

# WALL, STONE, CRAFT

Walter Jon Williams

## 1

She awoke, there in the common room of the inn, from a brief dream of roses and death. Once Mary came awake she recalled there were wild roses on her mother's grave, and wondered if her mother's spirit had visited her.

On her mother's grave, Mary's lover had first proposed their elopement. It was there the two of them had first made love.

Now she believed she was pregnant. Her lover was of the opinion that she was mistaken. That was about where it stood.

Mary concluded that it was best not to think about it. And so, blinking sleep from her eyes, she sat in the common room of the inn at Le Caillou and resolved to study her Italian grammar by candlelight.

Plurals. *La nascita, le nascite. La madre, le madri. Un bambino, i bambini...*

Interruption: stampings, snortings, the rattle of harness, the barking of dogs. Four young Englishmen entered the inn, one in scarlet uniform coat, the others in fine traveling clothes. Raindrops dazzled on their shoulders. The innkeeper bustled out from the kitchen, smiled, proffered the register.

Mary, unimpressed by anything English, concentrated on the grammar.

"Let me sign, George," the redcoat said. "My hand needs the practice." Mary glanced up at the comment.

"I say, George, here's a fellow signed in Greek!" The Englishman peered at yellowed pages of the inn's register, trying to make out the words in the dim light of the innkeeper's lamp. Mary smiled at the English officer's efforts.

"Perseus, I believe the name is. Perseus Busseus—d'ye suppose he means Bishop?—Kselleius. And he gives his occupation as 'te anthropou philou'—that would make him a friendly fellow, eh?—" The officer looked over his shoulder and grinned, then returned to the register. " 'Kaiatheos.'

” The officer scowled, then straightened. “Does that mean what I think it does, George?”

George—the pretty auburn-haired man in byrons—shook rain off his short cape, stepped to the register, examined the text. “Not ‘friendly fellow,’ ” he said. “That would be ‘anehr philos.’ ‘Anthropos’ is mankind, not man.” There was the faintest touch of Scotland in his speech.

“So it is,” said the officer. “It comes back now.”

George bent at his slim waist and looked carefully at the register. “What the fellow says is, ‘Both friend of man and—’ ” He frowned, then looked at his friend. “You were right about the ‘atheist,’ I’m afraid.”

The officer was indignant. “Ain’t funny, George,” he said.

George gave a cynical little half-smile. His voice changed, turned comical and fussy, became that of a high-pitched English schoolmaster. “Let us try to make out the name of this famous atheist.” He bent over the register again. ‘Perseus— you had that right, Somerset. Busseus—how *very* irregular. Kselleius—Kelly? Shelley?” He smiled at his friend. His voice became very Irish. “Kelly, I imagine. An atheistical upstart Irish schoolmaster with a little Greek. But what the Busseus might be eludes me, unless his middle name is Omnibus.”

Somerset chuckled. Mary rose from her place and walked quietly toward the pair. “The gentleman’s name is Bysse, sir,” she said. “Percy Bysse Shelley.”

The two men turned in surprise. The officer—Somerset—bowed as he perceived a lady. Mary saw for the first time that he had one empty sleeve pinned across his tunic, which would account for the comment about the hand. The other—George, the man in byrons—swept off his hat and gave Mary a flourishing bow, one far too theatrical to be taken seriously. When he straightened, he gave Mary a little frown.

“Bysse Shelley?” he said. “Any relation to Sir Bysse, the baronet?”

“His grandson.”

“Sir Bysse is a protege of old Norfolk.” This an aside to his friends. Radical Whiggery was afoot, or so the tone implied. George returned his attention to Mary as the other Englishmen gathered about her. “An interesting family, no doubt,” he said, and smiled at her. Mary wanted to flinch from the compelling way he looked at her, gazed upward, intently, from beneath his brows. “And are you of his party?”

“I am.”

“And you are, I take it, Mrs. Shelley?”

Mary straightened and gazed defiantly into George’s eyes. “Mrs. Shelley resides in England. My name is Godwin.”

George’s eyes widened, flickered a little. Low English murmurs came to Mary’s ears. George bowed again. “Charmed to meet you, Miss Godwin.”

George pointed to each of his companions with his hat. “Lord Fitzroy Somerset.” The armless man bowed again. “Captain Harry Smith. Captain Austen of the Navy. Pasmay, my fencing master.” Most of the party, Mary thought, were young, and all were handsome, George most of all. George turned to Mary again, a little smile of anticipation curling his lips. His burning look was almost insolent. “My name is Newstead.”

Mortal embarrassment clutched at Mary’s heart. She knew her cheeks were burning, but still she held George’s eyes as she bobbed a curtsy.

George had not been Marquess Newstead for more than a few months. He had been famous for years both as an intimate of the Prince Regent and the most dashing of Wellington’s cavalry officers, but it was his exploits on the field of Waterloo and his capture of Napoleon on the bridge at Genappe that had made him immortal. He was the talk of England and the Continent, though he had achieved his fame under another name.

Before the Prince Regent had given him the title of Newstead, auburn-haired, insolent-eyed George had been known as George Gordon Noel, the sixth Lord Byron.

Mary decided she was not going to be impressed by either his titles or his manner. She decided she would think of him as George.

“Pleased to meet you, my lord,” Mary said. Pride steeled her as she realized her voice hadn’t trembled.

She was spared further embarrassment when the door burst open and a servant entered followed by a pack of muddy dogs—whippets—who showered them all with water, then howled and bounded about George, their master. Standing tall, his strong, well-formed legs in the famous side-laced boots that he had invented to show off his calf and ankle, George laughed as the dogs jumped up on his chest and bayed for attention. His lordship barked back at them and wrestled with them for a moment—not very lordlike, Mary thought—and then he told his dogs to be still. At first they ignored him, but eventually he got them down and silenced.

He looked up at Mary. “I can discipline men, Miss Godwin,” he said,

“but I’m afraid I’m not very good with animals.”

“That shows you have a kind heart, I’m sure,” Mary said.

The others laughed a bit at this—apparently kindheartedness was not one of George’s better-known qualities—but George smiled indulgently.

“Have you and your companion supped, Miss Godwin? I would welcome the company of fellow English in this tiresome land of Brabant.”

Mary was unable to resist an impertinence. “Even if one of them is an atheistical upstart Irish schoolmaster?”

“Miss Godwin, I would dine with Wolfe Tone himself.” Still with that intent, under-eyed look, as if he was dissecting her.

Mary was relieved to turn away from George’s gaze and look toward the back of the inn, in the direction of the kitchen. “Bysshe is in the kitchen giving instructions to the cook. I believe my sister is with him.”

“Are there more in your party?”

“Only the three of us. And one rather elderly carriage horse.”

“Forgive us if we do not invite the horse to table.”

“Your ape, George,” Somerset said dolefully, “will be quite enough.”

Mary would have pursued this interesting remark, but at that moment Bysshe and Claire appeared from out of the kitchen passage. Both were laughing, as if at a shared secret, and Claire’s black eyes glittered. Mary repressed a spasm of annoyance.

“Mary!” Bysshe said. “The cook told us a ghost story!” He was about to go on, but paused as he saw the visitors.

“We have an invitation to dinner,” Mary said. “Lord Newstead has been kind enough—”

“Newstead!” said Claire. “*The* Lord Newstead?”

George turned his searching gaze on Claire. “I’m the only Newstead I know.”

Mary felt a chill of alarm, for a moment seeing Claire as George doubtless saw her: black-haired, black-eyed, fatally indiscreet, and all of sixteen.

Sometimes the year’s difference in age between Mary and Claire seemed a century.

“Lord Newstead!” Claire babbled. “I recognize you now! How exciting to meet you!”

Mary resigned herself to fate. “My lord,” she said, “may I present my sister, Miss Jane—Claire, rather, Claire Clairmont, and Mr. Shelley.”

“Overwhelmed and charmed, Miss Clairmont. Mr. Perseus Omnibus Kselleius, ti kanete?”

Bysshe blinked for a second or two, then grinned. “Thanmasia euxaristo,” returning politeness, “kai eseis?”

For a moment Mary gloried in Bysshe, in his big frame in his shabby clothes, his fair, disordered hair, his freckles, his large hands—and his absolute disinclination to be impressed by one of the most famous men on Earth.

George searched his mind for a moment. “Polu kala, euxaristo. Tha ethela na—” He groped for words, then gave a laugh. “Hang the Greek!” he said. “It’s been far too many years since Trinity. May I present my friend Somerset?”

Somerset gave the atheist a cold Christian eye. “How d’ye do?”

George finished his introductions. There was the snapping of coach whips outside, and the sound of more stamping horses. The dogs began barking again. At least two more coaches had arrived. George led the party into the dining room. Mary found herself sitting next to George, with Claire and Bysshe across the table.

“Damme, I quite forgot to register,” Somerset said, rising from his bench. “What bed will you settle for, George?”

“Nothing less than Bonaparte’s.”

Somerset sighed. “I thought not,” he said.

“Did Bonaparte sleep here in Le Caillou?” Claire asked.

“The night before Waterloo.”

“How exciting! Is Waterloo nearby?” She looked at Bysshe. “Had we known, we could have asked for his room.”

“Which we then would have had to surrender to my lord Newstead,” Bysshe said tolerantly. “He has greater claim, after all, than we.”

George gave Mary his intent look again. His voice was pitched low. “I would not deprive two lovely ladies of their bed for all the Bonapartes in Europe.”

*But rather join us in it,* Mary thought. That look was clear enough.

The rest of George’s party—servants, aides-de-camp, clerks, one black man in full Mameluke fig, turned-up slippers, ostrich plumes, scarlet

turban and all— carried George’s equipage from his carriages. In addition to an endless series of trunks and a large miscellany of weaponry there were more animals. Not only the promised ape—actually a large monkey, which seated itself on George’s shoulder—but brightly-colored parrots in cages, a pair of greyhounds, some hooded hunting hawks, songbirds, two forlorn-looking kit foxes in cages, which set all the dogs howling and jumping in eagerness to get at them, and a half-grown panther in a jewelled collar, which the dogs knew better than to bark at. The innkeeper was loud in his complaint as he attempted to sort them all out and stay outside of the range of beaks, claws, and fangs.

Bysse watched with bright eyes, enjoying the spectacle. George’s friends looked as if they were weary of it.

“I hope we will sleep tonight,” Mary said.

“If you sleep not,” said George, playing with the monkey, “we shall contrive to keep you entertained.”

*How gracious to include your friends in the orgy,* Mary thought. But once again kept silent.

Bysse was still enjoying the parade of frolicking animals. He glanced at Mary. “Don’t you think, Maie, this is the very image of philosophical anarchism?”

“You are welcome to it, sir,” said Somerset, returning from the register. “George, your mastiff has injured the ostler’s dog. He is loud in his complaint.”

“I’ll have Ferrante pay him off.”

“See that you do. And have him pistol the brains out of that mastiff while he’s at it.”

“Injure poor Picton?” George was offended. “I’ll have none of it.”

“Poor Picton will have his fangs in the ostler next.”

“He must have been teasing the poor beast.”

“Picton will kill us all one day.” Grudgingly.

“Forgive us, Somerset-laddie.” Mary watched as George reached over to Somerset and tweaked his ear. Somerset reddened but seemed pleased.

“Mr. Shelley,” said Captain Austen. “I wonder if you know what surprises the kitchen has in store for us.”

Austen was a well-built man in a plain black coat, older than the others, with a lined and weathered naval face and a reserved manner unique in

this company.

“Board ‘em in the smoke! That’s the Navy for you!” George said. “Straight to the business of eating, never mind the other nonsense.”

“ If you ate wormy biscuit for twenty years of war,” said Harry Smith, “ you’d care about the food as well.”

Bysshe gave Austen a smile. “The provisions seem adequate enough for a country inn,” he said. “And the rooms are clean, unlike most in this country. Claire and the Maie and I do not eat meat, so I had to tell the cook how to prepare our dinner. But if your taste runs to fowl or something in the cutlet line I daresay the cook can set you up.”

“No meat!” George seemed enthralled by the concept. “Disciples of J.F. Newton, as I take it?”

“Among others,” said Mary.

“But are you well? Do you not feel an enervation? Are you not feverish with lack of a proper diet?” George leaned very close and touched Mary’s forehead with the back of one cool hand while he reached to find her pulse with the other. The monkey grimaced at her from his shoulder. Mary disengaged and placed her hands on the table.

“I’m quite well, I assure you,” she said.

“The Maie’s health is far better than when I met her,” Bysshe said.

“Mine too,” said Claire.

“I believe most diseases can be conquered by proper diet,” said Bysshe. And then he added,

“He slays the lamb that looks him in the face,  
And horribly devours his mangled flesh.”

“Let’s have some mangled flesh tonight, George,” said Somerset gaily.

“Do let’s,” added Smith.

George’s hand remained on Mary’s forehead. His voice was very soft. “If eating flesh offend thee,” he said, “I will eat but only greens.”

Mary could feel her hackles rise. “Order what you please,” she said. “I don’t care one way or another.”

“Brava, Miss Godwin!” said Smith thankfully. “Let it be mangled flesh

for us all, and to perdition with all those little Low Country cabbages!”

“I don’t like them, either,” said Claire.

George removed his hand from Mary’s forehead and tried to signal the innkeeper, who was still struggling to corral the dogs. George failed, frowned, and lowered his hand.

“I’m cheered to know you’re familiar with the works of Newton,” Bysse said.

“I wouldn’t say *familiar*,” said George. He was still trying to signal the innkeeper. “I haven’t read his books. But I know he wants me not to eat meat, and that’s all I need to know.”

Bysse folded his big hands on the table. “Oh, there’s much more than that. Abstaining from meat implies an entire new moral order, in which mankind is placed on an equal level with the animals.”

“George in particular should appreciate that,” said Harry Smith, and made a face at the monkey.

“I think I prefer being ranked above the animals,” George said. “And above most people, too.” He looked up at Bysse. “Shall we avoid talk of food matters before we eat? My stomach’s rumbling louder than a battery of Napoleon’s daughters.” He looked down at the monkey and assumed a high-pitched Scots dowager’s voice. “An’ sae is Jerome Bonaparte’s, annit nae, Jerome?”

George finally succeeded in attracting the innkeeper’s attention and the company ordered food and wine. Bread, cheese, and pickles were brought to tide them over in the meantime. Jerome Bonaparte was permitted off his master’s lap to roam free along the table and eat what he wished.

George watched as Bysse carved a piece of cheese for himself. “In addition to Newton, you would also be a follower of William Godwin?”

Bysse gave Mary a glance, then nodded. “Ay. Godwin also.”

“I thought I recognized that ‘philosophical anarchism’ of yours. Godwin was the rage when I was at Harrow. But not so much thought of now, eh? Excepting of course his lovely namesake.” Turning his gaze to Mary.

Mary gave him a cold look. “Truth is ever in fashion, my lord,” she said.

“Did you say *ever* or *never*!” Playfully. Mary said nothing, and George gave a shrug. “Truthful Master Godwin, then. And who else?”

“Ovid,” Mary said. The officers looked a little serious at this. She smiled. “Come now—he’s not as scandalous as he’s been made out. Merely playful.”



This did not reassure her audience. Bysshe offered Mary a private smile. “We’ve also been reading Mary Wollstonecraft.”

“Ah!” George cried. “Heaven save us from intellectual women!”

“Mary Wollstonecraft,” said Somerset thoughtfully. “She was a harlot in France, was she not?”

“I prefer to think of my mother,” said Mary carefully, “as a political thinker and authoress.”

There was sudden silence as Somerset turned white with mortification. Then George threw back his head and laughed.

“Sunburn me!” he said. “That answers as you deserve!”

Somerset visibly made an effort to collect his wits. “I am most sorry, Miss—” he began.

George laughed again. “By heaven, we’ll watch our words hereafter!”

Claire tittered. “I was in suspense, wondering if there would be a mishap. And there was, there *was!*”

George turned to Mary and managed to compose his face into an attitude of solemnity, though the amusement that danced in his eyes denied it.

“I sincerely apologize on behalf of us all, Miss Godwin. We are soldiers and are accustomed to speaking rough among ourselves, and have been abroad and are doubtless ignorant of the true worth of any individual—” He searched his mind for a moment, trying to work out a graceful way to conclude. “—outside of our own little circle,” he finished.

“Well said,” said Mary, “and accepted.” She had chosen more interesting ground on which to make her stand.

“Oh yes!” said Claire. “Well said indeed!”

“My mother is not much understood by the public,” Mary continued. “But intellectual women, it would seem, are not much understood by *you.*”

George leaned away from Mary and scanned her with cold eyes. “On the contrary,” he said. “I am married to an intellectual woman.”

“And she, I imagine...” Mary let the pause hang in the air for a moment, like a rapier before it strikes home. “... resides in England?”

George scowled. “She does.”

“I’m sure she has her books to keep her company.”

“And Francis Bacon,” George said, his voice sour. “Annabella is an

authority on Francis Bacon. And she is welcome to reform *him*, if she likes.”

Mary smiled at him. “Who keeps *you* company, my lord?”

There was a stir among his friends. He gave her that insolent, under-eyed look again.

“I am not often lonely,” he said.

“Tonight you will rest with the ghost of Napoleon,” she said. “Which of you has better claim to that bed?”

George gave a cold little laugh. “I believe that was decided at Waterloo.”

“The Duke’s victory, or so I’ve heard.”

George’s friends were giving each other alarmed looks. Mary decided she had drawn enough Byron blood. She took a piece of cheese.

“Tell us about Waterloo!” Claire insisted. “Is it far from here?”

“The field is a mile or so north,” said Somerset. He seemed relieved to turn to the subject of battles. “I had thought perhaps you were English tourists come to visit the site.”

“Our arrival is coincidence,” Bysshe said. He was looking at Mary narrow-eyed, as if he was trying to work something out. “I’m somewhat embarrassed for funds, and I’m in hope of finding a letter at Brussels from my—” He began to say “wife,” but changed the word to “family.”

“We’re on our way to Vienna,” Smith said.

“The long way ‘round,” said Somerset. “It’s grown unsafe in Paris—too many old Bonapartists lurking with guns and bombs, and of course George is the laddie they hate most. So we’re off to join the Duke as diplomats, but we plan to meet with his highness of Orange along the way. In Brussels, in two days’ time.”

“Good old Slender Billy!” said Smith. “I haven’t seen him since the battle.”

“The battle!” said Claire. “You said you would tell us!”

George gave her an irritated look. “Please, Miss Clairmont, I beg you. No battles before dinner.” His stomach rumbled audibly.

“Bysshe,” said Mary, “didn’t you say the cook had told you a ghost story?”

