, we are none of us children now. What do you say, Mr Godwin?

GODWIN. What's that, my dear?

MRS GODWIN. Come out now, girls. In fact, no. Mr Shelley, I think you should come out, if you don't mind? You may use my bedroom in which to refresh yourself, and so forth. I'm sure you must need to do that.

SHELLEY. Thank you. You're very kind.

MRS GODWIN. And who's minding the shop, may I ask?

FANNY. I was. But I'm busy now. I asked Jane to go down.

MRS GODWIN. Then go down, Jane. At once. What do you think this is? A public holiday?

JANE (*to SHELLEY*). Will you be coming back?

SHELLEY. I hope so. Will we come back, Godwin?

GODWIN. Back? No. Windsor.

SHELLEY. Ah, yes. A pity.

JANE. But you'll come again soon?

MRS GODWIN. Jane!

JANE. Sorry. (*To SHELLEY*.) Come out through the shop and say goodbye!

She leaves.

MRS GODWIN (*inviting him to come with her*). Mr Shelley?

SHELLEY (*to MARY*). I hope I will see you soon. You're not going away again?

MARY. No. I have no more plans to travel.

SHELLEY. I wonder if you would read my poem? Would you?

MARY. Yes. Of course. I would like that very much.

SHELLEY. I will come back as soon as I can.

They smile deeply at each other.

Good day, Miss Godwin.

FANNY. Good day. I hope...

MRS GODWIN (*ushering him out*). I have saved you a nice slice of bacon for your breakfast, Mr Shelley.

GODWIN. No time!

SHELLEY. Oh, I never eat breakfast, Mrs Godwin. Or meat.

MRS GODWIN. No? Of course you don't.

They leave.

GODWIN. Right. Once you have finished it, I want you to deliver it. You know the office?

FANNY. Yes, Papa.

GODWIN. As soon as you can.

He gathers his things together.

Writing today, Mary?

MARY. Yes, Papa.

GODWIN. Very good.

He leaves. FANNY watches MARY for a moment. MARY is looking shocked and flushed.

FANNY. So... That is Mr Shelley.

MARY. Yes.

I need some paper.

MARY goes to the desk and finds the paper.

FANNY. Is something wrong?

MARY. No. Not at all.

FANNY. What did you think of him?

MARY. I thought he was... Yes. He's very pleasant.

FANNY. 'Pleasant'? What do you mean? That's the most... pale... the most insipid word I ever heard fall from your lips.

MARY. He's beautiful. There must be angels who command less light.

Looking at MARY's impassioned face, FANNY is suddenly filled with disquiet. MARY sees it.

You looked after him last night?

FANNY. Yes. We had a long talk.

MARY. I'm glad. Well. I'll let you get on. Tell me if I can be of any help.

FANNY. Yes. Thank you.

MARY leaves.

Scene Seven

The sisters' bedroom. MARY rushes in. She is full of the most staggering emotions – literally lovestruck. She feels as though the room is too small to contain her. She throws the pieces of paper up into the air.

She sits down suddenly, hugging her knees and covering her mouth. Then she laughs.

MARY. Madness.

She stands again. She has to move, to release the feeling.

I wonder if you would read my poem? Would you?

Yes. Of course. Of course. Of course. Of course.

I will come back as soon as I can.

Come back. Come back to me. Mr Shelley. Shelley. Like the name of a rose. Or something fragile from the sea.

Scene Eight

Night. The sisters' bedroom. MARY, in her nightgown, pulls all the blankets and quilts from the beds into the middle of the floor. She lights candles and places them around. She takes the books she has borrowed from her father, and places them on the covers.

She goes to the window and opens it, letting the moonlight in.

MARY. Come, gentle night; come, loving black-brow'd night.

FANNY enters. She is in her nightgown and carries a candle. She stops in astonishment – a little thrilled by the sight.

FANNY. Mary? What...?

MARY *takes FANNY's hand and sits her on the covers.*

MARY. I have more books. Love letters. More beautiful than you can imagine. Papa gave them to me, so you need not fear.

FANNY (*looking at the little book of letters*). I don't know if I can.

MARY. We have to. Mother may not be here, but she can still teach us what it is to love.

