

ACT FIVE

Scene One

The parlour. Skinner Street. MRS GODWIN leads SHELLEY into the room. SHELLEY looks pale and serious.

MRS GODWIN. Please come in.

Please sit down. Would you care for some tea?

SHELLEY. No, thank you.

SHELLEY looks about the room. It is over two years since he has been here. FANNY's shawl is lying on the back of a chair.

MRS GODWIN. I was very sorry to hear about your wife, Mr Shelley. A terrible affair. And coming so soon after Fanny.

SHELLEY. Yes.

MRS GODWIN. The Serpentine. A public park. Such a strange place to drown oneself. I said to Mr Godwin, I wouldn't have thought there would be sufficient water.

And she was pregnant, they say.

SHELLEY. Yes. I believe so.

MRS GODWIN. Do you know who the father was?

SHELLEY. No. She was living with an army officer, I believe. Or had been.

MRS GODWIN. Well. It doesn't matter now, does it? Another feckless young man, I dare say, who thought nothing of... She must have been quite desperate. Very sad.

SHELLEY. Is Mr Godwin going to see me?

MRS GODWIN. Yes. Yes, I believe he is. I'll ask him to come through. (*Going towards the study.*) He's writing another novel, you know? We have high hopes of it.

(*Pausing.*) How's my Jane?

SHELLEY. She's... she's well. She's quite well.

MRS GODWIN goes into the study. SHELLEY takes a deep breath to steady himself. He stands and moves about the room. He goes to the chair, and runs his hand over FANNY's shawl.

GODWIN enters with MRS GODWIN. The two men look at each other for some time.

Godwin.

GODWIN. Shelley.

Pause.

SHELLEY. I hardly know what to say. It's been a long time.

GODWIN. Yes.

I was sorry to hear about your wife. About Harriet.

SHELLEY. Thank you.

MRS GODWIN. We have just been discussing that. He doesn't know who the father was.

GODWIN. Shelley, I want to thank you, for the letter you wrote to me after Fanny's death. I know I replied rather harshly at the time. I know I said that I could not use your sympathy, but... on reflection... your words meant a great deal to me.

And I want to thank you for your discretion. And for seeing her buried.

SHELLEY. She asked me to bury her. In the letter she sent before she died.

GODWIN. Did she?

SHELLEY. It was all done anonymously.

GODWIN. Yes. No one else knows what happened. If people ask after her, I say that she died of a fever, on her way to see her aunts in Ireland. I think that is best.

SHELLEY. I understand.

Godwin, I've come to tell you that I have asked Mary... to marry me.

MRS GODWIN. Oh! Oh, that is good news. Isn't it, Mr Godwin? And after everything that's happened.

SHELLEY. My views on marriage have not altered. But I am fighting for custody of my two children by Harriet. Her family wish to keep them. I stand little chance of prevailing, if my situation with Mary remains unchanged. And financially, our marriage offers her greater assurance. It is what the law demands, it seems, and so I have decided that I must...

GODWIN. Compromise.

SHELLEY. Yes. On this occasion. Until the law catches up with mankind.

Pause.

MRS GODWIN. Well, that's very good news. Not quite romantic, perhaps, but we are all realists here, I think. Isn't it good news, Mr Godwin?

GODWIN. When shall you be married?

SHELLEY. Soon. At Christmas. We can see no advantage in delay.

Godwin, will you consider attending our wedding?

GODWIN. Yes. I should be delighted.

Scene Two

Day. The vestry of a church. MARY is waiting. SHELLEY enters.

SHELLEY. He's here.

She nods.

Shall we go through?

MARY. No. I have to talk to him. I can't just go in there and take his hand and speak my vows in front of him. Will you ask him to come to me?

SHELLEY. Yes.

MARY. I'm sorry. If you could wait...?

SHELLEY. Of course. I will always be waiting for you, Mary.

He kisses her and leaves. MARY waits anxiously. After a moment, GODWIN enters. Their eyes meet.

GODWIN. New dress?

MARY. Yes.

GODWIN. Very pretty.

He approaches her. When he reaches her, he isn't sure what to do. He taps her arm, awkwardly, and then moves some distance away from her.

Quite a day, then.

MARY. Yes.

GODWIN. I've just been introduced to my grandson. William. Named for me, I assume?

MARY. Yes. Who else?

GODWIN. He's a fine little chap. Looks like an angel, truth be told.

MARY. He's not an angel. He can be diabolical at times. But we forgive him. We always forgive him.

GODWIN. Yes. I hope you will allow me to become acquainted with him.

MARY. I hope you will.

Pause.

GODWIN. How is your work coming along?

MARY. Very well. I've written a novel. It's almost finished.

GODWIN. A novel, eh?

MARY. I'm going to start looking for a publisher.

GODWIN. And what is your novel about?

MARY. It's about... about a man who is... driven, consumed by the desire to explore the very limits of his powers... of science, of knowledge. He creates a creature... from the parts of other humans. A living being. But when he has created it, he finds he cannot countenance its needs – its need for love, companionship, respect, its whole monstrous reality. It pursues him, across mountains and seas. Across the wide world. They come to hate each other.

I thought of you a lot, while I was writing. All your ideas about... humanity, they have all been there to draw upon. If I ever doubted how much I've learned from you, I do not doubt it now.

GODWIN. And I am the monstrous creator, I suppose?

MARY. I don't know. Perhaps. And which am I?

GODWIN. I should like to read it.

MARY. I'd like that.

GODWIN. I cannot promise to be kind, of course.

MARY. Of course.

Pause.

GODWIN. I've missed you, Mary.

Pause.

MARY. Do you ever think it is a curse – this passion of the mind? This inability to leave the world unfathomed? Because I fear it might be. When I think of Fanny... of how little time I gave to her... how little account I took of her...

GODWIN. Fanny was not strong. She was exceptionally sensitive. I doubt she...

MARY. Then we should have made her strong. Shouldn't we? Or at least protected her. Surely one life, made happy, is worth more than all the philosophy, all the theorising in the world? If it is our calling, to help in the advancement of mankind, surely we must acknowledge what it is to be human? And if that means sensitivity, or weakness, or rashness, then so be it. People are not gods. And there is nothing to be gained in trying to make them so.

GODWIN. I cannot agree with you.

MARY. No. I don't suppose you can.

GODWIN. That is an apology for complacency. For indolence.
For stupification...

MARY. Why can our humanity not be our strength?

GODWIN. We must seek to analyse the frailties of our nature,
and then to reach beyond them...

MARY. I think that is a dangerous philosophy.

Pause.

GODWIN. It is a privilege – to be amongst the legislators of
mankind. And you will be, Mary. As your mother was, as I
am. And as Shelley will be too.

We are keeping him waiting.

MARY. Yes.

GODWIN. If I were going to lose you to anyone, it were best to
him. I see that now.

MARY. You haven't lost me.

GODWIN. Come then. Society demands its pound of flesh.

*He holds out his hand to her. She goes to him and puts her
hand in his. He hugs her suddenly.*

A privilege.

They leave.

End.