“A good one, too,” said Bysshe. “It happened in the house across the road, the one with the tile roof. A pair of old witches used to live there.

Sisters.” He looked up at George. “We may have ghosts before dinner, may we not?”

“For all of me, you may.”

“They dealt in charms and curses and so on, and made a living supplying the, ah, the supernatural needs of the district. It so happened that two different men had fallen in love with the same girl, and each man applied to one of the weird sisters for a love charm—each to a different sister, you see. One of them used his spell first and won the heart of the maiden, and this drove the other suitor into a rage. So he went to the witch who had sold him his charm, and demanded she change the young lady’s mind. When the witch insisted it was impossible, he drew his pistol and shot her dead.”

“How very un-Belgian of him,” drawled Smith.

Bysshe continued unperturbed. “So quick as a wink,” he said, “the dead witch’s sister seized a heavy kitchen cleaver and cut off the young man’s head with a single stroke. The head fell to the floor and bounced out the porch steps. And ever since that night—” He leaned across the table toward Mary, his voice dropping dramatically. “—people in the house have sometimes heard a thumping noise, and seen the *suitor’s head, dripping gore, bouncing down the steps.*”

Mary and Bysshe shared a delicious shiver. George gave Bysshe a thoughtful look.

“D’ye credit this sort of thing, Mr. Omnibus?”

Bysshe looked up. “Oh yes. I have a great belief in things supernatural.”

George gave an insolent smile, and Mary’s heart quickened as she recognized a trap.

“Then how can you be an atheist?” George asked.

Bysshe was startled. No one had ever asked him this question before. He gave a nervous laugh. “I am not so much opposed to God,” he said, “as I am a worshipper of Galileo and Newton. And of course an enemy of the established Church.”

“I see.”

A little smile drifted across Bysshe’s lips.

“Yes!” he said, “I have seen God’s worshippers unsheathe  
The sword of his revenge, when grace descended,

Confirming all unnatural impulses,  
To satisfy their desolating deeds;  
And frantic priests waved the ill-omened cross  
O'er the unhappy earth; then shone the sun  
On showers of gore from the upflashing steel  
Of safe assassin—”

“And *have* you seen such?” George’s look was piercing.

Bysshe blinked at him. “Beg pardon?”

“I asked if you *had* seen showers of gore, upflashing steel, all that sort of thing.”

“Ah. No.” He offered George a half-apologetic smile. “I do not hold warfare consonant with my principles.”

“Yes.” George’s stomach rumbled once more. “It’s rather more in my line than yours. So I think I am probably better qualified to judge it...” His lip twisted. “... *and* your principles.”

Mary felt her hackles rise. “Surely you don’t dispute that warfare is a great evil,” she said. “And that the church blesses war and its outcome.”

“The church—” He waved a hand. “The chaplains we had with us in Spain were fine men and did good work, from what I could see. Though we had damn few of them, as for the most part they preferred to judge war from their comfortable beds at home. And as for war—ay, it’s evil. Yes. Among other things.”

“*Among other things!*” Mary was outraged. “What other things?”

George looked at each of the officers in turn, then at Mary. “War is an abomination, I think we can all agree. But it is also an occasion for all that is great in mankind. Courage, comradeship, sacrifice. Heroism and nobility beyond the scope of imagination.”

“Glory,” said one-armed Somerset helpfully.

“Death!” snapped Mary. “Hideous, lingering death! Disease. Mutilation!” She realized she had stepped a little far, and bobbed her head toward Somerset, silently begging his pardon for bringing up his disfigurement. “Endless suffering among the starving widows and orphans,” she went on. “Early this year Bysshe and Jane and I walked across the part of France that the armies had marched over. It was a desert, my lord. Whole villages without a single soul. Women, children, and cripples in rags. Many without a roof over their head.”

“Ay,” said Harry Smith. “We saw it in Spain, all of us.”

“Miss Godwin,” said George, “those poor French people have my sympathy as well as yours. But if a nation is going to murder its rightful king, elect a tyrant, and attack every other nation in the world, then it can but expect to receive that which it giveth. I reserve far greater sympathy for the poor orphans and widows of Spain, Portugal, and the Low Countries.”

“And England,” said Captain Austen.

“Ay,” said George, “and England.”

“I did not say that England has not suffered,” said Mary. “Anyone with eyes can see the victims of the war. And the victims of the Corn Bill as well.”

“Enough.” George threw up his hands. “I heard enough debate on the Corn Bill in the House of Lords—I beg you, not here.”

“People are starving, my lord,” Mary said quietly.

“But thanks to Waterloo,” George said, “they at least starve in peace.”

“Here’s our flesh!” said a relieved Harry Smith. Napkins flourished, silverware rattled, the dinner was laid down. Bysshe took a bite of his cheese pie, then sampled one of the little Brabant cabbages and gave a freckled smile—he had not, as had Mary, grown tired of them. Smith, Somerset, and George chatted about various Army acquaintances, and the others ate in silence. Somerset, Mary noticed, had come equipped with a combination knife-and-fork and managed his cutlet efficiently.

George, she noted, ate only a little, despite the grumblings of his stomach.

“Is it not to your taste, my lord?” she asked.

“My appetite is off.” Shortly.

“That light cavalry figure don’t come without sacrifice,” said Smith. “I’m an infantryman, though,” brandishing knife and fork, “and can tuck in to my vittles.”

George gave him an irritated glance and sipped at his hock. “Cavalry, infantry, Senior Service, staff,” he said, pointing at himself, Smith, Austen, and Somerset with his fork. The fork swung to Bysshe. “Do you, sir, have an occupation? Besides being atheistical, I mean.”

Bysshe put down his knife and fork and answered deliberately. “I have been a scientist, and a reformer, and a sort of an engineer. I have now taken up poetry.”

“I didn’t know it was something to be *taken up*,” said George.

“Captain Austen’s sister does something in the literary line, I believe,” Harry Smith said.

Austen gave a little shake of his head. “Please, Harry. Not here.”

“I know she publishes anonymously, but—”

“She doesn’t want it known,” firmly, “and I prefer her wishes be respected.”

Smith gave Austen an apologetic look. “Sorry, Frank.”

Mary watched Austen’s distress with amusement. Austen had a spinster sister, she supposed—she could just imagine the type—who probably wrote ripe horrid Gothic novels, all terror and dark battlements and cloaked sensuality, all to the constant mortification of the family.

Well, Mary thought. She should be charitable. Perhaps they were good.

She and Bysse liked a good gothic, when they were in the mood. Bysse had even written a couple, when he was fifteen or so.

George turned to Bysse. “That was your own verse you quoted?”

“Yes.”

“I thought perhaps it was, as I hadn’t recognized it.”

“*Queen Mab*,” said Claire. “It’s *very* good.” She gave Bysse a look of adoration that sent a weary despairing cry through Mary’s nerves. “It’s got all Bysse’s ideas in it,” she said.

“And the publisher?”

“I published it myself,” Bysse said, “in an edition of seventy copies.”

George raised an eyebrow. “A self-published phenomenon, forsooth. But why so few?”

“The poem is a political statement in accordance with Mr. Godwin’s *Political Justice*. Were it widely circulated, the government might act to suppress it, and to prosecute the publisher.” He gave a shudder. “With people like Lord Ellenborough in office, I think it best to take no chances.”

“Lord Ellenborough is a great man,” said Captain Austen firmly. Mary was surprised at his emphatic tone. “He led for Mr. Warren Hastings, do you know, during his trial, and that trial lasted seven years or more and ended in acquittal. Governor Hastings did me many a good turn in India—he was the making of me. I’m sure I owe Lord Ellenborough my purest gratitude.”

Bysshe gave Austen a serious look. “Lord Ellenborough sent Daniel Eaton to prison for publishing Thomas Paine,” he said. “And he sent Leigh Hunt to prison for publishing the truth about the Prince Regent.”

“One an atheist,” Austen scowled, “the other a pamphleteer.”

“Why, so am I both,” said Bysshe sweetly, and, smiling, sipped his spring water. Mary wanted to clap aloud.

“It is the duty of the Lord Chief Justice to guard the realm from subversion,” said Somerset. “We were at war, you know.”

“We are no longer at war,” said Bysshe, “and Lord Ellenborough still sends good folk to prison.”

“At least,” said Mary, “he can no longer accuse reformers of being Jacobins. Not with France under the Bourbons again.”

“Of course he can,” Bysshe said. “Reform is an idea, and Jacobinism is an idea, and Ellenborough conceives them the same.”

“But are they not?” George said.

Mary’s temper flared. “Are you serious? Comparing those who seek to correct injustice with those who—”

“Who cut the heads off everyone with whom they disagreed?” George interrupted. “I’m perfectly serious. Robespierre was the very type of reformer— virtuous, sober, sedate, educated, a spotless private life. And how many thousands did he murder?” He jabbed his fork at Bysshe again, and Mary restrained the impulse to slap it out of his hand. “You may not like Ellenborough’s sentencing, but a few hours in the pillory or a few months in prison ain’t the same as beheading. And that’s what reform in England would come to in the end—mobs and demagogues heaping up death, and then a dictator like Cromwell, or worse luck Bonaparte, to end liberty for a whole generation.”

“I do not look to the French for a model,” said Bysshe, “but rather to America.”

“So did the French,” said George, “and look what *they* got.”

“If France had not desperately needed reform,” Bysshe said, “there would have been nothing so violent as their revolution. If England reforms itself, there need be no violence.”

“Ah. So if the government simply resigns, and frame-breakers and agitators and democratic philosophers and wandering poets take their place, then things shall be well in England.”

“Things will be better in any case,” Bysshe said quietly, “than they are

now.”

“Exactly!” Claire said.

George gave his companions a knowing look. *See how I humor this vagabond?* Mary read. Loathing stirred her heart.

Bysshe could read a look as well as Mary. His face darkened. “Please understand me,” he said. “I do not look for immediate change, nor do I preach violent revolution. Mr. Godwin has corrected that error in my thought. There will be little amendment for years to come. But Ellenborough is old, and the King is old and mad, and the Regent and his loathsome brothers are not young...” He smiled. “I will outlive them, will I not?”

George looked at him. “Will you outlive me, sir? I am not yet thirty.”

“I am three-and-twenty.” Mildly. “I believe the odds favor me.”

Bysshe and the others laughed, while George looked cynical and dyspeptic. *Used to being the young cavalier*, Mary thought. *He’s not so young any longer— how much longer will that pretty face last?*

“And of course advance of science may turn this debate irrelevant,” Bysshe went on. “Mr. Godwin calculates that with the use of mechanical aids, people may reduce their daily labor to an hour or two, to the general benefit of all.”

“But you oppose such machines, don’t ye?” George said. “You support the Luddites, I assume?”

“Ay, but—”

“And the frame-breakers are destroying the machines that have taken their livelihood, aren’t they? So where is your general benefit, then?”

Mary couldn’t hold it in any longer. She slapped her hand down on the table, and George and Bysshe started. “The riots occur because the profits of the looms were not used to benefit the weavers, but to enrich the mill owners! Were the owners to share their profits with the weavers, there would have been no disorder.”

George gave her a civil bow. “Your view of human nature is generous,” he said, “if you expect a mill owner to support the families of those who are not even his employees.”

“It would be for the good of all, wouldn’t it?” Bysshe said. “If he does not want his mills threatened and frames broken.”

“It sounds like extortion wrapped in pretty philosophy.”



“The mill owners will pay one way or another,” Mary pointed out. “They can pay taxes to the government to suppress the Luddites with militia and dragoons, or they can have the goodwill of the people, and let the swords and muskets rust.”

“They will buy the swords every time,” George said. “They are useful in ways other than suppressing disorder, such as securing trade routes and the safety of the nation.” He put on a benevolent face. “You must forgive me, but your view of humanity is too benign. You do not account for the violence and passion that are in the very heart of man, and which institutions such as law and religion are intended to help control. And when science serves the passions, only tragedy can result—when I think of science, I think of the science of Dr. Guillotin.”

“We are fallen,” said Captain Austen. “Eden will never be within our grasp.”

“The passions are a problem, but I think they can be turned to good,” said Bysshe. “That is—” He gave an apologetic smile. “That is the aim of my current work. To use the means of poetry to channel the passions to a humane and beneficent aim.”

“I offer you my very best wishes,” condescendingly, “but I fear mankind will disappoint you. Passions are—” George gave Mary an insolent, knowing smile. “—are the downfall of many a fine young virtue.”

Mary considered hitting him in the face. Bysshe seemed not to have noticed George’s look, nor Mary’s reaction. “Mr. Godwin ventured the thought that dreams are the source of many irrational passions,” he mused. “He believes that should we ever find a way of doing without sleep, the passions would fall away.”

“Ay!” barked George. “Through enervation, if nothing else.”

The others laughed. Mary decided she had had enough, and rose.

“I shall withdraw,” she said. “The journey has been fatiguing.”

The gentlemen, Bysshe excepted, rose to their feet. “Good night, Maie,” he said. “I will stay for a while, I think.”

“As you like, Bysshe.” Mary looked at her sister. “Jane? I mean Claire? Will you come with me?”

“Oh, no.” Quickly. “I’m not at all tired.”

Annoyance stiffened Mary’s spine. “As you like,” she said.

George bowed toward her, picked a candle off the table, and offered her an arm. “May I light you up the stair? I should like to apologize for my

temerity in contradicting such a charming lady.” He offered his brightest smile. “I think *my* poor virtue will extend that far, yes?”

She looked at him coldly—she couldn’t think it customary, even in George’s circles, to escort a woman to her bedroom.

Damn it anyway. “My lord,” she said, and put her arm through his.

Jerome Bonaparte made a flying leap from the table and landed on George’s shoulder. It clung to his long auburn hair, screamed, and made a face, and the others laughed. Mary considered the thought of being escorted up to bed by a lord and a monkey, and it improved her humor.

“Goodnight, gentlemen,” Mary said. “Claire.”

The gentlemen reseated themselves and George took Mary up the stairs. They were so narrow and steep that they couldn’t go up abreast; George, with the candle, went first, and Mary, holding his hand, came up behind. Her door was the first up the stairs; she put her hand on the wooden door handle and turned to face her escort. The monkey leered at her from his shoulder.

“I thank you for your company, my lord,” she said. “I fear your journey was a little short.”

“I wished a word with you,” softly, “a little apart from the others.”

Mary stiffened. To her annoyance her heart gave a lurch. “What word is that?” she asked.

His expression was all affability. “I am sensible to the difficulties that you and your sister must be having. Without money in a foreign country, and with your only protector a man—” He hesitated. Jerome Bonaparte, jealous for his attention, tugged at his hair. “A charming man of noble ideals, surely, but without money.”

“I thank you for your concern, but it is misplaced,” Mary said. “Claire and I are perfectly well.”

“Your health ain’t my worry,” he said. Was he deliberately misunderstanding? Mary wondered in fury. “I worry for your future—you are on an adventure with a man who cannot support you, cannot see you safe home, cannot marry you.”

“Bysshe and I do not wish to marry.” The words caught at her heart. “We are free.”

“And the damage to your reputation in society—” he began, and came up short when she burst into laughter. He looked severe, while the monkey mocked him from his shoulder. “You may laugh now, Miss Godwin, but

there are those who will use this adventure against you. Political enemies of your father at the very least.”

“That isn’t why I was laughing. I am the daughter of William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft—I *have* no reputation! It’s like being the natural daughter of Lucifer and the Scarlet Woman of Babylon. Nothing is expected of us, nothing at all. Society has given us license to do as we please. We were dead to them from birth.”

He gave her a narrow look. “But you have at least a little concern for the proprieties—why else travel pseudonymously?”

Mary looked at him in surprise. “What d’you mean?”

He smiled. “Give me a little credit, Miss Godwin. When you call your sister *Jane* half the time, and your protector calls you *May* ...”

Mary laughed again. “*The* Maie—Maie for short—is one of Bysshe’s pet names for me. The other is Pecksie.”

“Oh.”

“And Jane is my sister’s given name, which she has always hated. Last year she decided to call herself Clara or Claire—this week it is Claire.”

Jerome Bonaparte began to yank at George’s ear, and George made a face, pulled the monkey from his shoulder, and shook it with mock ferocity. Again he spoke in the cracked Scots dowager’s voice. “Are ye sae donsie wicked, creeture? Tae Elba w’ye!”

Mary burst into laughter again. George gave her a careless grin, then returned the monkey to his shoulder. It sat and regarded Mary with bright, wise eyes.

“Miss Godwin, I am truly concerned for you, believe else of me what you will.”

Mary’s laughter died away. She took the candle from his hand. “Please, my lord. My sister and I are perfectly safe in Mr. Shelley’s company.”

“You will not accept my protection? I will freely give it.”

“We do not need it. I thank you.”

“Will you not take a loan, then? To see you safe across the Channel? Mr. Shelley may pay me back if he is ever in funds.”

Mary shook her head.

A little of the old insolence returned to George’s expression. “Well. I have done what I could.”

“Good night, Lord Newstead.”

“Good night.”

Mary readied herself for bed and climbed atop the soft mattress. She tried to read her Italian grammar, but the sounds coming up the stairway were a distraction. There was loud conversation, and singing, and then Claire’s fine voice, unaccompanied, rising clear and sweet up the narrow stair.

*Torcere*, Mary thought, looking fiercely at her book, *attorcere*, *rattorcere*, *scontorcere*, *torcere*.

Twist. Twist, twist, twist, twist.

Claire finished, and there was loud applause. Bysse came in shortly afterwards. His eyes sparkled and his color was high. “We were singing,” he said.

“I heard.”

“I hope we didn’t disturb you.” He began to undress.

Mary frowned at her book. “You did.”

“And I argued some more with Byron.” He looked at her and smiled. “Imagine it—if we could convert Byron! Bring one of the most famous men in the world to our views.”

She gave him a look. “I can think of nothing more disastrous to our cause than to have him lead it.”

“Byron’s famous. And he’s a splendid man.” He looked at her with a self-conscious grin. “I have a pair of byrons, you know, back home. I think I have a good turn of ankle, but the things are the very devil to lace. You really need servants for it.”

“He’s Newstead now. Not Byron. I wonder if they’ll have to change the name of the boot?”

“Why would he change his name, d’you suppose? After he’d become famous with it.”

“Wellington became famous as Wellesley.”

“Wellington *had* to change his name. His brother was *already* Lord Wellesley.” He approached the bed and smiled down at her. “He likes you.”

“He likes any woman who crosses his path. Or so I understand.”

Bysse crawled into the bed and put his arm around her, the hand resting warmly on her belly. He smelled of the tobacco he’d been smoking

with George. She put her hand atop his, feeling on the third finger the gold wedding ring he still wore. Dissatisfaction crackled through her. “You are free, you know.” He spoke softly into her ear. “You can be with Byron if you wish.”