She takes the book and goes to a marked page.

Look – read this page.

FANNY *takes it and reads.*

Read it aloud.

FANNY (*reading*). 'I have been playing and laughing with the little girl so long, that I cannot take up my pen to address you without emotion.'

MARY. It is written to your father – do you see?

FANNY (*reading*). 'Pressing her to my bosom, she looked so like you, every nerve seemed to vibrate to the touch, and you seemed to pervade my whole frame, quickening the beat of my heart.' The child is me.

MARY. Yes.

JANE *enters, also dressed for bed and carrying a candle.*

JANE. What are you doing?

MARY. Hush, Jane. Come away from the door.

JANE. What are you doing? Can I join in?

She sits with them on the floor. She picks up a book.

Ah! Is this it? Is this the *Memoir*?

MARY (*reading*). 'Recollection now makes my heart bound to thee; I have thy honest countenance before me, relaxed by tenderness. Thy lips then feel softer than soft, and I rest my cheek on thine, forgetting all the world.'

JANE. But that is too gorgeous!

FANNY. Is that written to my father too?

MARY. She must have loved him deeply. I'm sure, when we were younger, we were made to think it was no more than a passing fancy.

JANE. Listen to this. (*Reading from the Memoirs.*) ‘Mary rested her head upon my shoulder – the shoulder of her lover...’
This is Papa speaking!

FANNY. Papa?

JANE (*reading*). ‘...I had never loved till now; or, at least, had never nourished a passion to the same growth, or met with an object so consummately worthy.’ Is that not the funniest thing?

MARY. That is Papa’s way of saying that he was overwhelmed with passion!

She throws herself onto JANE, who laughs.

Abandoned to a desire that changed him utterly, that pushed him to the ground, that launched him to the winds!

FANNY (*reading from the Memoirs*). ‘We did not marry.’ I thought they did.

MARY. Eventually. But I was conceived in the first throes of their passion.

JANE. Oh, Mary!

FANNY. You don’t mind, do you?

MARY. Of course not. Marriage is a nonsense. You were conceived at a tollgate, Fanny.

JANE. A tollgate?

MARY (*taking up the Letters*). Look here – let me see... here. She calls you her ‘barrier-girl’. She would meet your father at one of the barriers into Paris.

FANNY. ‘Barrier-girl’? Papa used to call me the barrier-child sometimes. Do you remember? I always thought it meant something bad. That I had been in the way somehow.

MARY. Oh, Fanny. They would spend nights together in a room in the tollgate.

JANE. How romantic!

FANNY. Is that really true?

MARY. A child of the Revolution.

JANE. And outside, all around, people were having their heads chopped off!

MARY. Look here – (*Reading.*) ‘...my imagination then rather chooses to ramble back to the barrier with you, to see you coming to meet me, and my basket of grapes and wine, and with the blissful hours to come.’

JANE. I never heard of anything so romantic.

They lie back and grow quieter. FANNY reads to the end of the letter.

FANNY. ‘My little barrier-girl...’

JANE. I wish she was my mother. Oh, I wish she was.

I am going to change my name to hers. Jane is such a dull name. And really I was christened Mary-Jane, so...

FANNY (*laughing*). But you can’t take ‘Mary’.

JANE. Oh, yes! Oh, no. Then I shall take her birthday! When was her birthday?

FANNY. April the twenty-seventh.

JANE. Then from now on that will be my birthday. Will you let me? And you must mark it.

You will, won’t you?

MARY. All right.

JANE. But don’t tell Mama, or she will laugh and think me stupid.

FANNY. Let’s blow out the candles now.

They do so, and settle down.

MARY. We cannot let our lives be small. There is no life but loving.

Gradually, they begin to drift into sleep. In MARY's mind, SHELLEY enters the room. The energy between them draws them together. They do not touch, but seem to lean and brush against each other.

When she awakens, FANNY is standing by the window, gazing out at the night sky.

(Whispering.) Are you all right, Fanny?

FANNY. It is too much to bear.

MARY (*hesitantly*). What do you mean?

But FANNY only goes back to her bed and closes her eyes.

End of Act One.