

# **AND LIGHTNING STRUCK**

**Mary Shelley and the Curse of Creation**

**By  
Robert Weibezahl**

## AND LIGHTNING STRUCK

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### CHARACTERS

**MARY SHELLEY** (female, 35). Reserved, intellectual, thoughtful, yet passionate. A woman who knows her mind, but conserves her emotions—until forced to confront them.

**YOUNGER MARY** (female, 18-20). Intelligent and thoughtful. Already displaying traces of the extraordinary talent she will share with the world, but still essentially a young woman in the throes of love.

**MATTHEWS** (male, mid-20s). Intelligent and enthusiastic, polite but emphatic about what he wants, both an ardent fan and a determined businessman.

**THE CREATURE** (male\*, age flexible, 30-60). The true embodiment of Mary Shelley’s vision—not the Hollywood stereotype. Brooding, intelligent, cursed by fate. Role requires great physical presence and physicality.

**POLIDORI** (male, 20s). A young doctor and aspiring poet, is more enthusiastic than talented, a romantic who wants very much to be accepted as part of the “in” crowd.

**SHELLEY** (male, 25-30). Dreamy, intelligent, romantic. An artist dedicated to ideals of love and beauty.

**VICTOR** (male, 25-30). Shelley’s counterpoint—a genius who has, quite literally, lost control of his own creativity.

**BYRON** (male, 25-30). Dashing, self-possessed, sardonic. Accustomed to being the star.

**CLAIRE** (female, 18-20). Romantic, unrealistic, wily, but a bit needy. A young woman without discernible talents of her own, living among geniuses.

**GODWIN** (male, age flexible, 30-60) A specter: Mary’s memory of her father. Stern and disapproving, but cares deeply for his daughter.

\*If Creature and Godwin are cast with separate actors, the casting of Creature could be gender neutral.

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**AND LIGHTNING STRUCK** can be performed by seven actors, with parts doubled as indicated, or ten actors without doubling.

Mary Shelley  
Younger Mary  
Matthews/Polidori  
The Creature/Godwin  
Shelley/Victor  
Byron  
Claire

TIME: 1830 and the 1810s.

PLACE: Mary Shelley's home in England and various places in her memory.

*And Lightning Struck: Mary Shelley and the Curse of Creation* was commissioned by Lit Live and originally staged at the Simi Valley Cultural Arts Center in Simi Valley, California, directed by Austin Robert Miller, and featuring the following cast:

Mary.....Kay Capasso  
Matthews/Polidori.....Cole Wagner  
Younger Mary.....Jennifer Ridgway  
The Creature/Godwin.....Tom Mesmer  
Shelley/Victor .....Schafer Bourne  
Byron.....Evan Smith  
Claire.....Alyssa Villaire

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### A NOTE FROM THE PLAYWRIGHT

**AND LIGHTNING STRUCK** is a work of the imagination based on real events. In an effort to tell the story of the origins of Mary Godwin Shelley's masterpiece, *Frankenstein*, I have drawn on the writings of those who were there the night it was first told, during a ghost story-telling contest at the chateau of Lord Byron along the shores of Lake Geneva: Mary herself, her husband Percy Bysshe Shelley, her step-sister Claire Clairmont, the doctor-poet John Polidori, and their host, Byron. The character of Matthews is a fabrication which means, of course, that the meeting between Mary Shelley and him that sets the play in motion and provides its frame is complete fiction. Dialogue is often drawn from the writings of Mary and the other real-life characters, and when it is made up, I have based much of it on actual words or sentiments expressed in their letters, diaries, fiction, and poetry to try to remain as faithful to these geniuses as possible, while creating some theatricality for the modern audience. Polidori, who did publish *The Vampyre* three years after this event, may have told a different story that fateful night (accounts vary), but for dramatic purposes I have assigned him that classic tale.

Production Note: **AND LIGHTNING STRUCK** is very fluid material and directors are invited to stage the play as they see fit. The stage directions in the script are offered as suggestions based on the first staging of the piece and are merely included as possibilities. The playwright envisions a simple set, primarily centered on the 1830 sitting room of Mary Shelley. The action in Mary's memories and the scenes featuring the Creature and Victor can be staged in separate areas or all the characters can be integrated into the action on the central set. The drama can be enhanced with distinct lighting effects.

N.B.: If the same actor is playing the Creature and Godwin, as suggested, then the Creature's opening lines in Act 1 can either be said from offstage and the Creature need not be revealed until Act 2, or, if costuming and technical choices permit, the Creature can be seen early in Act 1 before reappearing as Godwin.

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## ACT 1

*England. Summer. 1830.*

*The stage is set simply. A drawing room. An eighteenth-century writing desk and chair. Perhaps a window, half draped. An entranceway. The idea of a fireplace with two chairs or a divan beside it.*

*It is late afternoon at the start of the play, but the room is dim because outside a storm rages, suggested by the incessant sound of rain. There will be occasional flashes of thunder and lightning in the distance. By play's end, it can be night.*

*At the desk sits MARY. She is about 35 years old, dressed somberly in the manner of 1830s England. She is sitting at the desk writing. (The specters of YOUNGER MARY, SHELLEY, BYRON, and CLAIRE can be on stage. Or they can be voices in Mary's head. THE CREATURE may or may not be seen per playwright's note.) After a moment Mary hears a voice in her head.*

**VOICE 1 (YOUNGER MARY).** I did not make myself the heroine of my tales. (*Unsettled, MARY rises from her seat and paces, perhaps tends the "fire." Another voice...*)

**VOICE 2 (SHELLEY).** The irresistible wildness and sublimity of her feelings showed itself in her gestures and her looks.