Mary gave him an irritated look. “I don’t *wish* to be with Byron. I want to be with you.”

“But you *may*,” whispering, the hand stroking her belly, “be with Byron if you want.”

Temper flared through Mary. “I don’t *want* Byron!” she said. “And I don’t want Mr. Thomas Jefferson Hogg, or any of your other friends!”

He seemed a little hurt. “Hogg’s a splendid fellow.”

“Hogg tried to seduce your wife, and he’s tried to seduce me. And I don’t understand how he remains your best friend.”

“Because we agree on everything, and I hold him no malice where his intent was not malicious.” Bysshe gave her a searching look. “I only want you to be free. If we’re not free, our love is chained, chained absolutely, and all ruined. I can’t live that way—I found that out with Harriet.”

She sighed, put her arm around him, drew her fingers through his tangled hair. He rested his head on her shoulder and looked up into her eyes. “I want to be *free* to be with you,” Mary told him. “Why will that not suit?”

“It suits.” He kissed her cheek. “It suits very well.” He looked up at her happily. “And if Harriet joins us in Brussels, with a little money, then all shall be perfect.”

Mary gazed at him, utterly unable to understand how he could think his wife would join them, or why, for that matter, he thought it a good idea.

*He misses his little boy, she thought. He wants to be with him.*

The thought rang hollow in her mind.

He kissed her again, his hand moving along her belly, touching her lightly. “My golden-haired Maie.” The hand cupped her breast. Her breath hissed inward.

“Careful,” she said. “I’m very tender there.”

“I will be nothing but tenderness.” The kisses reached her lips. “I desire nothing but tenderness for you.”

She turned to him, let his lips brush against hers, then press more firmly. Sensation, a little painful, flushed her breast. His tongue touched

hers. Desire rose and she put her arms around him.

The door opened and Claire came in, chattering of George while she undressed. Mood broken, tenderness broken, there was nothing to do but sleep.

“Come and look,” Mary said, “here’s a cat eating roses; she’ll turn into a woman, when beasts eat these roses they turn into men and women.” But there was no one in the cottage, only the sound of the wind.

Fear touched her, cold on the back of her neck.

She stepped into the cottage, and suddenly there was something blocking the sun that came through the windows, an enormous figure, monstrous and black and hungry...

Nausea and the sounds of swordplay woke her. A dog was barking maniacally. Mary rose from the bed swiftly and wrapped her shawl around herself. The room was hot and stuffy, and her gorge rose. She stepped to the window, trying not to vomit, and opened the pane to bring in fresh air.

Coolness touched her cheeks. Below in the courtyard of the inn was Pasmanny, the fencing teacher, slashing madly at his pupil, Byron. Newstead. *George*, she reminded herself, she would remember he was *George*.

And serve him right.

She dragged welcome morning air into her lungs as the two battled below her. George was in his shirt, planted firmly on his strong, muscular legs, his pretty face set in an expression of intent calculation. Pasmanny flung himself at the man, darting in and out, his sword almost fluid in its movement. They were using straight heavy sabers, dangerous even if unsharpened, and no protective equipment at all. A huge black dog, tied to the vermilion wheel of a big dark-blue barouche, barked at the both of them without cease.

Nausea swam over Mary; she closed her eyes and clutched the windowsill. The ringing of the swords suddenly seemed very far away.

“Are they fighting?” Claire’s fingers clutched her shoulder. “Is it a duel? Oh, it’s *Byron!*”

Mary abandoned the window and groped her way to the bed. Sweat beaded on her forehead. Bysse blinked muzzily at her from his pillow.

“I must go down and watch,” said Claire. She reached for her clothing

and, hopping, managed to dress without missing a second of the action outside. She grabbed a hairbrush on her way out the door and was arranging her hair on the run even before the door slammed behind her.

“Whatever is happening?” Bysse murmured. She reached blindly for his hand and clutched it.

“Bysse,” she gasped. “I am with child. I must be.”

“I shouldn’t think so.” Calmly. “We’ve been using every precaution.” He touched her cheek. His hand was cool. “It’s the travel and excitement. Perhaps a bad egg.”

Nausea blackened her vision and bent her double. Sweat fell in stately rhythm from her forehead to the floor. “This can’t be a bad egg,” she said. “Not day after day.”

“Poor Maie.” He nestled behind her, stroked her back and shoulders. “Perhaps there is a flaw in the theory,” he said. “Time will tell.”

*No turning back*, Mary thought. She had *wanted* there to be no turning back, to burn every bridge behind her, commit herself totally, as her mother had, to her beliefs. And now she’d succeeded—she and Bysse were linked forever, linked by the child in her womb. Even if they parted, if—free, as they both wished to be—he abandoned this union, there would still be that link, those bridges burnt, her mother’s defiant inheritance fulfilled...

*Perhaps there is a flaw in the theory*. She wanted to laugh and cry at once.

Bysse stroked her, his thoughts his own, and outside the martial clangor went on and on.

It was some time before she could dress and go down to the common rooms. The sabre practice had ended, and Bysse and Claire were already breaking their fast with Somerset, Smith, and Captain Austen. The thought of breakfast made Mary ill, so she wandered outside into the courtyard, where the two breathless swordsmen, towels draped around their necks, were sitting on a bench drinking water, with a tin dipper, from an old wooden bucket. The huge black dog barked, foaming, as she stepped out of the inn, and the two men, seeing her, rose.

“Please sit, gentlemen,” she said, waving them back to their bench; she walked across the courtyard to the big open gate and stepped outside. She leaned against the whitewashed stone wall and took deep breaths of the

country air. Sweet-smelling wildflowers grew in the verges of the highway. Prosperous-looking villagers nodded pleasantly as they passed about their errands.

“Looking for your haunted house, Miss Godwin?”

George’s inevitable voice grated on her ears. She looked at him over her shoulder. “My intention was simply to enjoy the morning.”

“I hope I’m not spoiling it.”

Reluctant courtesy rescued him from her own riposting tongue. “How was the Emperor’s bed?” she said finally.

He stepped out into the road. “I believe I slept better than he did, and longer.” He smiled at her. “No ghosts walked.”

“But you still fought a battle after your sleep.”

“A far, far better one. Waterloo was not something I would care to experience more than once.”

“I shouldn’t care to experience it even the first time.”

“Well. You’re female, of course.” All offhand, unaware of her rising hackles. He looked up and down the highway.

“D’ye know, this is the first time I’ve seen this road in peace. I first rode it north during the retreat from Quatre Bras, a miserable rainy night, and then there was the chase south after Boney the night of Waterloo, then later the advance with the army to Paris...” He shook his head. “It’s a pleasant road, ain’t it? Much better without the armies.”

“Yes.”

“We went along there.” His hand sketched a line across the opposite horizon. “This road was choked with retreating French, so we went around them. With two squadrons of Vandeleur’s lads, the 12th, the Prince of Wales’s Own, all I could find once the French gave way. I knew Boney would be running, and I knew it had to be along this road. I had to find him, make certain he would never trouble our peace. Find him for England.” He dropped right fist into left palm.

“Boney’d left two battalions of the Guard to hold us, but I went around them. I knew the Prussians would be after him, too, and their mounts were fresher. So we drove on through the night, jumping fences, breaking down hedges, galloping like madmen, and then we found him at Genappe. The bridge was so crammed with refugees that he couldn’t get his barouche across.”

Mary watched carefully as George, uninvited, told the story that he



must, by now, have told a hundred times, and wondered why he was telling it now to someone with such a clear distaste for things military. His color was high, and he was still breathing hard from his exercise; sweat gleamed on his immaculate forehead and matted his shirt; she could see the pulse throbbing in his throat. Perhaps the swordplay and sight of the road had brought the memory back; perhaps he was merely, after all, trying to impress her.

*A female, of course.* Damn the man.

“They’d brought a white Arab up for him to ride away,” George went on. “His Chasseurs of the Guard were close around. I told each trooper to mark his enemy as we rode up—we came up at a slow trot, in silence, our weapons sheathed. In the dark the enemy took us for French—our uniforms were similar enough. I gave the signal—we drew pistols and carbines—half the French saddles were emptied in an instant. Some poor lad of a cornet tried to get in my way, and I cut him up through the teeth. Then there he was—the Emperor. With one foot in the stirrup, and Roustam the Mameluke ready to boost him into the saddle.”

A tigerish, triumphant smile spread across George’s face. His eyes were focused down the road, not seeing her at all. “I put my dripping point in his face, and for the life of me I couldn’t think of any French to say except to tell him to sit down. ‘*Asseyez-vous!*’ I ordered, and he gave me a sullen look and sat down, right down in the muddy roadway, with the carbines still cracking around us and bullets flying through the air. And I thought, He’s finished. He’s done. There’s nothing left of him now. We finished off his bodyguard—they hadn’t a chance after our first volley. The French soldiers around us thought we were the Prussian advance guard, and they were running as fast as their legs could carry them. Either they didn’t know we had their Emperor or they didn’t care. So we dragged Boney’s barouche off the road, and dragged Boney with it, and ten minutes later the Prussians galloped up—the Death’s Head Hussars under Gneisenau, all in black and silver, riding like devils. But the devils had lost the prize.”

Looking at the wild glow in George’s eyes Mary realized that she’d been wrong—the story was not for her at all, but for *him*. For George. He needed it somehow, this affirmation of himself, the enunciated remembrance of his moment of triumph.

But why? Why did he need it?

She realized his eyes were on her. “Would you like to see the coach, Miss Godwin?” he asked. The question surprised her.

“It’s here?”

“I kept it.” He laughed. “Why not? It was mine. What Captain Austen would call a fair prize of war.” He offered her his arm. She took it, curious about what else she might discover.

The black mastiff began slavering at her the second she set foot inside the courtyard. Its howls filled the air. “Hush, Picton,” George said, and walked straight to the big gold-trimmed blue coach with vermilion wheels. The door had the Byron arms and the Latin motto CREDE BYRON.

*Should* she believe him? Mary wondered. And if so, how much?

“This is Bonaparte’s?” she said.

“Was, Miss Godwin. Till June 16th last. *Down, Picton!*” The dog lunged at him, and he wrestled with it, laughing, until it calmed down and began to fawn on him.

George stepped to the door and opened it. “The Imperial symbols are still on the lining, as you see.” The door and couch were lined with rich purple, with golden bees and the letter N worked in heavy gold embroidery. “Fine Italian leatherwork,” he said. “Drop-down secretares so that the great man could write or dictate on the march. Holsters for pistols.” He knocked on the coach’s polished side. “Bulletproof. There are steel panels built in, just in case any of the Great Man’s subjects decided to imitate Marcus Brutus.” He smiled. “I was glad for that steel in Paris, I assure you, with Bonapartist assassins lurking under every tree.” A mischievous gleam entered his eye. “And last, the best thing of all.” He opened a compartment under one of the seats and withdrew a solid silver chamber pot. “You’ll notice it still bears the imperial N.”

“Vanity in silver.”

“Possibly. Or perhaps he was afraid one of his soldiers would steal it if he didn’t mark it for his own.”

Mary looked at the preposterous object and found herself laughing. George looked pleased and stowed the chamber pot in its little cabinet. He looked at her with his head cocked to one side. “You will not reconsider my offer?”

“No.” Mary stiffened. “Please don’t mention it again.”

The mastiff Picton began to howl again, and George seized its collar and told it to behave itself. Mary turned to see Claire walking toward them.

“Won’t you be joining us for breakfast, my lord?”

George straightened. “Perhaps a crust or two. I’m not much for breakfast.”

Still fasting, Mary thought. “It would make such sense for you to give up meat, you know,” she said. “Since you deprive yourself of food anyway.”

“I prefer not to deny myself pleasure, even if the quantities are necessarily restricted.”

“Your swordplay was magnificent.”

“Thank you. Cavalry style, you know—all slash and dash. But I *am* good, for a’ that.”

“I know you’re busy, but—” Claire bit her lip. “Will you take us to Waterloo?”

“Claire!” cried Mary.

Claire gave a nervous laugh. “Truly,” she said. “I’m absolutely with child to see Waterloo.”

George looked at her, his eyes intent. “Very well,” he said. “We’ll be driving through it in any case. And Captain Austen has expressed an interest.”

Fury rose in Mary’s heart. “Claire, how *dare* you impose—”

“Ha’ ye nae pity for the puir lassie?” The Scots voice was mock-severe. “Ye shall nae keep her fra’ her Waterloo.”

Claire’s Waterloo, Mary thought, was exactly what she wanted to keep her from.

George offered them his exaggerated, flourishing bow. “If you’ll excuse me, ladies, I must give the necessary orders.”

He strode through the door. Pasmany followed, the swords tucked under his arm. Claire gave a little joyous jump, her shoes scraping on cobbles. “I can hardly believe it,” she said. “Byron showing us Waterloo!”

“I can’t believe it either,” Mary said. She sighed wearily and headed for the dining room.

Perhaps she would dare to sip a little milk.

They rode out in Napoleon’s six-horse barouche, Claire, Mary, and Bysse inside with George, and Smith, Somerset, and Captain Austen sharing the outside rear seat. The leather top with its bulletproof steel inserts had been folded away and the inside passengers could all enjoy the open air. The barouche wasn’t driven by a coachman up top, but by three postboys who rode the right-hand horses, so there was nothing in front to

interrupt the view. Bysshe's mule and little carriage, filled with bags and books, ate dust behind along with the officers' baggage coaches, all driven by George's servants.

The men talked of war and Claire listened to them with shining eyes. Mary concentrated on enjoying the shape of the low hills with their whitewashed farmhouses and red tile roofs, the cut fields of golden rye stubble, the smell of wildflowers and the sound of birdsong. It was only when the carriage passed a walled farm, its whitewash marred by bullets and cannon shot, that her reverie was marred by the thought of what had happened here.

"La Haie Sainte," George remarked. "The King's German Legion held it throughout the battle, even after they'd run out of ammunition. I sent Mercer's horse guns to keep the French from the walls, else Lord knows what would have happened." He stood in the carriage, looked left and right, frowned. "These roads we're about to pass were sunken—an obstacle to both sides, but mainly to the French. They're filled in now. Mass graves."

"The French were cut down in heaps during their cavalry attack," Somerset added. "The piles were eight feet tall, men and horses."

"How gruesome!" laughed Claire.

"Turn right, Swinson," said George.

Homemade souvenir stands had been set up at the crossroads. Prosperous-looking rustics hawked torn uniforms, breastplates, swords, muskets, bayonets. Somerset scowled at them. "They must have made a fortune looting the dead."

"And the living," said Smith. "Some of our poor wounded weren't brought in till two days after the battle. Many had been stripped naked by the peasants."

A young man ran up alongside the coach, shouting in French. He explained he had been in the battle, a guide to the great Englishman Lord Byron, and would guide them over the field for a few guilders.

"Never heard of you," drawled George, and dismissed him. "Hey! Swinson! Pull up here."

The postboys pulled up their teams. George opened the door of the coach and strolled to one of the souvenir stands. When he returned it was with a French breastplate and helmet. Streaks of rust dribbled down the breastplate, and the helmet's horsehair plume smelled of mildew.

"I thought we could take a few shots at it," George said. "I'd like to see

whether armor provides any protection at all against bullets—I suspect not. There’s a movement afoot at Whitehall to give breastplates to the Household Brigade, and I suspect they ain’t worth the weight. If I can shoot a few holes in this with my Mantons, I may be able to prove my point.”

They drove down a rutted road of soft earth. It was lined with thorn hedges, but most of them had been broken down during the battle and there were long vistas of rye stubble, the gentle sloping ground, the pattern of plow and harvest. Occasionally the coach wheels grated on something, and Mary remembered they were moving along a mass grave, over the decaying flesh and whitening bones of hundreds of horses and men. A cloud passed across the sun, and she shivered.

“Can ye pull through the hedge, Swinson?” George asked. “I think the ground is firm enough to support us—no rain for a few days at least.” The lead postboy studied the hedge with a practiced eye, then guided the lead team through a gap in it.

The barouche rocked over exposed roots and broken limbs, then ground onto a rutted sward of green grass, knee-high, that led gently down into the valley they’d just crossed. George stood again, his eyes scanning the ground. “Pull up over there,” he said, pointing, and the coachman complied.

“Here you can see where the battle was won,” George said. He tossed his clanging armor out onto the grass, opened the coach door and stepped out himself. The others followed, Mary reluctantly. George pointed with one elegant hand at the ridge running along the opposite end of the valley from their own, a half-mile opposite.

“Napoleon’s grand battery,” he said. “Eighty guns, many of them twelve-pounders—Boney called them his daughters. He was an artilleryman, you know, and he always prepared his attacks with a massed bombardment. The guns fired for an hour and put our poor fellows through hell. Bylandt’s Dutchmen were standing in the open, right where we are now, and the guns broke ‘em entirely.

“Then the main attack came, about two o’clock. Count d’Erlon’s corps, 16,000 strong, arrayed 25 men deep with heavy cavalry on the wings. They captured La Haye and Papelotte, those farms over there on the left, and rolled up this ridge with drums beating the *pas de charge* ...”

George turned. There was a smile on his face. Mary watched him closely—the pulse was beating like d’Erlon’s drums in his throat, and his color was high. He was loving every second of this.

He went on, describing the action, and against her will Mary found herself seeing it, Picton's division lying in wait, prone on the reverse slope, George bringing the heavy cavalry up, the cannons banging away. Picton's men rising, firing their volleys, following with the bayonet. The Highlanders screaming in Gaelic, their plumes nodding as they drew their long broadswords and plunged into the fight, the pipers playing "Johnnie Cope" amid all the screams and clatter. George leading the Household and Union Brigades against the enemy cavalry, the huge grain-fed English hunters driving back the chargers from Normandy. And then George falling on d'Erlon's flanks, driving the French in a frightened mob all the way back across the valley while the British horsemen slashed at their backs. The French gunners of the grand battery unable to fire for fear of hitting their own men, and then dying themselves under the British sabres.

Mary could sense as well the things George left out. The sound of steel grating on bone. Wails and moans of the wounded, the horrid challenging roars of the horses. And in the end, a valley filled with stillness, a carpet of bodies and pierced flesh...

George gave a long sigh. "Our cavalry are brave, you know, far too brave for their own good. And the officers get their early training in steeplechases and the hunt, and their instinct is to ride straight at the objective at full gallop, which is absolutely the worst thing cavalry can ever do. After Slade led his command to disaster back in the Year Twelve, the Duke realized he could only commit cavalry at his peril. In Spain we finally trained the horse to maneuver and to make careful charges, but the Union and Household troops hadn't been in the Peninsula, and didn't know the drill... I drove myself mad in the weeks before the battle, trying to beat the recall orders into them." He laughed selfconsciously. "My heart was in my mouth during the whole charge, I confess, less with fear of the enemy than with terror my own men would run mad. But they answered the trumpets, all but the Inniskillings, who wouldnae listen—the Irish blood was up—and while they ran off into the valley, the rest of us stayed in the grand battery. Sabred the gunners, drove off the limbers with the ready ammunition—and where we could we took the wheels off the guns, and rolled 'em back to our lines like boys with hoops. And the Inniskillings—" He shook his head. "They ran wild into the enemy lines, and Boney loosed his lancers at 'em, and they died almost to a man. I had to watch from the middle of the battery, with my officers begging to be let slip again and rescue their comrades, and I had to forbid it."

There were absolute tears in George's eyes. Mary watched in fascination

and wondered if this was a part of the performance, or whether he was genuinely affected—but then she saw that Bysshe’s eyes had misted over and Somerset was wiping his eyes with his one good sleeve. So, she thought, she *could* believe Byron, at least a little.

“Well.” George cleared his throat, trying to control himself. “Well. We came back across the valley herding thousands of prisoners—and that charge proved the winning stroke. Boney attacked later, of course—all his heavy cavalry came knee-to-knee up the middle, between La Haie Sainte and Hougomont,” gesturing to the left with one arm, “we had great guns and squares of infantry to hold them, and my heavies to counterattack. The Prussians were pressing the French at Plancenoit and Papelotte. Boney’s last throw of the dice sent the Old Guard across the valley after sunset, but our Guards under Maitland held them, and Colborne’s 52nd and the Belgian Chasseurs got round their flanks, and after they broke I let the Household and Union troopers have their head—we swept ‘em away. Sabred and trampled Boney’s finest troops right in front of his eyes, all in revenge for the brave, mad Inniskillings—the only time his Guard ever failed in attack, and it marked the end of his reign. We were blown by the end of it, but Boney had nothing left to counterattack with. I knew he would flee. So I had a fresh horse brought up and went after him.”

“So you won the battle of Waterloo!” said Claire.

George gave her a modest look that, to Mary, seemed false as the very devil. “I was privileged to have a decisive part. But ‘twas the Duke that won the battle. We all fought at his direction.”

“But you captured Napoleon and ended the Empire!”

He smiled. “That I did do, lassie, ay.”

“Bravo!” Claire clapped her hands.

Harry Smith glanced up with bright eyes. “D’ye know, George,” he said, “pleased as I am to hear this modest recitation of your accomplishments, I find precious little mention in your discourse of the *infantry*. I seem to remember fighting a few Frenchie myself, down Hougomont way, with Reille’s whole corps marching down on us, and I believe I can recollect in my dim footsoldier’s mind that I stood all day under cannonshot and bursting mortar bombs, and that Kellerman’s heavy cavalry came wave after wave all afternoon, with the Old Guard afterward as a lagniappe...”

“I am pleased that you had some little part,” George said, and bowed from his slim cavalry waist.

“Your lordship’s condescension does you more credit than I can possibly

express.” Returning the bow.

George reached out and gave Smith’s ear an affectionate tweak. “May I continue my tale? And then we may travel to Captain Harry’s part of the battlefield, and he will remind us of whatever small role it was the footsoldiers played.”

George went through the story of Napoleon’s capture again. It was the same, sentiment for sentiment, almost word for word. Mary wandered away, the fat moist grass turning the hem of her skirt green. Skylarks danced through the air, trilling as they went. She wandered by the old broken thorn hedge and saw wild roses blossoming in it, and she remembered the wild roses planted on her mother’s grave.

She thought of George Gordon Noel with tears in his eyes, and the way the others had wanted to weep—even Bysshe, who hadn’t been there—and all for the loss of some Irishmen who, had they been crippled or out of uniform or begging for food or employment, these fine English officers would probably have turned into the street to starve...

She looked up at the sound of footsteps. Harry Smith walked up and nodded pleasantly. “I believe I have heard George give this speech,” he said.

“So have I. Does he give it often?”

“Oh yes.” His voice dropped, imitated George’s limpid dramatics. “*He’s finished. He’s done. There’s nothing left of him now.*” Mary covered amusement with her hand. “Though the tale has improved somewhat since the first time,” Smith added. “In this poor infantryman’s opinion.”

Mary gave him a careful look. “Is he all he seems to think he is?”

Smith gave a thin smile. “Oh, ay. The greatest cavalryman of our time, to be sure. Without doubt a genius. *Chevalier sans peur et*—well, I won’t say *sans reproche*. Not quite.” His brow contracted as he gave careful thought to his next words. “He purchased his way up to colonel—that would be with Lady Newstead’s money—but since then he’s earned his spurs.”

“He truly is talented, then.”

“Truly. But of course he’s lucky, too. If Le Marchant hadn’t died at Salamanca, George wouldn’t have been able to get his heavy brigade, and if poor General Cotton hadn’t been shot by our own sentry George wouldn’t have got all the cavalry in time for Vitoria, and of course if Uxbridge hadn’t run off with Wellington’s sister-in-law then George might not have got command at Waterloo... Young and without political



influence as he is, he wouldn't have *kept* all those commands for long if he hadn't spent his every leave getting soused with that unspeakable hound the Prince of Wales. Ay, there's been luck involved. But who won't wish for luck in his life, eh?"

"What if his runs out?"

Smith gave this notion the same careful consideration. "I don't know," he said finally. "He's fortune's laddie, but that don't mean he's without character."

"You surprise me, speaking of him so frankly."

"We've been friends since Spain. And nothing I say will matter in any case." He smiled. "Besides, hardly anyone ever asks for *my* opinion."

The sound of Claire's laughter and applause carried across the sward. Smith cocked an eye at the other party. "Boney's at sword's point, if I'm not mistaken."

"Your turn for glory."

"Ay. If anyone will listen after George's already won the battle." He held out his arm and Mary took it. "You should meet my wife. Juanita—I met her in Spain at the storming of Badajoz. The troops were carrying away the loot, but I carried her away instead." He looked at her thoughtfully. "You have a certain spirit in common."

Mary felt flattered. "Thank you, Captain Smith. I'm honored by the comparison."

They moved to another part of the battlefield. There was a picnic overlooking the chateau of Hougoumont that lay red-roofed in its valley next to a well-tended orchard. Part of the chateau had been destroyed in the battle, Smith reported, but it had been rebuilt since.

Rebuilt, Mary thought, by owners enriched by battlefield loot. George called for his pistols and moved the cuirass a distance away, propping it up on a small slope with the helmet sitting on top. A servant brought the Mantons and loaded them, and while the others stood and watched, George aimed and fired. Claire clapped her hands and laughed, though there was no discernible effect. White gunsmoke drifted on the morning breeze. George presented his second pistol, paused to aim, fired again. There was a whining sound and a scar appeared on the shoulder of the cuirass. The other men laughed.

"That cuirassier's got you for sure!" Harry Smith said.

“May I venture a shot?” Bysshe asked. George assented.

One of George’s servants reloaded the pistols while George gave Bysshe instruction in shooting. “Hold the arm out straight and use the bead to aim.”

“I like keeping the elbow bent a little,” Bysshe said. “Not tucked in like a duellist, but not locked, either.”

Bysshe took effortless aim—Mary’s heart leaped at the grace of his movement—then Bysshe paused an instant and fired. There was a thumping sound and a hole appeared in the French breastplate, directly over the heart.

“Luck!” George said.

“Yes!” Claire said. “Purest luck!”

“Not so,” Bysshe said easily. “Observe the plume holder.” He presented the other pistol, took briefest aim, fired. With a little whine the helmet’s metal plume holder took flight and whipped spinning through the air. Claire applauded and gave a cheer.

Mary smelled powder on the gentle morning wind.

Bysshe returned the pistols to George. “Fine weapons,” he said, “though I prefer an octagonal barrel, as you can sight along the top.”

George smiled thinly and said nothing.

“Mr. Shelley,” said Somerset, “you have the makings of a soldier.”

“I’ve always enjoyed a good shoot,” Bysshe said, “though of course I won’t fire at an animal. And as for soldiering, who knows what I might have been were I not exposed to Mr. Godwin’s political thought?”

There was silence at this. Bysshe smiled at George. “You shouldn’t lock the elbow out,” he said. “That fashion, every little motion of the body transmits itself to the weapon. If you keep the elbow bent a bit, it forms a sort of a spring to absorb involuntary muscle tremors and you’ll have better control.” He looked at the others gaily. “It’s not for nothing I was an engineer!”

George handed the pistols to his servant for loading. “We’ll fire another volley,” he said. His voice was curt.

Mary watched George as the Mantons were loaded, as he presented each pistol—straight-armed—and fired again. One knocked the helmet off its perch, the other struck the breastplate at an angle and bounced off. The others laughed, and Mary could see a little muscle twitching in George’s cheek.

“My turn, George,” said Harry Smith, and the pistols were recharged. His first shot threw up turf, but the second punched a hole in the cuirass. “There,” Smith said, “that should satisfy the Horse Guards that armor ain’t worth the weight.”

Somerset took his turn, firing awkwardly with his one hand, and missed both shots.

“Another volley,” George said.

There was something unpleasant in his tone, and the others took hushed notice. The pistols were reloaded. George presented the first pistol at the target, and Mary could see how he was vibrating with passion, so taut his knuckles were white on the pistol-grip. His shots missed clean.

“Bad luck, George,” Somerset said. His voice was calming. “Probably the bullets were deformed and didn’t fly right.”

“Another volley,” said George.

“We have an appointment in Brussels, George.”

“It can wait.”

The others drew aside and clustered together while George insisted on firing several more times. “What a troublesome fellow he is,” Smith muttered. Eventually George put some holes in the cuirass, collected it, and stalked to the coach, where he had the servants strap it to the rear so that he could have it sent to the Prince of Wales.

Mary sat as far away from George as possible. George’s air of defiant petulance hung over the company as they started north on the Brussels road. But then Bysshe asked Claire to sing, and Claire’s high, sweet voice rose above the green countryside of Brabant, and by the end of the song everyone was smiling. Mary flashed Bysshe a look of gratitude.

The talk turned to war again, battles and sieges and the dead, a long line of uniformed shadows, young, brave men who fell to the French, to accident, to camp fever. Mary had little to say on the subject that she hadn’t already offered, but she listened carefully, felt the soldiers’ sadness at the death of comrades, the rejoicing at victory, the satisfaction of a deadly, intricate job done well. The feelings expressed seemed fine, passionate, even a little exalted. Bysshe listened and spoke little, but gradually Mary began to feel that he was somehow included in this circle of men and that she was not—perhaps his expert pistol shooting had made him a part of this company.

*A female, of course.* War was a fraternity only, though the suffering it caused made no distinction as to sex.

“May I offer an observation?” Mary said.

“Of course,” said Captain Austen.

“I am struck by the passion you show when speaking of your comrades and your—shall I call it your craft?”

“Please, Miss Godwin,” George said. “The enlisted men may have a *craft*, if you like. We are gentlemen, and have a *profession*.”

“I intended no offense. But still—I couldn’t help but observe the fine feelings you show towards your comrades, and the attention you give to the details of your... profession.”

George seemed pleased. “Ay. Didn’t I speak last night of war being full of its own kind of greatness?”

“Greatness perhaps the greater,” Bysshe said, “by existing in contrast to war’s wretchedness.”

“Precisely,” said George.

“Ay,” Mary said, “but what struck me most was that you gentlemen showed such elevated passion when discussing war, such sensibility, high feeling, and utter conviction—more than I am accustomed to seeing from any... respectable males.” Harry Smith gave an uncomfortable laugh at this characterization.

“Perhaps you gentlemen practice war,” Mary went on, “because it allows free play to your passions. You are free to feel, to exist at the highest pitch of emotion. Society does not normally permit this to its members—perhaps it *must* in order to make war attractive.”

Bysshe listened to her in admiration. “Brava!” he cried. “War as the sole refuge of the passions—I think you have struck the thing exactly.”

Smith and Somerset frowned, working through the notion. It was impossible to read Austen’s weathered countenance. But George shook his head wearily.

“Mere stuff, I’m afraid,” he said. “Your analysis shows an admirable ingenuity, Miss Godwin, but I’m afraid there’s no more place for passion on the battlefield than anywhere else. The poor Inniskillings had passion, but look what became of *them*.” He paused, shook his head again. “No, it’s drill and cold logic and a good eye for ground that wins the battles. In my line it’s not only my own sensibility that must be mastered, but those of hundreds of men and horses.”

“Drill is meant to master the passions,” said Captain Austen. “For in a battle, the impulse, the overwhelming passion, is to run away. This

impulse must be subdued.”

Mary was incredulous. “You claim not to experience these elevated passions which you display so plainly?”

George gave her the insolent, under-eyed look again. “All passions have their place, Miss Godwin. I reserve mine for the appropriate time.”

Resentment snarled up Mary’s spine. “Weren’t those tears I saw standing in your eyes when you described the death of the Inniskillings? Do you claim that’s part of your drill?”

George’s color brightened. “I didn’t shed those tears during the battle. At the time I was too busy damning those cursed Irishmen for the wild fools they were, and wishing I’d flogged more of them when I’d the chance.”

“But wasn’t Bonaparte’s great success on account of his ability to inspire his soldiers and his nation?” Bysshe asked. “To raise their passions to a great pitch and conquer the world?”

“And it was the uninspired, roguery English with their drill and discipline who put him back in his place,” George said. “Bonaparte should have saved the speeches and put his faith in the drill-square.”

Somerset gave an amused laugh. “This conversation begins to sound like one of Mrs. West’s novels of Sense and Sensibility that were so popular in the Nineties,” he said. “I suppose you’re too young to recall them. *A Gossip’s Story*, and *The Advantages of Education*. My governess made me read them both.”

Harry Smith looked at Captain Austen with glittering eyes. “*In fact—*” he began.

Captain Austen interrupted. “One is not blind to the world of feeling,” he said, “but surely Reason must rule the passions, else even a good heart can be led astray.”

“I can’t agree,” Bysshe said. “Surely it is Reason that has led us to the world of law, and property, and equity, and kingship—and all the hypocrisy that comes with upholding these artificial formations, and denying our true nature, all that deprives us of life, of true and natural goodness.”

“Absolutely!” said Claire.

“It is Reason,” Mary said, “which makes you deny the evidence of my senses. I *saw* your emotion, gentlemen, when you discussed your dead comrades. And I applaud it.”

“It does you credit,” Bysshe added.

“Do you claim not to feel anything in battle?” Mary demanded.  
“Nothing at all?”

George paused a moment, then answered seriously. “My concentration is very great. It is an elevated sort of apprehension, very intent. I must be aware of so much, you see—I can’t afford to miss a thing. My analytical faculty is always in play.”

“And that’s all?” cried Mary.

That condescending half-smile returned. “There isnae time for else, lass.”

“At the height of a charge? In the midst of an engagement?”

“Then especially. An instant’s break in my concentration and all could be lost.”

“Lord Newstead,” Mary said, “I cannot credit this.”

George only maintained his slight smile, knowing and superior. Mary wanted to wipe it from his face, and considered reminding him of his fractious conduct over the pistols. *How’s that for control and discipline*, she thought.

But no, she decided, it would be a long, unpleasant ride to Brussels if she upset George again.

Against her inclinations, she concluded to be English, and hypocritical, and say nothing.

Bysshe found neither wife nor money in Brussels, and George arranged lodgings for them that they couldn’t afford. The only option Mary could think of was to make their way to a channel port, then somehow try to talk their way to England with promise of payment once Bysshe had access to funds in London.

It was something for which she held little hope.

They couldn’t afford any local diversions, and so spent their days in a graveyard, companionably reading.

And then, one morning two days after their arrival in Brussels, as Mary lay ill in their bed, Bysshe returned from an errand with money, coins clanking in a bag. “We’re saved!” he said, and emptied the bag into her lap.

Mary looked at the silver lying on the comforter and felt her anxiety ease. They were old Spanish coins with the head of George III stamped over their original design, but they were real for all that. “A draft from Har... from your wife?” she said.

“No.” Bysshe sat on the bed, frowned. “It’s a loan from Byron—Lord Newstead, I mean.”

“Bysshe!” Mary sat up and set bedclothes and silver flying. “You took money from that man? Why?”

He put a paternal hand on hers. “Lord Newstead convinced me it would be in your interest, and Claire’s. To see you safely to England.”

“We’ll do well enough without his money! It’s not even his to give away, it’s his wife’s.”

Bysshe seemed hurt. “It’s a loan,” he said. “I’ll pay it back once I’m in London.” He gave a little laugh. “I’m certain he doesn’t expect repayment. He thinks we’re vagabonds.”

“He thinks worse of us than that.” A wave of nausea took her and she doubled up with a little cry. She rolled away from him. Coins rang on the floor. Bysshe put a hand on her shoulder, stroked her back.

“Poor Pecksie,” he said. “Some English cooking will do you good.”

“Why don’t you believe me?” Tears welled in her eyes. “I’m with child, Bysshe!”

He stroked her. “Perhaps. In a week or two we’ll know for certain.” His tone lightened. “He invited us to a ball tonight.”

“Who?”

“Newstead. The ball’s in his honor, he can invite whomever he pleases. The Prince of Orange will be there, and the English ambassador.”

Mary had no inclination to be the subject of one of George’s freaks. “We have no clothes fit for a ball,” she said, “and I don’t wish to go in any case.”

“We have money now. We can buy clothes.” He smiled. “And Lord Newstead said he would loan you and Claire some jewels.”

“Lady Newstead’s jewels,” Mary reminded.

“All those powerful people! Imagine it! Perhaps we can affect a conversion.”

Mary glared at him over her shoulder. “That money is for our passage to England. George wants only to display us, his tame Radicals, like his tame monkey or his tame panther. We’re just a caprice of his—he doesn’t take

either us or our arguments seriously.”

“That doesn’t invalidate our arguments. We can still make them.” Cheerfully. “Claire and I will go, then. She’s quite set on it, and I hate to disappoint her.”

“I think it will do us no good to be in his company for an instant longer. I think he is...” She reached behind her back, took his hand, touched it. “Perhaps he is a little mad,” she said.

“Byron? Really? He’s *wrong*, of course, but...”

Nausea twisted her insides. Mary spoke rapidly, desperate to convince Bysshe of her opinions. “He so craves glory and fame, Bysshe. The war gave expression to his passions, gave him the achievement he desired—but now the war’s over and he can’t have the worship he needs. That’s why he’s taken up with us—he wants even *our* admiration. There’s no future for him now—he could follow Wellington into politics but he’d be in Wellington’s shadow forever that way. He’s got nowhere to go.”

There was a moment’s silence. “I see you’ve been giving him much thought,” Bysshe said finally.

“His marriage is a failure—he can’t go back to England. His relations with women will be irregular, and—”

“*Our* relations are irregular, Maie. And it’s the better for it.”

“I didn’t mean that. I meant he cannot love. It’s worship he wants, not love. And those pretty young men he travels with—there’s something peculiar in that. Something unhealthy.”

“Captain Austen is neither pretty nor young.”

“He’s along only by accident. Another of George’s freaks.”

“And if you think he’s a paederast, well—we should be tolerant. Plato believed it a virtue. And George always asks after *you*.”

“I do not wish to be in his thoughts.”

“He is in yours.” His voice was gentle. “And that is all right. You are free.”

Mary’s heart sank. “It is *your* child I have, Bysshe,” she said.

Bysshe didn’t answer. *Torcere*, she thought. *Attorcere, rattorcere*.

Claire’s face glowed as she modelled her new ball gown, circling on the parlor carpet of the lodgings George had acquired for Bysshe’s party. Lady



Newstead's jewels glittered from Claire's fingers and throat. Bysse, in a new coat, boots, and pantaloons, smiled approvingly from the corner.

"Very lovely, Miss Clairmont," George approved.

George was in full uniform, scarlet coat, blue facings, gold braid, and byrons laced tight. His cocked hat was laid carelessly on the mantel. George's eyes turned to Mary.

"I'm sorry you are ill, Miss Godwin," he said. "I wish you were able to accompany us."

Bysse, Mary presumed, had told him this. Mary found no reason why she should support the lie.

"I'm not ill," she said mildly. "I simply do not wish to go—I have some pages I wish to finish. A story called *Hate*."

George and Bysse flushed alike. Mary, smiling, approached Claire, took her hand, admired gown and gems. She was surprised by the affect: the jewels, designed for an older woman, gave Claire a surprisingly mature look, older and more experienced than her sixteen years. Mary found herself growing uneasy.

"The seamstress was shocked when she was told I needed it tonight," Claire said. "She had to call in extra help to finish in time." She laughed. "But money mended everything!"

"For which we may thank Lord Newstead," Mary said, "and Lady Newstead to thank for the jewels." She looked up at George, who was still smouldering from her earlier shot. "I'm surprised, my lord, that she allows them to travel without her."

"Annabella has her own jewels," George said. "These are mine. I travel often without her, and as I move in the highest circles, I want to make certain that any lady who finds herself in my company can glitter with the best of them."

"How chivalrous." George cocked his head, trying to decide whether or not this was irony. Mary decided to let him wonder. She folded her hands and smiled sweetly.

"I believe it's time to leave," she said. "You don't want to keep his highness of Orange waiting."

Cloaks and hats were snatched; goodbyes were said. Mary managed to whisper to Claire as she helped with her cloak.

"Be careful, Jane," she said.

Resentment glittered in Claire's black eyes. "*You* have a man," she said.

Mary looked at her. "So does Lady Newstead."

Claire glared hatred and swept out, fastening bonnet-strings. Bysse kissed Mary's lips, George her hand. Mary prepared to settle by the fire with pen and manuscript, but before she could sit, there was a knock on the door and George rushed in.

"Forgot me hat," he said. But instead of taking it from the mantel, he walked to where Mary stood by her chair and simply looked at her. Mary's heart lurched at the intensity of his gaze.

"Your hat awaits you, my lord," she said.

"I hope you will reconsider," said George.

Mary merely looked at him, forced him to state his business. He took her hand in both of his, and she clenched her fist as his fingers touched hers.

"I ask you, Miss Godwin, to reconsider my offer to take you under my protection," George said.

Mary clenched her teeth. Her heart hammered. "I am perfectly safe with Mr. Shelley," she said.

"Perhaps not as safe as you think." She glared at him. George's eyes bored into hers. "I gave him money," he said, "and he told me you were free. Is that the act of a protector?"

Rage flamed through Mary. She snatched her hand back and came within an inch of slapping George's face.

"Do you think he's sold me to you?" she cried.

"I can conceive no other explanation," George said.

"You are mistaken and a fool." She turned away, trembling in anger, and leaned against the wall.

"I understand this may be a shock. To have trusted such a man, and then discovered—"

The wallpaper had little bees on it, Napoleon's emblem. "Can't you understand that Bysse was perfectly literal!" she shouted. "I am free, he is free, Claire is free—free to go, or free to stay." She straightened her back, clenched her fists. "I will stay. Goodbye, Lord Newstead."

"I fear for you."

"Go away," she said, speaking to the wallpaper; and after a moment's silence she heard George turn, and take his hat from the mantel, and leave the building.

Mary collapsed into her chair. The only thing she could think was, *Poor Claire*.

## 2

Mary was pregnant again. She folded her hands over her belly, stood on the end of the dock, and gazed up at the Alps.

Clouds sat low on the mountains, growling. The passes were closed with avalanche and unseasonal snow, the *vaudaire* storm wind tore white from the steep waves of the gray lake, and *Ariel* pitched madly at its buoy by the waterfront, its mast-tip tracing wild figures against the sky.

The *vaudaire* had caused a “seiche”—the whole mass of the lake had shifted toward Montreux, and water levels had gone up six feet. The strange freshwater tide had cast up a line of dead fish and dead birds along the stony waterfront, all staring at Mary with brittle glass eyes.

“It doesn’t look as if we’ll be leaving tomorrow,” Bysse said. He and Mary stood by the waterfront, cloaked and sheltered by an umbrella. Water broke on the shore, leaped through the air, reaching for her, for Bysse... It splattered at her feet.

She thought of Harriet, Bysse’s wife, hair drifting, clothes floating like seaweed. Staring eyes like dark glass. Her hands reaching for her husband from the water.

She had been missing for weeks before her drowned body was finally found.

The *vaudaire* was supposed to be a warm wind from Italy, but its warmth was lost on Mary. It felt like the burning touch of a glacier.

“Let’s go back to the hotel,” Mary said. “I’m feeling a little weak.”

She would deliver around the New Year unless the baby was again premature.

A distant boom reached her, was echoed, again and again, by mountains. Another avalanche. She hoped it hadn’t fallen on any of the brave Swiss who were trying to clear the roads.

She and Bysse returned to the hotel through darkening streets. It was

a fine place, rather expensive, though they could afford it now. Their circumstances had improved in the last year, though at cost.

Old Sir Bysshe had died, and left Bysshe a thousand pounds per year. Harriet Shelley had drowned, bricks in her pockets. Mary had given birth to a premature daughter who had lived only two weeks. She wondered about the child she carried—she had an intuition all was not well. Death, perhaps, was stalking her baby, was stalking them all.

In payment for what? Mary wondered. What sin had they committed?

She walked through Montreux's wet streets and thought of dead glass eyes, and grasping hands, and hair streaming like seaweed. Her daughter dying alone in her cradle at night, convulsing, twitching, eyes open and tiny red face torn with mortal terror.

When Mary had come to the cradle later to nurse the baby, she had thought it in an unusually deep sleep. She hadn't realized that death had come until after dawn, when the little corpse turned cold.

Death. She and Bysshe had kissed and coupled on her mother's grave, had shivered together at the gothic delights of *Vathek*, had whispered ghost stories to one another in the dead of night till Claire screamed with hysteria. Somehow death had not really touched her before. She and Bysshe had crossed war-scarred France two years ago, sleeping in homes abandoned for fear of Cossacks, and somehow death had not intruded into their lives.

"Winter is coming," Bysshe said. "Do we wish to spend it in Geneva? I'd rather push on to Italy and be a happy salamander in the sun."

"I've had another letter from Mrs. Godwin."

Bysshe sighed. "England, then."

She sought his hand and squeezed it. Bysshe wanted the sun of Italy, but Bysshe was her sun, the blaze that kept her warm, kept her from despair. Death had not touched *him*. He flamed with life, with joy, with optimism.

She tried to stay in his radiance. Where his light banished the creeping shadows that followed her.

As they entered their hotel room they heard the wailing of an infant and found Claire trying to comfort her daughter Alba. "Where have you been?" Claire demanded. There were tears on her cheeks. "I fell asleep and dreamed you'd abandoned me! And then I cried out and woke the baby."

Bysshe moved to comfort her. Mary settled herself heavily onto a sofa.

In the small room in Montreux, with dark shadows creeping in the corners and the *vaudaire* driving against the shutters, Mary put her arms around her unborn child and willed the shade of death to keep away.

Bysshe stopped short in the midst of his afternoon promenade. “Great heavens,” he said. His tone implied only mild surprise—he was so filled with life and certitude that he took most of life’s shocks purely in stride.

When Mary looked up, she gasped and her heart gave a crash.

It was a barouche—*the* barouche. Vermilion wheels, liveried postboys wearing muddy slickers, armorial bearings on the door, the bulletproof top raised to keep out the storm. Baggage piled on platforms fore and aft.

Rolling past as Mary and Bysshe stood on the tidy Swiss sidewalk and stared.

CREDE BYRON, Mary thought viciously. As soon credit Lucifer.

The gray sky lowered as they watched the barouche grind past, steel-rimmed wheels thundering on the cobbles. And then a window dropped on its leather strap, and someone shouted something to the postboys. The words were lost in the *vaudaire*, but the postboys pulled the horses to a stop. The door opened and George appeared, jamming a round hat down over his auburn hair. His jacket was a little tight, and he appeared to have gained a stone or more since Mary had last seen him. He walked toward Bysshe and Mary, and Mary tried not to stiffen with fury at the sight of him.

“Mr. Omnibus! Ti kanete?”

“Very well, thank you.”

“Miss Godwin.” George bowed, clasped Mary’s hand. She closed her fist, reminded herself that she hated him.

“I’m Mrs. Shelley now.”

“My felicitations,” George said.

George turned to Bysshe. “Are the roads clear to the west?” he asked. “I and my companion must push on to Geneva on a matter of urgency.”

“The roads have been closed for three days,” Bysshe said. “There have been both rockslides and avalanches near Chexbres.”

“That’s what they told me in Vevey. There was no lodging there, so I came here, even though it’s out of our way.” George pressed his lips together, a pale line. He looked over his shoulder at the coach, at the

mountainside, at the dangerous weather. "We'll have to try to force our way through tomorrow," he said. "Though it will be damned hard."

"It shouldn't," Bysshe said. "Not in a heavy coach like that."

George looked grim. "It was unaccountably dangerous just getting here," he said.

"Stay till the weather is better," Bysshe said, smiling. "You can't be blamed if the weather holds you up."

Mary hated Bysshe for that smile, even though she knew he had reasons to be obliging.

Just as she had reasons for hating.

"Nay." George shook his head, and a little Scots fell out. "I cannae bide."

"You might make it on a mule."

"I have a lady with me." Shortly. "Mules are out of the question."

"A boat...?"

"Perhaps if the lady is superfluous," Mary interrupted, "you could leave her behind, and carry out your errand on a mule, alone."

The picture was certainly an enjoyable one.

George looked at her, visibly mastered his unspoken reply, then shook his head.

"She must come."

"Lord Newstead," Mary went on, "would you like to see your daughter? She is not superfluous either, and she is here."

George glanced nervously at the coach, then back. "Is Claire here as well?"

"Yes."

George looked grim. "This is not... a good time."

Bysshe summoned an unaccustomed gravity. "I think, my lord," Bysshe said, "there may never be a better time. You have not been within five hundred miles of your daughter since her birth. You are on an urgent errand and may not tarry— very well. But you must spend a night here, and can't press on till morning. There will never be a better moment."

George looked at him stony-eyed, then nodded. "What hotel?"

"La Royale."

He smiled. "Royal, eh? A pretty sentiment for the Genevan Republic."

“We’re in Vaud, not Geneva.”

“Still not over the border?” George gave another nervous glance over his shoulder. “I need to set a faster pace.”

His long hair streamed in the wind as he stalked back to the coach. Mary could barely see a blonde head gazing cautiously from the window. She half-expected that the coach would drive on and she would never see George again, but instead the postboys turned the horses from the waterfront road into the town, toward the hotel.

Bysse smiled purposefully and began to stride to the hotel. Mary followed, walking fast across the wet cobbles to keep up with him. “I can’t but think that good will come of this,” he said.

“I pray you’re right.”

*Much pain, Mary thought, however it turned out.*

George’s new female was tall and blonde and pink-faced, though she walked hunched over as if embarrassed by her height, and took small, shy steps. She was perhaps in her middle twenties.

They met, embarrassingly, on the hotel’s wide stair, Mary with Claire, Alba in Claire’s arms. The tall blonde, lower lip outthrust haughtily, walked past them on the way to her room, her gaze passing blankly over them. Perhaps she hadn’t been told who Alba’s father was.

She had a maid with her and a pair of George’s men, both of whom had pistols stuffed in their belts. For a wild moment Mary wondered if George had abducted her.

No, she decided, this was only George’s theatricality. He didn’t have his menagerie with him this time, no leopards or monkeys, so he dressed his postboys as bandits.

The woman passed. Mary felt Claire stiffen. “She looks like *you*,” Claire hissed.

Mary looked at the woman in astonishment. “She doesn’t. Not at all.”

“She does! Tall, blonde, fair eyes...” Claire’s own eyes filled with tears. “Why can’t she be dark, like me?”

“Don’t be absurd!” Mary seized her sister’s hand, pulled her down the stairs. “Save the tears for later. They may be needed.”

In the lobby Mary saw more of George’s men carrying in luggage. Pasmay, the fencing master, had slung a carbine over one shoulder.

Mary's mind whirled—perhaps this was an abduction after all.

Or perhaps the blonde's family—or husband—was in pursuit.

"This way." Bysshe's voice. He led them into one of the hotel's candlelit drawing rooms, closed the crystal-knobbed door behind them. A huge porcelain stove loomed over them.

George stood uncertain in the candlelight, elegant clothing over muddy boots. He looked at Claire and Alba stonily, then advanced, peered at the tiny form that Claire offered him.

"Your daughter Alba," Bysshe said, hovering at his shoulder.

George watched the child for a long, doubtful moment, his auburn hair hanging down his forehead. Then he straightened. "My offer rests, Miss Clairmont, on its previous terms."

Claire drew back, rested Alba on her shoulder. "Never," she said. She licked her lips. "It is too monstrous."

"Come, my lord," Bysshe said. He ventured to put a hand on George's shoulder. "Surely your demands are unreasonable."

"I offered to provide the child with means," George said, "to see that she is raised in a fine home, free from want, and among good people—friends of mine, who will offer her every advantage. I would take her myself but," hesitating, "my domestic conditions would not permit it."

Mary's heart flamed. "But at the cost of forbidding her the sight of her mother!" she said. "That is too cruel."

"The child's future will already be impaired by her irregular connections," George said. "Prolonging those connections could only do her further harm." His eyes flicked up to Claire. "Her mother can only lower her station, not raise it. She is best off with a proper family who can raise her with their own."

Claire's eyes flooded with tears. She turned away, clutching Alba to her. "I won't give her up!" she said. The child began to cry.

George folded his arms. "That settles matters. If you won't accept my offer, then there's an end." The baby's wails filled the air.

"Alba cries for her father," Bysshe said. "Can you not let her into your heart?"

A half-smile twitched across George's lips. "I have no absolute certainty that I *am* this child's father."

A keening sound came from Claire. For a wild, raging moment Mary



looked for a weapon to plunge into George's breast. "Unnatural man!" she cried. "Can't you acknowledge the consequences of your own behavior?"

"On the contrary, I am willing to ignore the questionable situation in which I found Miss Clairmont and to care for the child completely. But only on my terms."

"I don't trust his promises!" Claire said. "He abandoned me in Munich without a penny!"

"We agreed to part," George said.

"If it hadn't been for Captain Austen's kindness, I would have starved." She leaned on the door jamb for support, and Mary joined her and buoyed her with an arm around her waist.

"You ran out into the night," George said. "You wouldn't take money."

"I'll tell her!" Claire drew away from Mary, dragged at the door, hauled it open. "I'll tell your new woman!"

Fear leaped into George's eyes. "Claire!" He rushed to the door, seized her arm as she tried to pass; Claire wrenched herself free and staggered into the hotel lobby. Alba wailed in her arms. George's servants were long gone, but hotel guests stared as if in tableaux, hats and walking-sticks half-raised. Fully aware of the spectacle they were making, Mary, clumsy in pregnancy, inserted herself between George and Claire. Claire broke for the stair, while George danced around Mary like an awkward footballer. Mary rejoiced in the fact that her pregnancy seemed only to make her more difficult to get around.

Bysshe put an end to it. He seized George's wrist in a firm grip. "You can't stop us all, my lord," he said.

George glared at him, his look all fury and ice. "What d'ye want, then?"

Claire, panting and flushed, paused halfway up the stair. Alba's alarmed shrieks echoed up the grand staircase.

Bysshe's answer was quick. "A competence for your daughter. Nothing more."

"A thousand a year," George said flatly. "No more than that."

Mary's heart leaped at the figure that doubled the family's income.

Bysshe nodded. "That will do, my lord."

"I want nothing more to do with the girl than that. Nothing whatever."

"Call for pen and paper. And we can bring this to an end."

Two copies were made, and George signed and sealed them with his signet before bidding them all a frigid good-night. The first payment was made that night, one of George's men coming to the door carrying a valise that clanked with gold. Mary gazed at it in amazement—why was George carrying so much?

“Have we done the right thing?” Bysshe wondered, looking at the valise as Claire stuffed it under her bed. “This violence, this extortion?”

“We offered love,” Mary said, “and he returned only finance. How else could we deal with him?” She sighed. “And Alba will thank us.”

Claire straightened and looked down at the bed. “I only wanted him to pay,” said Claire. “Any other considerations can go to the devil.”

The *vaudaire* blew on, scarcely fainter than before. The water level was still high. Dead fish still floated in the freshwater tide. “I would venture it,” Bysshe said, frowning as he watched the dancing *Ariel*, “but not with the children.”

*Children.* Mary's smile was inward as she realized how real her new baby was to Bysshe. “We can afford to stay at the hotel a little longer,” she said. “Still—a reef in the mains'l would make it safe enough.” Mary paused a moment, perhaps to hear the cold summons of Harriet Shelley from beneath the water. There was no sound, but she shivered anyway. “No harm to wait another day.”

Bysshe smiled at her hopefully. “Very well. Perhaps we'll have a chance to speak to George again.”

“Bysshe, sometimes your optimism is...” She shook her head. “Let us finish our walk.”

They walked on through windswept morning streets. The bright sun glared off the white snow and deadly black ice that covered the surrounding high peaks. Soon the snow and ice would melt and threaten avalanche once more. “I am growing weary with this town,” Bysshe said.

“Let's go back to our room and read *Chamouni*,” Mary suggested. Mr. Coleridge had been a guest of her father's, and his poem about the Alps a favorite of theirs now they were lodged in Switzerland.

Bysshe was working on writing another descriptive poem on the Vale of Chamouni—unlike Coleridge, he and Mary had actually seen the place—and as an homage to Coleridge, Bysshe was including some reworked lines from *Kubla Khan*.

*The everlasting universe of things, she recited to herself, flows through the mind.*

Lovely stuff. Bysse's best by far.

On their return to the hotel they found one of George's servants waiting for them. "Lord Newstead would like to see you."

*Ah, Mary thought. He wants his gold back.*

Let him try to take it.

George waited in the same drawing room in which he'd made his previous night's concession. Despite the bright daylight the room was still lit by lamps— the heavy dark curtains were drawn against the *vaudaire*. George was standing straight as a whip in the center of the room, a dangerous light in his eyes. Mary wondered if this was how he looked in battle.

"Mr. Shelley," George said, and bowed, "I would like to hire your boat to take my party to Geneva."

Bysse blinked. "I—" he began, then, "*Ariel* is small, only twenty-five feet. Your party is very large and—"

"The local commissaire visited me this morning," George interrupted. "He has forbidden me to depart Montreux. As it is vital for me to leave at once, I must find other means. And I am prepared to pay well for them."

Bysse looked at Mary, then at George. Hesitated again. "I suppose it would be possible..."

"Why is it," Mary demanded, "that you are forbidden to leave?"

George folded his arms, looked down at her. "I have broken no law. It is a ridiculous political matter."

Bysse offered a smile. "If that's all, then..."

Mary interrupted. "If Mr. Shelley and I end up in jail as a result of this, I wonder how ridiculous it will seem."

Bysse looked at her, shocked. "Mary!"

Mary kept her eyes on George. "Why should we help you?"

"Because..." He paused, ran a nervous hand through his hair. Not used, Mary thought, to justifying himself.

"Because," he said finally, "I am assisting someone who is fleeing oppression."

"Fleeing a husband?"

“Husband?” George looked startled. “No—her husband is abroad and cannot protect her.” He stepped forward, his color high, his nostrils flared like those of a warhorse. “She is fleeing the attentions of a seducer—a powerful man who has callously used her to gain wealth and influence. I intend to aid her in escaping his power.”

Bysshe’s eyes blazed. “Of *course* I will aid you!”

Mary watched this display of chivalry with a sinking heart. The masculine confraternity had excluded her, had lost her within its own rituals and condescension.

“I will pay you a further hundred—” George began.

“Please, my lord. I and my little boat are entirely at your service in this noble cause.”

George stepped forward, clasped his hand. “Mr. Omnibus, I am in your debt.”

The *vaudaire* wailed at the window. Mary wondered if it was Harriet’s call, and her hands clenched into fists. She would resist the cry if she could.

Bysshe turned to Mary. “We must prepare.” Heavy in her pregnancy, she followed him from the drawing room, up the stair, toward their own rooms. “I will deliver Lord Newstead and his lady to Geneva, and you and Claire can join me there when the roads are cleared. Or if weather is suitable I will return for you.”

“I will go with you,” Mary said. “Of course.”

Bysshe seemed surprised that she would accompany him on this piece of masculine knight-errantry. “It may not be entirely safe on the lake,” he said.

“I’ll make it safer—you’ll take fewer chances with me aboard. And if I’m with you, George is less likely to inspire you to run off to South America on some noble mission or other.”

“I wouldn’t do that.” Mildly. “And I think you are being a little severe.”

“What has George done for us that we should risk anything for him?”

“I do not serve him, but his lady.”

“Of whom he has told you nothing. You don’t even know her name. And in any case, you seem perfectly willing to risk *her* life on this venture.”

Alba’s cries sounded through the door of their room. Bysshe paused a moment, resignation plain in his eyes, then opened the door. “It’s for Alba,

really,” he said. “The more contact between George and our little family, the better it may be for her. The better chance we will have to melt his heart.”

He opened the door. Claire was holding her colicky child. Tears filled her black eyes. “Where have you been for so long? I was afraid you were gone forever!”

“You know better than that.” Mary took the baby from her, the gesture so natural that sadness took a moment to come—the memory that she had held her own lost child this way, held it to her breast and felt the touch of its cold lips.

“And what is this about George?” Claire demanded.

“He wants me to take him down the lake,” Bysse said. “And Mary wishes to join us. You and Alba can remain here until the roads are clear.”

Claire’s voice rose to a shriek. “*No! Never!*” She lunged for Alba and snatched the girl from Mary’s astonished arms. “You’re going to abandon me—just like George! You’re all going to Geneva to laugh at me!”

“Of course not,” Bysse said reasonably.

Mary stared at her sister, tried to speak, but Claire’s cries trampled over her intentions.

“You’re abandoning me! I’m useless to you—worthless! You’ll soon have your own baby!”

Mary tried to comfort Claire, but it was hopeless. Claire screamed and shuddered and wept, convinced that she would be left forever in Montreux. In the end there was no choice but to take her along. Mary received mean satisfaction in watching Bysse as he absorbed this reality, as his chivalrous, noble-minded expedition alongside the hero of Waterloo turned into a low family comedy, George and his old lover, his new lover, and his wailing bastard.

And ghosts. Harriet, lurking under the water. And their dead baby calling.

*Ariel* bucked like a horse on the white-topped waves as the *vaudaire* keened in the rigging. Frigid spray flew in Mary’s face and her feet slid on slippery planking. Her heart thrashed into her throat. The boat seemed half-full of water. She gave a despairing look over her shoulder at the retreating rowboat they’d hired to bring them from the jetty to their craft.

“Bysshe!” she said. “This is hopeless.”

“Better once we’re under way. See that the cuddy will be comfortable for Claire and Alba.”

“This is madness.”

Bysshe licked joyfully at the freshwater spray that ran down his lips. “We’ll be fine, I’m sure.”

He was a much better sailor than she: she had to trust him. She opened the sliding hatch to the cuddy, the little cabin forward, and saw several inches of water sloshing in the bottom. The cushions on the little seats were soaked. Wearily, she looked up at Bysshe.

“We’ll have to bail.”

“Very well.”

It took a quarter hour to bail out the boat, during which time Claire paced back and forth on the little jetty, Alba in her arms. She looked like a specter with her pale face peering out from her dark shawl.

Bysshe cast off the gaskets that reefed the mainsail to the boom, then jumped forward to the halyards and raised the sail on its gaff. The wind tore at the canvas with a sound like a cannonade, open-hand slaps against Mary’s ears. The shrouds were taut as bowstrings. Bysshe reefed the sail down, hauled the halyards and topping lift again till the canvas was taut, lowered the leeboards, then asked Mary to take the tiller while he cast *Ariel* off from its buoy.

Bysshe braced himself against the gunwale as he hauled on the mooring line, drawing *Ariel* up against the wind. When Bysshe cast off from the buoy the boat paid instantly off the wind and the sail filled with a rolling boom. Water surged under the boat’s counter and suddenly, before Mary knew it, *Ariel* was flying fast. Fear closed a fist around her windpipe as the little boat heeled and the tiller almost yanked her arms from their sockets. She could hear Harriet’s wails in the windsong. Mary dug her heels into the planks and hauled the tiller up to her chest, keeping *Ariel* up into the wind. Frigid water boiled up over the lee counter, pouring into the boat like a waterfall.

Bysshe leapt gracefully aft and released the mainsheet. The sail boomed out with a crash that rattled Mary’s bones and the boat righted itself. Bysshe took the tiller from Mary, sheeted in, leaned out into the wind as the boat picked up speed. There was a grin on his face.

“Sorry!” he said. “I should have let the sheet go before we set out.”

Bysshe tacked and brought *Ariel* into the wind near the jetty. The sail boomed like thunder as it spilled wind. Waves slammed the boat into the jetty. The mast swayed wildly. The stone jetty was at least four feet taller than the boat's deck. Mary helped Claire with the luggage—gold clanked heavily in one bag—then took Alba while Bysshe assisted Claire into the boat.

“It's *wet*,” Claire said when she saw the cuddy.

“Take your heavy cloak out of your bags and sit on it,” Mary said.

“This is *terrible*,” Claire said, and lowered herself carefully into the cuddy.

“Go forrard,” Bysshe said to Mary, “and push off from the jetty as hard as you can.”

*Forrard*. Bysshe so enjoyed being nautical. Clumsy in skirts and pregnancy, Mary climbed atop the cuddy and did as she was asked. The booming sail filled, Mary snatched at the shrouds for balance, and *Ariel* leaped from the jetty like a stone from a child's catapult. Mary made her way across the tilting deck to the cockpit. Bysshe was leaning out to weather, his big hands controlling the tiller easily, his long fair hair streaming in the wind.

“I won't ask you to do that again,” he said. “George should help from this point.”

George and his lady would join the boat at another jetty—there was less chance that the authorities would intervene if they weren't seen where another Englishman was readying his boat.

*Ariel* raced across the waterfront, foam boiling under its counter. The second jetty—a wooden one—approached swiftly, with cloaked figures upon it. Bysshe rounded into the wind, canvas thundering, and brought *Ariel* neatly to the dock. George's men seized shrouds and a mooring line and held the boat in its place.

George's round hat was jammed down over his brows and the collar of his cloak was turned up, but any attempt at anonymity was wrecked by his famous laced boots. He seized a shroud and leaped easily into the boat, then turned to help his lady.

She had stepped back, frightened by the gunshot cracks of the luffing sail, the wild swings of the boom. Dressed in a blue silk dress, broad-brimmed bonnet, and heavy cloak, she frowned with her haughty lower lip, looking disdainfully at the little boat and its odd collection of passengers.

George reassured his companion. He and one of his men, the swordmaster Pasmany, helped her into the boat, held her arm as she ducked under the boom.

George grabbed the brim of his hat to keep the wind from carrying it away and performed hasty introductions. “Mr. and Mrs. Shelley. The Comtesse Laufenburg.”

Mary strained her memory, trying to remember if she’d ever heard the name before. The comtesse smiled a superior smile and tried to be pleasant. “Enchanted to make cognizance of you,” she said in French.

A baby wailed over the sound of flogging canvas. George straightened, his eyes a little wild.

“Claire is here?” he asked.

“She did not desire to be abandoned in Montreux,” Mary said, trying to stress the word *abandoned*.

“My God!” George said. “I wish you had greater consideration of the... realities.”

“Claire is free and may do as she wishes,” Mary said.

George clenched his teeth. He took the comtesse by her arm and drew her toward the cuddy.

“The boat will be better balanced,” Bysshe called after, “if the comtesse will sit on the weather side.” *And perhaps*, Mary thought, *we won’t capsize*.

George gave Bysshe a blank look. “The larboard side,” Bysshe said helpfully. Another blank look.

“Hang it! The left.”

“Very well.”

George and the comtesse ducked down the hatchway. Mary would have liked to have eavesdropped on the comtesse’s introduction to Claire, but the furious rattling sail obscured the phrases, if any. George came up, looking grim, and Pasmany began tossing luggage toward him. Other than a pair of valises, most of it was military: a familiar-looking pistol case, a pair of sabers, a brace of carbines. George stowed it all in the cuddy. Then Pasmany himself leaped into the boat, and George signaled all was ready. Bysshe placed George by the weather rail, and Pasmany squatted on the weather foredeck.

“If you gentlemen would push us off?” Bysshe said.



The sail filled and *Ariel* began to move fast, rising at each wave and thudding into the troughs. Spray rose at each impact. Bysshe trimmed the sail, the luff trembling just a little, the rest full and taut, then cleated the mainsheet down.

“A long reach down the length of the lake,” Bysshe said with a smile. “Easy enough sailing, if a little hard on the ladies.”

George peered out over the cuddy, his eyes searching the bank. The old castle of Chillon bulked ominously on the shore, just south of Montreux.

“When do we cross the border into Geneva?” George asked.

“Why does it matter?” Bysshe said. “Geneva joined the Swiss Confederation last year.”

“But the administrations are not yet united. And the more jurisdictions that lie between the comtesse and her pursuers, the happier I will be.”

George cast an uncomfortable look astern. With spray dotting his cloak, his hat clamped down on his head, his body disposed awkwardly on the weather side of the boat, George seemed thoroughly miserable—and in an overwhelming flood of sudden understanding, Mary suddenly knew why. It was over for him. His noble birth, his fame, his entire life to this point—all was as naught. Passion had claimed him for its own. His career had ended: there was no place for him in the army, in diplomatic circles, even in polite society. He’d thrown it all away in this mad impulse of passion.

He was an exile now, and the only people whom he could expect to associate with him were other exiles.

Like the exiles aboard *Ariel*.

Perhaps, Mary thought, he was only now realizing it. Poor George. She actually felt sorry for him.

The castle of Chillon fell astern, like a grand symbol of George’s hopes, a world of possibility not realized.

“Beg pardon, my lord,” she said, “but where do you intend to go?”

George frowned. “France, perhaps,” he said. “The comtesse has... some friends... in France. England, if France won’t suit, but we won’t be able to stay there long. America, if necessary.”

“Can the Prince Regent intervene on your behalf?”

George’s smile was grim. “If he wishes. But he’s subject to strange fits of morality, particularly if the sins in question remind him of his own. Prinny will *not* wish to be reminded of Mrs. Fitzherbert and Lady Hertford. He *does* wish to look upright in the eyes of the nation. And he

has no loyalty to his friends, none at all.” He gave a poised, slow-motion shrug. “Perhaps he will help, if the fit is on him. But I think not.” He reached inside his greatcoat, patted an inside pocket. “Do you think I can light a cigar in this wind? If so, I hope it will not discomfort you, Mrs. Shelley.”

He managed a spark in his strike-a-light, puffed madly till the tinder caught, then ignited his cigar and turned to Bysshe. “I found your poems, Mr. Omnibus. Your *Queen Mab* and *Alastor*. The latter of which I liked better, though I liked both well enough.”

Bysshe looked at him in surprise. Wind whistled through the shrouds. “How did you find *Mab*? There were only seventy copies, and I’m certain I can account for each one.”

George seemed pleased with himself. “There are few doors closed to me.” Darkness clouded his face. “Or rather, *were*.” With a sigh. He wiped spray from his ear with the back of his hand.

“I’m surprised that you liked *Mab* at all,” Bysshe said quickly, “as its ideas are so contrary to your own.”

“You expressed them well enough. As a verse treatise of Mr. Godwin’s political thought, I believed it done soundly—as soundly as such a thing *can* be done. And I think you can have it published properly now—it’s hardly a threat to public order, Godwin’s thought being so out of fashion even among radicals.”

He drew deliberately on his cigar, then waved it. The wind tore the cigar smoke from his mouth in little wisps. “*Alastor*, though better poetry, seemed in contrast to have little thought behind it. I never understood what that fellow was *doing* on the boat—was it a metaphor for life? I kept waiting for something to *happen*.”

Mary bristled at George’s condescension. What are *you* doing on this little boat? she wanted to ask.

Bysshe, however, looked apologetic. “I’m writing better things now.”

“He’s writing *wonderful* things now,” Mary said. “An ode to Mont Blanc. An essay on Christianity. A hymn to intellectual beauty.”

George gave her an amused look. “Mrs. Shelley’s tone implies that, to me, intellectual beauty is entirely a stranger, but she misunderstands my point. I found it remarkable that the same pen could produce both *Queen Mab* and *Alastor*, and have no doubt that so various a talent will produce very good work in the poetry line—provided,” nodding to Bysshe, “that Mr. Shelley continues in it, and doesn’t take up engineering again, or

chemistry.” He grinned. “Or become a sea captain.”

“He is and remains a poet,” Mary said firmly. She used a corner of her shawl to wipe spray from her cheek.

“Who else do you like, my lord?” Bysshe asked.

“Poets, you mean? Scott, above all. Shakespeare, who is sound on political matters as well as having a magnificent... shall I call it a *stride*? Burns, the great poet of my country. And our Laureate.”

“Mr. Southey was kind to me when we met,” Bysshe said. “And Mrs. Southey made wonderful tea-cakes. But I wish I admired his work more.” He looked up. “What do you think of Milton? The Maie and I read him constantly.”

George shrugged. “Dour Puritan fellow. I’m surprised you can stand him at all.”

“His verse is glorious. And he wasn’t a Puritan, but an Independent, like Cromwell—his philosophy was quite unorthodox. He believed, for example, in plural marriage.”

George’s eyes glittered. “Did he now.”

“Ay. And his Satan is a magnificent creation, far more interesting than any of his angels or his simpering pedantic Christ. That long, raging fall from grace, into darkness visible.”

George’s brows knit. Perhaps he was contemplating his own long fall from the Heaven of polite society. His eyes turned to Mary.

“And how is the originator of Mr. Shelley’s political thought? How does your father, Mrs. Shelley?”

“He is working on a novel. An important work.”

“I am pleased to hear it. Does he progress?”

Mary was going to answer simply “Very well,” but Bysshe’s answer came first. “Plagued by lack of money,” he said. “We will be going to England to succor him after this, ah, errand is completed.”

“Your generosity does you credit,” George said, and then resentment entered his eyes and his lip curled. “Of course, you will be able to better afford it, now.”

Bysshe’s answer was mild. “Mr. Godwin lives partly with our support, but he will not speak to us since I eloped with his daughter. You will not acknowledge Alba, but at least you’ve been... persuaded... to do well by her.”

George preferred not to rise to this, settled instead for clarification. “You support a man who won’t acknowledge you?”

“It is not my father-in-law I support, but rather the author of *Political Justice*.”

“A nice discernment,” George observed. “Perhaps over-nice.”

“One does what goodness one can. And one hopes people will respond.” Looking at George, who smiled cynically around his cigar.

“Your charity speaks well for you. But perhaps Mr. Godwin would have greater cause to finish his book if poverty were not being made so convenient for him.”

Mary felt herself flushing red. But Bysshe’s reply again was mild. “It isn’t that simple. Mr. Godwin has dependents, and the public that once celebrated his thought has, alas, forgotten him. His novel may retrieve matters. But a fine thing such as this work cannot be rushed—not if it is to have the impact it deserves.”

“I will bow to your expertise in matters of literary production. But still... to support someone who will not even speak to you—that is charity indeed. And it does not speak well for Mr. Godwin’s gratitude.”

“My father is a great man!” Mary knew she was speaking hotly, and she bit back on her anger. “But he judges by a... a very high standard of morality. He will accept support from a sincere admirer, but he has not yet understood the depth of sentiment between Bysshe and myself, and believes that Bysshe has done my reputation harm—not,” flaring again, “that I would care if he had.”

*Ariel* thudded into a wave trough, and George winced at the impact. He adjusted his seat on the rail and nodded. “Mr. Godwin will accept money from an admirer, but not letters from an in-law. And Mr. Shelley will support the author of *Political Justice*, but not his in-laws.”

“And *you*,” Mary said, “will support a blackmailer, but not a daughter.”

George’s eyes turned to stone. Mary realized she had gone too far for this small boat and close company.

“Gentlemen, it’s cold,” she announced. “I will withdraw.”

She made her way carefully into the cuddy. The tall comtesse was disposed uncomfortably, on wet cushions, by the hatch, the overhead planking brushing the top of her bonnet. Her gaze was mild, but her lip was haughty. There was a careful three inches between her and Claire, who was nursing Alba and, clearly enough, a grudge.

Mary walked past them to the peak, sat carefully on a wet cushion near Claire. Their knees collided every time *Ariel* fell down a wave. The cuddy smelled of wet stuffing and stale water. There was still water sluicing about on the bottom.

Mary looked at Claire's baby and felt sadness like an ache in her breast.

Claire regarded her resentfully. "The French bitch hates us," she whispered urgently. "Look at her expression."

Mary wished Claire had kept her voice down. Mary leaned out to look at the comtesse, managed a smile. "Vous parlez anglais?" she asked.

"Non. Je regrette. Parles-tu français?" The comtesse had a peculiar accent. As, with a name like Laufenburg, one might expect.

Pleasant of her, though, to use the intimate tu. "Je comprends un peu." Claire's French was much better than hers, but Claire clearly had no interest in conversation.

The comtesse looked at the nursing baby. A shadow flitted across her face. "My own child," in French, "I was forced to leave behind."

"I'm sorry." For a moment Mary hated the comtesse for having a child to leave, that and for the abandonment itself.

No. Bysse, she remembered, had left his own children. It did not make one unnatural. Sometimes there were circumstances.

Speech languished after this unpromising beginning. Mary leaned her head against the planking and tried to sleep, sadly aware of the cold seep of water up her skirts. The boat's movement was too violent to be restful, but she composed herself deliberately for sleep. Images floated through her mind: the great crumbling keep of Chillon, standing above the surging gray water like the setting of one of "Monk" Lewis's novels; a gray cat eating a blushing rose; a figure, massive and threatening, somehow both George and her father Godwin, flinging back the bed-curtains to reveal, in the bright light of morning, the comtesse Laufenburg's placid blonde face with its outthrust, Habsburg lip.

Habsburg. Mary sat up with a cry and banged her skull on the deckhead.

She cast a wild look at Claire and the comtesse, saw them both drowsing, Alba asleep in Claire's lap. The boat was rolling madly in a freshening breeze: there were ominous, threatening little shrieks of wind in the rigging. The cuddy stank badly.

Mary made her way out of the cuddy, clinging to the sides of the hatch

as the boat sought to pitch her out. Bysse was holding grimly to the tiller with one big hand, controlling the sheet with the other while spray soaked his coat; George and Pasmány were hanging to the shrouds to keep from sliding down the tilted deck.

Astern was Lausanne, north of the lake, and the Cornettes to the south; and Mont Billiat, looming over the valley of the Dranse to the south, was right abeam: they were smack in the middle of the lake, with the *vaudaire* wind funneling down the valley, stronger than ever with the mountain boundary out of the way.

Mary seized the rail, hauled herself up the tilting deck toward George. “I know your secret,” she said. “I know who your woman is.”

George’s face ran with spray; his auburn hair was plastered to the back of his neck. He fixed her with eyes colder than the glaciers of Mont Blanc. “Indeed,” he said.

“Marie-Louise of the house of Habsburg.” Hot anger pulsed through her, burned against the cold spindrift on her face. “Former Empress of the French!”

Restlessly, George turned his eyes away. “Indeed,” he said again.

Mary seized a shroud and dragged herself to the rail next to him. Bysse watched in shock as Mary shouted into the wind. “Her husband abroad! Abroad, forsooth—all the way to St. Helena! Forced to leave her child behind, because her father would never let Napoleon’s son out of his control for an instant. Even a Habsburg lip—my God!”

“Very clever, Miss Godwin. But I believe you have divined my sentiments on the subject of clever women.” George gazed ahead, toward Geneva. “Now you see why I wish to be away.”

“I see only vanity!” Mary raged. “Colossal vanity! You can’t stop fighting Napoleon even now! Even when the battlefield is only a bed!”

George glared at her. “Is it my damned fault that Napoleon could never keep his women?”

“It’s your damned fault that *you* keep her!”

George opened his mouth to spit out a reply and then the *vaudaire*, like a giant hand, took *Ariel’s* mast in its grasp and slammed the frail boat over. Bysse cried out and hauled the tiller to his chest and let the mainsheet go, all far too late. The deck pitched out from under Mary’s heels and she clung to the shroud for dear life. Pasmány shouted in Hungarian. There was a roar as the sail hit the water. The lake foamed over the lee rail and the wind tore Mary’s breath away. There were

screams from the cuddy as water poured into the little cabin.

“Halyards and topping lift!” Bysshe gasped. He was clinging to the weather rail: a breaker exploded in his face and he gasped for air. “Let ‘em go!”

If the sail filled with water all was lost. Mary let go of the shroud and palmed her way across the vertical deck. Freezing lakewater clutched at her ankles. Harriet Shelley shrieked her triumph in Mary’s ears like the wind. Mary lurched forward to the mast, flung the halyard and topping lift off their cleats. The sail sagged free, empty of everything but the water that poured onto its canvas surface, turning it into a giant weight that would drag the boat over. Too late.

“Save the ladies, George!” Bysshe called. His face was dead-white but his voice was calm. “I can’t swim!”

Water boiled up Mary’s skirts. She could feel the dead weight dragging her down as she clutched at George’s leg and hauled herself up the deck. She screamed as her unborn child protested, a gouging pain deep in her belly.

George raged wildly. “Damn it, Shelley, what can I *do*?” He had a leg over one of the shrouds; the other was Mary’s support. The wind had taken his hat and his cloak rattled around him like wind-filled canvas.

“Cut the mast free!”

George turned to Mary. “My sword! Get it from the cabin!”

Mary looked down and into the terrified black eyes of Claire, half-out of the cuddy. She held a wailing Alba in her arms. “Take the baby!” she shrieked.

“Give me a sword!” Mary said. A wave broke over the boat, soaking them all in icy rain. Mary thought of Harriet smiling, her hair trailing like seaweed.

“Save my baby!”

“The *sword!* Byron’s *sword!* Give it!” Mary clung to George’s leg with one hand and thrust the crying babe away with the other.

“*I hate you!*” Claire shrieked, but she turned and fumbled for George’s sword. She held it up out of the hatch, and Mary took the cut steel hilt in her hand and drew it rasping from the scabbard. She held it blindly above her head and felt George’s firm hand close over hers and take the sabre away. The pain in her belly was like a knife. Through the boat and her spine she felt the thudding blows as George hacked at the shrouds, and

then there was a rending as the mast splintered and *Ariel*, relieved of its top-hamper, swung suddenly upright.

Half the lake seemed to splash into the boat as it came off its beam-ends. George pitched over backwards as *Ariel* righted itself, but Mary clung to his leg and kept him from going into the lake while he dragged himself to safety over the rail.

Another wave crashed over them. Mary clutched at her belly and moaned. The pain was ebbing. The boat pirouetted on the lake as the wind took it, and then *Ariel* jerked to a halt. The wreckage of the mast was acting as a sea-anchor, moderating the wave action, keeping the boat stable. Alba's screams floated high above *Ariel's* remains.

Wood floats, Mary remembered dully. And *Ariel* was wood, no matter how much water slopped about in her bottom.

Shelley staggered to his feet, shin-deep in lake water. "By God, George," he gasped. "You've saved us."

"By God," George answered "so I have." Mary looked up from the deck to see George with the devil's light in his eyes, his color high and his sabre in his hand. So, she reckoned, he must have seemed to Napoleon at Genappe. George bent and peered into the cuddy.

"Are the ladies all right?"

"Je suis bien, merci." From the Austrian princess.

"Damn you to hell, George!" Claire cried. George only grinned.

"I see we are well," he said.

And then Mary felt the warm blood running down the insides of her legs, and knew that George was wrong.

Mary lay on a bed in the farmhouse sipping warm brandy. Reddening cloths were packed between her legs. The hemorrhage had not stopped, though at least there was no pain. Mary could feel the child moving within her, as if struggling in its terror. Over the click of knitting needles, she could hear the voices of the men in the kitchen, and smell George's cigar.

The large farm, sitting below its pastures ttpi stretched up the Noirmont, was owned by a white-mustached old man named Ffeury, a man who seemed incapable of surprise or confusion even when armed men arrived at his doorstep, carrying between them a bleeding woman and a sack filled with gold. He turned Mary over to his wife, hitched up his



trousers, put his hat on, and went to St. Prex to find a doctor.

Madame Fleury, a large woman unflappable as her husband, tended Mary and made her drink a brandy toddy while she sat by Mary and did her knitting.

When Fleury returned, his news wasn't good. The local surgeon had gone up the road to set the bones of some workmen caught in an avalanche—perhaps there would be amputations—but he would return as soon as he could. The road west to Geneva was still blocked by the slide; the road east to Lausanne had been cleared. George seemed thoughtful at the news. His voice echoed in from the kitchen. "Perhaps the chase will simply go past," he said in English.

"What sort of pursuit do you anticipate?" Bysse asked. "Surely you don't expect the Austrian Emperor to send his troops into Switzerland."

"Stranger things have happened," George said. "And it may not be the Emperor's own people after us—it might be Neipperg, acting on his own."

Mary knew she'd heard the name before, and tried to recall it. But Bysse said, "The general? Why would he be concerned?"

There was cynical amusement in George's voice. "Because he's her highness's former lover! I don't imagine he'd like to see his fortune run away."

"Do you credit him with so base a motive?"

George laughed. "In order to prevent Marie-Louise from joining Bonaparte, Prince Metternich *ordered* von Neipperg to leave his wife and to seduce her highness—and that one-eyed scoundrel was only too happy to comply. His reward was to be the co-rulership of Parma, of which her highness was to be Duchess."

"Are you certain of this?"

"Metternich told me at his dinner table over a pipe of tobacco. And Neipperg *boasted* to me, sir!" A sigh, almost a snarl, came from George. "My heart wrung at his words, Mr. Shelley. For I had already met her highness and—" Words failed him for a moment. "I determined to rescue her from Neipperg's clutches, though all the Hungarian Grenadiers of the Empire stood in the way!"

"That was most admirable, my lord," Bysse said quietly.

Claire's voice piped up. "Who is this Neipperg?"

"Adam von Neipperg is a cavalry officer who defeated Murat," Bysse said. "That's all I know of him."

George's voice was thoughtful. "He's the best the Austrians have. Quite the *beau sabreur*, and a diplomat as well. He persuaded Crown Prince Bernadotte to switch sides before the battle of Leipzig. And yes, he defeated Murat on the field of Tolentino, a few weeks before Waterloo. Command of the Austrian army was another of Prince Metternich's rewards for his... services."

Murat, Mary knew, was Napoleon's great cavalry general. Neipperg, the best Austrian cavalryman, had defeated Murat, and now Britain's greatest horseman had defeated Napoleon *and* Neipperg, one on the battlefield and both in bed.

*Such a competitive little company of cavaliers*, she thought. Madame Fleury's knitting needles clacked out a complicated pattern.

"You think he's going to come after you?" Bysshe asked.

"I would," simply. "And neither he nor I would care what the Swiss think about it. And he'll find enough officers who will want to fight for the, ah, *honor* of their royal family. And he certainly has scouts or agents among the Swiss looking for me—surely one of them visited the commissaire of Montreux."

"I see." Mary heard the sound of Bysshe rising from his seat. "I must see to Mary."

He stepped into the bedroom, sat on the edge of the bed, took her hand. Madame Fleury barely looked up from her knitting.

"Are you better, Pecksie?"

"Nothing has changed." *I'm still dying*, she thought.

Bysshe sighed. "I'm sorry," he said, "to have exposed you to such danger. And now I don't know what to do."

"And all for so little."

Bysshe was thoughtful. "Do you think liberty is so little? And Byron—the voice of monarchy and reaction—fighting for freedom! Think of it!"

*My life is bleeding away*, Mary thought incredulously, *and his child with it*. There was poison in her voice when she answered.

"This isn't about the freedom of a woman, it's about the freedom of one man to do what he wants."

Bysshe frowned at her.

"He can't love," Mary insisted. "He felt no love for his wife, or for Claire." Bysshe tried to hush her—her voice was probably perfectly audible

in the kitchen. But it was pleasing for her not to give a damn.

“It’s not love he feels for that poor woman in the cellar,” she said. “His passions are entirely concerned with himself—and now that he can’t exorcise them on the battlefield, he’s got to find other means.”

“Are you certain?”

“He’s a mad whirlwind of destruction! Look what he did to Claire. And now he’s wrecked *Ariel*, and he may yet involve us all in a battle—with Austrian cavalry, forsooth! He’ll destroy us all if we let him.”

“Perhaps it will not come to that.”

George appeared in the door. He was wrapped in a blanket and carried a carbine, and if he was embarrassed by what he’d heard, he failed to display it. “With your permission, Mr. Shelley, I’m going to try to sink your boat. It sits on a rock just below our location, a pistol pointed at our head.”

Bysshe looked at Mary. “Do as you wish.”

“I’ll give you privacy, then.” And pointedly closed the door.

Mary heard his footsteps march out, the outside door open and close. She put her hand on Bysshe’s arm. *I am bleeding to death*, she thought. “Promise me you will take no part in anything,” she said. “George will try to talk you into defending the princess—he knows you’re a good shot.”

“But what of Marie-Louise? To be dragged back to Austria by force of arms— what a prospect! An outrage, inhuman and degrading.”

*I am bleeding to death*, Mary thought. But she composed a civil reply. “Her condition saddens me. But she was born a pawn and has lived a pawn her entire life. However this turns out, she will be a pawn either of George or of Metternich, and we cannot change that. It is the evil of monarchy and tyranny that has made her so. We may be thankful we were not born among her class.”

There were tears in Bysshe’s eyes. “Very well. If you think it best, I will not lift a hand in this.”

Mary put her arms around him, held herself close to his warmth. She clenched trembling hands behind his back.

Soon, she thought, *I will lack the strength to do even this. And then I will die.*

There was a warm and spreading lake between her legs. She felt very drowsy as she held Bysshe, the effects of the brandy, and she closed her eyes and tried to rest. Bysshe stroked her cheek and hair. Mary, for a

moment, dreamed.

She dreamed of pursuit, a towering, shrouded figure stalking her over the lake—but the lake was frozen, and as Mary fled across the ice she found other people standing there, people to whom she ran for help only to discover them all dead, frozen in their places and covered with frost. Terrified, she ran among them, seeing to her further horror that she knew them all: her mother and namesake; and Mr. Godwin; and George, looking at her insolently with eyes of black ice; and lastly the figure of Harriet Shelley, a woman she had never met in life but who Mary knew at once. Harriet stood rooted to a patch of ice and held in her arms the frost-swathed figure of a child. And despite the rime that covered the tiny face, Mary knew at once, and with agonized despair, just whose child Harriet carried so triumphantly in her arms.

She woke, terror pounding in her heart. There was a gunshot from outside. She felt Bysshe stiffen. Another shot. And then the sound of pounding feet.

“They’re here, damn it!” George called. “And my shot missed!”

Gunfire and the sound of hammering swirled through Mary’s perceptions. Furniture was shifted, doors barricaded, weapons laid ready. The shutters had already been closed against the *vaudaire*, so no one had to risk himself securing the windows. Claire and Alba came into Mary’s room, the both of them screaming; and Mary, not giving a damn any longer, sent them both out. George put them in the cellar with the Austrian princess—Mary was amused that they seemed doomed to share quarters together. Bysshe, throughout, only sat on the bed and held Mary in his arms. He seemed calm, but his heart pounded against her ear. M. Fleury appeared, loading an old Charleville musket as he offhandedly explained that he had served in one of Louis XVI’s mercenary Swiss regiments. His wife put down her knitting needles, poured buckshot into her apron pockets, and went off with him to serve as his loader. Afterwards Mary wondered if that particular episode, that vision of the old man with his gun and powder horn, had been a dream—but no, Madame Fleury was gone, her pockets filled with lead.

Eventually the noise died away. George came in with his Mantons stuffed in his belt, looking pleased with himself. “I think we stand well,” he said. “This place is fine as a fort. At Waterloo we held Hougoumont and La Haye Sainte against worse—and Neipperg will have no artillery. The odds aren’t bad—I counted only eight of them.” He looked at Bysshe. “Unless

you are willing to join us, Mr. Shelley, in defense of her highness's liberty."

Bysshe sat up. "I wish no man's blood on my hands." Mary rejoiced at the firmness in his voice.

"I will not argue against your conscience, but if you won't fight, then perhaps you can load for me?"

"What of Mary?" Bysshe asked.

*Indeed*, Mary thought. *What of me?*

"Can we arrange for her, and for Claire and Alba, to leave this house?"

George shook his head. "They don't dare risk letting you go—you'd just inform the Swiss authorities. I could negotiate a cease-fire to allow you to become their prisoners, but then you'd be living in the barn or the outdoors instead of more comfortably in here." He looked down at Mary. "I do not think we should move your lady in any case. Here in the house it is safe enough."

"But what if there's a battle? My God—there's already been shooting!"

"No one was hurt, you'll note—though if I'd had a Baker or a jager rifle instead of my puisny little carbine, I daresay I'd have dropped one of them. No—what will happen now is that they'll either try an assault, which will take a while to organize, because they're all scattered out watching the house, and which will cost them dearly in the end... or they'll wait. They don't know how many people we have in here, and they'll be cautious on that account. We're inside, with plenty of food and fuel and ammunition, and they're in the outdoors facing unseasonably cold weather. And the longer they wait, the more likely it will be that our local Swiss yeomen will discover them, and then..." He gave a low laugh. "Austrian soldiers have never fared well in Switzerland, not since the days of William Tell. Our Austrian friends will be arrested and imprisoned."

"But the surgeon? Will they not let the surgeon pass?"

"I can't say."

Bysshe stared. "My God! Can't you speak to them?"

"I will ask if you like. But I don't know what a surgeon can do that we cannot."

Bysshe looked desperate. "There must be something that will stop the bleeding!"

*Yes*, Mary thought. *Death. Harriet has won.*

George gazed down at Mary with thoughtful eyes. "A Scotch midwife

would sit her in a tub of icewater.”

Bysshe stiffened like a dog on point. “Is there ice? Is there an ice cellar?” He rushed out of the room. Mary could hear him stammering out frantic questions in French, then Fleury’s offhand reply. When Bysshe came back he looked stricken. “There is an icehouse, but it’s out behind the barn.”

“And in enemy hands.” George sighed. “Well, I will ask if they will permit Madame Fleury to bring ice into the house, and pass the surgeon through when he comes.”

George left the room and commenced a shouted conversation in French with someone outside. Mary winced at the volume of George’s voice. The voice outside spoke French with a harsh accent.

No, she understood. They would not permit ice or a surgeon to enter a house.

“They suspect a plot, I suppose,” George reported. He stood wearily in the doorway. “Or they think one of my men is wounded.”

“They want to make you watch someone die,” Mary said. “And hope it will make you surrender.”

George looked at her. “Yes, you comprehend their intent,” he said. “That is precisely what they want.” Bysshe looked horrified.

George’s look turned intent. “And what does Mistress Mary want?”

Mary closed her eyes. “Mistress Mary wants to live, and to hell with you all.”

George laughed, a low and misanthropic chuckle. “Very well. Live you shall—and I believe I know the way.”

He returned to the other room, and Mary heard his raised voice again. He was asking, in French, what the intruders wanted, and in passing comparing their actions to Napoleon’s abduction of the Due d’Enghien, justly abhorred by all nations.

“A telling hit,” Mary said. “Good old George.” She wrapped her two small pale hands around one of Bysshe’s big ones.

The same voice answered, demanding that Her Highness the Duchess of Parma be surrendered. George returned that her highness was here of her own free will, and that she commanded that they withdraw to their own borders and trouble her no more. The emissary said his party was acting for the honor of Austria and the House of Habsburg. George announced that he felt free to doubt that their shameful actions were in any way honorable, and he was prepared to prove it, *corps-a-corps*, if

*Feldmarschall-leutnant* von Neipperg was willing to oblige him.

“My God!” Bysse said. “He’s calling the blackguard out!”

Mary could only laugh. A duel, fought for an Austrian princess and Mary’s bleeding womb.

The other asked for time to consider. George gave it.

“This neatly solves our dilemma, don’t it?” he said after he returned. “If I beat Neipperg, the rest of those German puppies won’t have direction—they’d be on the road back to Austria. Her royal highness and I will be able to make our way to a friendly country. No magistrates, no awkward questions, and a long head start.” He smiled. “And all the ice in the world for Mistress Mary.”

“And if you lose?” Bysse asked.

“It ain’t to be thought of. I’m a master of the sabre, I practice with Pasmay almost daily, and whatever Neipperg’s other virtues I doubt he can compare with me in the art of the sword. The only question,” he turned thoughtful, “is whether we can trust his offer. If there’s treachery...”

“Or if he insists on pistols!” Mary found she couldn’t resist pointing this out. “You didn’t precisely cover yourself with glory the last time I saw you shoot.”

George only seemed amused. “Neipperg only has one eye—I doubt he’s much of a shot, either. My second would have to insist on a sabre fight,” and here he smiled, “*pour l’honneur de la cavalerie.*”

Somehow Mary found this satisfying. “Go fight, George. I know you love your legend more than you ever loved that Austrian girl—and this will make a nice end to it.”

George only chuckled again, while Bysse looked shocked. “Truthful Mistress Mary,” George said. “Never without your sting.”

“I see no point in politeness from this position.”

“You would have made a good soldier, Mrs. Shelley.”

Longing fell upon Mary. “I would have made a better mother,” she said, and felt tears sting her eyes.

“God, Maie!” Bysse cried. “What I would not give!” He bent over her and began to weep.

It was, Mary considered, about time, and then reflected that death had made her satirical.

George watched for a long moment, then withdrew. Mary could hear his boots pacing back and forth in the kitchen, and then a different, younger voice called from outside.

The *Feldmarschall-leutnant* had agreed to the encounter. He, the new voice, was prepared to present himself as von Neipperg's second.

"A soldier all right," George commented. "Civilian clothes, but he's got that sprig of greenery that Austrian troops wear in their hats." His voice lifted. "That's far enough, laddie!" He switched to French and said that his second would be out shortly. Then his footsteps returned to Mary's rooms and put a hand on Bysshe's shoulder.

"Mr. Shelley," he said, "I regret this intrusion, but I must ask—will you do me the honor of standing my second in this affaire?"

"Bysshe!" Mary cried. "Of course not!"

Bysshe blinked tear-dazzled eyes but managed to speak clearly enough. "I'm totally opposed to the practice. It's vicious and wasteful and utterly without moral foundation. It reeks of death and the dark ages and ruling-class affectation."

George's voice was gentle. "There are no other gentlemen here," he said. "Pasma is a servant, and I can't see sending our worthy M. Fleury out to negotiate with those little noblemen. And—" He looked at Mary. "Your lady must have her ice and her surgeon."

Bysshe looked stricken. "I know nothing of how to manage these encounters," he said. "I would not do well by you. If you were to fall as a result of my bungling, I should never forgive myself."

"I will tell you what to say, and if he doesn't agree, then bring negotiations to a close."

"Bysshe," Mary reminded, "you said you would have nothing to do with this."

Bysshe wiped tears from his eyes and looked thoughtful.

"Don't you see this is theater?" Mary demanded. "George is adding this scene to his legend—he doesn't give a damn for anyone here!"

George only seemed amused. "You are far from death, madam, I think, to show such spirit," he said. "Come, Mr. Shelley! Despite what Mary thinks, a fight with Neipperg is the only way we can escape without risking the ladies."

"No," Mary said.

Bysshe looked thoroughly unhappy. "Very well," he said. "For Mary's



sake, I'll do as you ask, provided I do no violence myself. But I should say that I resent being placed in this... *extraordinary* position in the first place."

Mary settled for glaring at Bysshe.

More negotiations were conducted through the window, and then Bysshe, after receiving a thorough briefing, straightened and brushed his jacket, brushed his knees, put on his hat, and said goodbye to Mary. He was very pale under his freckles.

"Don't forget to point out," George said, "that if von Neipperg attempts treachery, he will be instantly shot dead by my men firing from this house."

"Quite."

He left Mary in her bed. George went with him, to pull away the furniture barricade at the front door.

Mary realized she wasn't about to lie in bed while Bysshe was outside risking his neck. She threw off the covers and went to the window. Unbarred the shutter, pushed it open slightly.

Wet coursed down her legs.

Bysshe was holding a conversation with a stiff young man in an overcoat. After a few moments, Bysshe returned and reported to George. Mary, feeling like a guilty child, returned to her bed.

"Baron von Strickow—that's Neipperg's second—was taken with your notion of the swordfight *pour la cavalerie*, but insists the fight should be on horseback." He frowned. "They know, of course, that you haven't a horse with you."

"No doubt they'd offer me some nag or other." George thought for a moment. "Very well. I find the notion of a fight on horseback too piquant quite to ignore— tell them that if they insist on such a fight, they must bring forward six saddled horses, and that I will pick mine first, and Neipperg second."

"Very well."

Bysshe returned to the negotiations, and reported back that all had been settled. "With ill grace, as regards your last condition. But he conceded it was fair." Bysshe returned to Mary's room, speaking to George over his shoulder. "Just as well you're doing this on horseback. The yard is wet and slippery—poor footing for sword work."

"I'll try not to do any quick turns on horseback, either." George stepped

into the room, gave Mary a glance, then looked at Bysse. “Your appreciation of our opponents?”

“The Baron was tired and mud-covered. He’s been riding hard. I don’t imagine the rest of them are any fresher.” Bysse sat by Mary and took her hand. “He wouldn’t shake my hand until he found out my father was a baronet. And then I wouldn’t shake his.”

“Good fellow!”

Bysse gave a self-congratulatory look. “I believe it put him out of countenance.”

George was amused. “These kraut-eaters make me look positively democratic.” He left to give Pasmay his carbine and pistols—“the better to keep Neipperg honest.”

“What of the princess?” Mary wondered. “Do you suppose he will bother to tell her of these efforts on her behalf?”

Shortly thereafter came the sound of the kitchen trap being thrown open, and George’s bootheels descending to the cellar. Distant French tones, the sound of female protest, George’s calm insistence. Claire’s furious shrieks. George’s abrupt reply, and then his return to the kitchen.

George appeared in the door, clanking in spurs and with a sword in his hand. Marie-Louise, looking pale, hovered behind him.

Mary looked up at Bysse. “You won’t have to participate in this any longer, will you?”

George answered for him. “I’d be obliged if Mr. Shelley would help me select my horse. Then you can withdraw to the porch—but if there’s treachery, be prepared to barricade the door again.”

Bysse nodded. “Very well.” He rose and looked out the window. “The horses are coming, along with the Baron and a one-eyed man.”

George gave a cursory look out the window. “That’s the fellow. He lost the eye at Neerwinden—French sabre cut.” His voice turned inward. “I’ll try to attack from his blind side—perhaps he’ll be weaker there.”

Bysse was more interested in the animals. “There are three white horses. What are they?”

“Lipizzaners of the royal stud,” George said. “The Roman Caesars rode ‘em, or so the Austrians claim. Small horses by the standard of our English hunters, but strong and very sturdy. Bred and trained for war.” He flashed a smile. “They’ll do for me, I think.”

He stripped off his coat and began to walk toward the door, but

recollected, at the last second, the cause of the fight and returned to Marie-Louise. He put his arms around her, murmured something, and kissed her cheek. Then, with a smile, he walked into the other room. Bysse, deeply unhappy, followed. And then Mary, ignoring the questioning eyes of the Austrian princess, worked her way out of bed and went to the window.

From the window Mary watched as George took his time with the horses, examining each minutely, discoursing on their virtues with Bysse, checking their shoes and eyes as if he were buying them. The Austrians looked stiff and disapproving. Neipperg was a tall, bull-chested man, handsome despite the eyepatch, with a well-tended halo of hair.

Perhaps George dragged the business out in order to nettle his opponent.

George mounted one of the white horses and trotted it round the yard for a brief while, then repeated the experiment with a second Lipizzaner. Then he went back to the first and declared himself satisfied.

Neipperg, seeming even more rigid than before, took the second horse, the one George had rejected. Perhaps it was his own, Mary thought.

Bysse retreated to the front porch of the farmhouse, Strickow to the barn, and the two horsemen to opposite ends of the yard. Both handled their horses expertly. Bysse asked each if he were ready, and received a curt nod.

Mary's legs trembled. She hoped she wouldn't fall. She had to see it. "Un," Strickow called out in a loud voice. "*Deux. Trois!*" Mary had expected the combatants to dash at each other, but they were too cautious, too professional— instead each goaded his beast into a slow trot and held his sabre with the hilt high, the blade dropping across the body, carefully on guard. Mary noticed that George was approaching on his opponent's blind right side. As they came together there were sudden flashes of silver, too fast for the eye to follow, and the sound of ringing steel.

Then they were past. But Neipperg, as he spurred on, delivered a vicious blind swipe at George's back. Mary cried out, but there was another clang—George had dropped his point behind his back to guard against just that attack.

"Foul blow!" Bysse cried, from the porch, then clapped his hands. "Good work, George!"

George turned with an intent smile on his face, as if he had the measure

of his opponent. There was a cry from elsewhere in the farmhouse, and Claire came running, terror in her eyes. “Are they fighting?” she wailed, and pushed past Mary to get to the window.

Mary tried to pull her back and failed. Her head swam. “You don’t want to watch this,” she said.

Alba began to cry from the cellar. Claire pushed the shutters wide and thrust her head out.

“Kill him, George!” she shouted. “Kill him!”

George gave no sign of having heard—he and Neipperg were trotting at each other again, and George was crouched down over his horse’s neck, his attention wholly on his opponent.

Mary watched over Claire’s shoulder as the two approached, as blades flashed and clanged—once, twice—and then George thrust to Neipperg’s throat and Mary gasped, not just at the pitilessness of it, but at its strange physical consummation, at the way horse and rider and arm and sword, the dart of the blade and momentum of the horse and rider, merged for an instant in an awesome moment of perfection...

Neipperg rode on for a few seconds while blood poured like a tide down his white shirtfront, and then he slumped and fell off his animal like a sack. Mary shivered, knowing she’d just seen a man killed, killed with absolute forethought and deliberation. And George, that intent look still on his face as he watched Neipperg over his shoulder, lowered his scarlet-tipped sword and gave a careless tug of the reins to turn his horse around...

Too careless. The horse balked, then turned too suddenly. Its hind legs slid out from under it on the slick grass, George’s arms windmilled as he tried to regain his balance, and the horse, with an almost-human cry, fell heavily on George’s right leg.

Claire and Mary cried out. The Lipizzaner’s legs flailed in the air as he rolled over on George. Bysshe launched himself off the porch in a run. George began to scream, a sound that raised the hair on Mary’s neck.

And, while Adam von Neipperg twitched away his life on the grass, Marie-Louise of Austria, France, and Parma, hearing George’s cries of agony, bolted hysterically for the door and ran out onto the yard and into the arms of her countryman.

“No!” George insisted. “No surgeons!”

Not a word, Mary noted, for the lost Marie-Louise. She watched from the doorway as his friends carried him in and laid him on the kitchen table. The impassive M. Fleury cut the boot away with a pair of shears and tore the leather away with a suddenness that made George gasp. Bysshe peeled away the bloody stocking, and bit his lip at the sight of protruding bone.

“We *must* show this to the surgeon, George,” Bysshe said. “The foot and ankle are shattered.”

“No!” Sweat beaded on George’s forehead. “I’ve seen surgeons at their work. My God—” There was horror in his eyes. “I’ll be a *cripple!*”

M. Fleury said nothing, only looked down at the shattered ankle with his knowing veteran’s eyes. He hitched up his trousers, took a bucket from under the cutting board, and left to get ice for Mary.

The Austrians were long gone, ridden off with their blonde trophy. Their fallen paladin was still in the yard—he’d only slow down their escape.

George was pale and his skin was clammy. Claire choked back tears as she looked down at him. “Does it hurt very much?”

“Yes,” George confessed, “it does. Perhaps Madame Fleury would oblige me with a glass of brandy.”

Madame Fleury fetched the jug and some glasses. Pasma stood in the corner exuding dark Hungarian gloom. George looked up at Mary, seemed surprised to find her out of bed.

“I seem to be unlucky for your little family,” he said. “I hope you will forgive me.”

“If I can,” said Mary.

George smiled. “Truthful Miss Mary. How fine you are.” A spasm of pain took him and he gasped. Madame Fleury put some brandy in his hand and he gulped it.

“Mary!” Bysshe rushed to her. “You should not be seeing this. Go back to your bed.”

“What difference does it make?” Mary said, feeling the blood streaking her legs; but she allowed herself to be put to bed.

Soon the tub of ice water was ready. It was too big to get through the door into Mary’s room, so she had to join George in the kitchen after all. She sat in the cold wet, and Bysshe propped her back with pillows, and they both watched as the water turned red.

George was pale, gulping brandy from the bottle. He looked at Bysshe.

“Perhaps you could take our mind off things,” he said. “Perhaps you could tell me one of your ghost stories.”

Bysshe could not speak. Tears were running down his face. So to calm him, and to occupy her time when dying, Mary began to tell a story. It was about an empty man, a Swiss baron who was a genius but who lacked any quality of soul. His name, in English, meant the Franked Stone—the stone whose noble birth had paid its way, but which was still a stone, and being a stone unable to know love.

And the baron had a wasting disease, one that caused his limbs to wither and die. And he knew he would soon be a cripple.

Being a genius the baron thought he knew the answer. Out of protoplasm and electricity and parts stolen from the graveyard he built another man. He called this man a monster, and held him prisoner. And every time one of the baron’s limbs began to wither, he’d arrange for his assistants to cut off one of the monster’s limbs, and use it to replace the baron’s withered part. The monster’s own limb was replaced by one from the graveyard. And the monster went through enormous pain, one hideous surgical procedure after another, but the baron didn’t care, because he was whole again and the monster was only a monster, a thing he had created.

But then the monster escaped. He educated himself and grew in understanding and apprehension and he spied on the baron and his family. In revenge the monster killed everyone the baron knew, and the baron was angered not because he loved his family but because the killings were an offense to his pride. So the baron swore revenge on the monster and began to pursue him.

The pursuit took the baron all over the world, but it never ended. At the end the baron pursued the monster to the arctic, and disappeared forever into the ice and mist, into the heart of the white desert of the Pole.

Mary meant the monster to be Soul, of course, and the baron Reason. Because unless the two could unite in sympathy, all was lost in ice and desolation.

It took Mary a long time to tell her story, and she couldn’t tell whether George understood her meaning or not. By the time she finished the day was almost over, and her own bleeding had stopped. George had drunk himself nearly insensible, and a diffident notary had arrived from St. Prex to take everyone’s testimony.

Mary went back to bed, clean sheets and warmth and the arms of her lover. She and her child would live.

The surgeon came with them, took one look at George's foot, and announced it had to come off.

The surgery was performed on the kitchen table, and George's screams rang for a long time in Mary's dreams.

In a few days Mary had largely recovered. She and Bysshe thanked the Fleurys and sailed to Geneva on a beautiful autumn day in their hired boat. George and Claire—for Claire was George's again—remained behind to sort out George's legal problems. Mary didn't think their friendship would last beyond George's immediate recovery, and she hoped that Claire would not return to England heavy with another child.

After another week's recovery in Geneva, Bysshe and Mary headed for England and the financial rescue of Mr. Godwin. Mary had bought a pocketbook and was already filling its pages with her story of the Franked Stone. Bysshe knew any number of publishers, and assured her it would find a home with one of them.

*Frankenstein* was an immediate success. At one point there were over twenty stage productions going on at once. Though she received no money from the stage adaptations, the book proved a very good seller, and was never out of print. The royalties proved useful in supporting Bysshe and Mary and Claire—once she returned to them, once more with child—during years of wandering, chiefly in Switzerland and Italy.

George's promised thousand pounds a year never materialized.

And the monster, the poor abused charnel creature that was Mary's settlement with death, now stalked through the hearts of all the world.

George went to South America to sell his sword to the revolutionary cause. Mary and Bysshe, reading of his exploits in tattered newspapers sent from England, found it somehow satisfying that he was, at last and however reluctantly, fighting for liberty.

They never saw him again, but Mary thought of him often—the great, famed figure, limping painfully through battle after battle, crippled, ever-restless, and in his breast the arctic waste of the soul, the franked and steely creator with his heart of stone.

**The End**