**VOICE 3 (CREATURE).** Cursed, cursed creator! Why did I live?

**MARY.** Enough.

*Just before Mary speaks, MATTHEWS, a young gentleman enters the room. With her back to him, Mary does not see him and is not aware of his presence until he speaks, at which point she is slightly startled, but not overly surprised. (The specters of the past exit).*

**MATTHEWS.** I beg your pardon.

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**MARY.** (*Slightly startled.*) Oh.

**MATTHEWS.** Did you say something?

**MARY.** No. I—

**MATTHEWS.** Mrs. Shelley?

**MARY.** Yes. Hello. I have been expecting you.

**MATTHEWS.** Your maid said I should come through.

**MARY.** Yes, of course. I'll have her make tea. You must be soaked through.

**MATTHEWS.** (*Reciting.*) I wield the flail of the lashing hail,

And whiten the green plains under;

And then again I dissolve it in rain,

And laugh as I pass in thunder.

**MARY.** (*Surprised, pleased.*) You know my husband's work.

**MATTHEWS.** A great writer. I know his words intimately. (*Pause.*) And yours.

**MARY** (*A bit embarrassed.*) Let me see to that tea, then. (*She momentarily leaves the room. Matthews, alone, seems a bit ill at ease, perhaps, in being in the private home of someone he greatly admires. He goes to Mary's desk, pages through a book she has left there. Glances at the paper she has been writing, but quickly puts it down when he hears Mary returning.*)

**MARY.** (*Entering with a tray holding tea.*) The girl is new, and useless. (*There is a sudden flash of lightning followed not long after by the loud rumble of thunder.*)

My, it sounds as if you arrived just before the storm hit with fullest force.

**MATTHEWS.** They are predicting it to last some time.

**MARY.** Summer weather. The night I was born they say that lightning lit up the sky and thunder rattled the rooftops and chimneys of London. The night sky was filled with jagged yellow lines and many watched with awe at God's display.

**MATTHEWS.** You were born in summer?

**MARY.** The 30th of August. I won't say the year.

**MATTHEWS.** That is a lady's prerogative.

**MARY.** Won't you be seated, Mr. ... Richards, was it?

**MATTHEWS.** Matthews.

**MARY.** My apologies. I knew a family called Matthews when I was a girl in Holburn. Perhaps they were family?

**MATTHEWS.** I don't know, Madam. I think not. It is a common name. And I am from the West.

**MARY.** Please, sit. (*He does. Mary remains standing for the time being.*)

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**MATTHEWS.** You know why I am here?

**MARY.** I do. I received your letter.

**MATTHEWS.** Colburn and Bentley are set to bring out a new edition of your book—

**MARY.** Of *one* of my books. *Frankenstein*.

**MATTHEWS.** Yes. *The Modern Prometheus*. And we would very much like a new introduction. And we would very much like one written by you.

**MARY.** I am not sure I have anything new to say about that book.

**MATTHEWS.** The public loves it so. And would be ever so grateful, I am sure, if you would share its story with them.

**MARY.** Its story? Its story is all there in the pages of the book. It has even been put on the stage—

**MATTHEWS.** Of course. No, I mean, not the story of the monster—

**MARY.** The *creature*.

**MATTHEWS.** Yes. of course, the creature. Not the story of the creature itself, but the story of how you came to create him.

**MARY.** The first edition of the book already had an introduction. That seems adequate.

**MATTHEWS.** But that was written by your late husband, was it not? (*Mary hesitates to say.*) A great writer, as I have expressed. But the monst—the *creature*—is your creation, is it not?

**MARY** (*Ruefully.*) Even my father, the Great Man himself, thought my Percy had written the book.

**MATTHEWS.** But he did not.

**MARY.** No. It is mine and mine alone.

**MATTHEWS.** Your readers—and I count myself among the most ardent—would like to hear the story from you.

**MARY.** What would I tell? (*Thunder and lightning at this moment, as Young Mary steps out of the darkness in another area of the stage (or enters the room). Older Mary is aware of her “presence.” Matthews, of course, is not. Their dialogue overlaps.*)

**YOUNGER MARY.**

...the truth

**MARY.** What is that?

**MATTHEWS.**

Why, the truth, of course.

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**YOUNGER MARY.**

What they always ask of you: How I, when  
a young girl, came to think of and to dilate  
so very hideous an idea.  
hideous an idea.

**MATTHEWS.**

How a young girl came to upon,  
think— upon, so very

**MARY.** Hideous.

**MATTHEWS.** Pardon?

**YOUNGER MARY.** Some say so.

**MARY.** They see only that part of the creature, perhaps. Not all that he represents.

**YOUNGER MARY.** What parts sprang from our very soul.

**MARY.** Invention, it must be humbly admitted, does not consist in creating out of  
void, but out of chaos.

**YOUNGER MARY.**

The chaos of the soul?

**MATTHEWS.**

Chaos?

**MARY.** Yes. And of the chaos of the heart.

**YOUNGER MARY.** And of the daily chaos, too. (*Exits.*)

**MATTHEWS.** Would you ... would you speak to your readers of that chaos?

**MARY.** (*She realizes she has been lost in a conversation with her past self, and is embarrassed.*) I think not. No. (*After a moment.*) I think the original preface does  
suffice.

**MATTHEWS.** But those are his words.

**MARY.** Yes.

**MATTHEWS.** Was there no difference? Between his words and yours?

**MARY.** He was a genius.

**MATTHEWS.** And you are not?

**MARY.** That is for others to gauge. I am a writer who seeks clarity. Nothing more.  
As the daughter of two persons of distinguished literary celebrity—

**MATTHEWS.** So, give them clarity.

**MARY.** Who?

**MATTHEWS.** Your readers. Now. And those still to come.

**MARY.** Who can believe my work will live on for years to come?

**MATTHEWS.** (*Pulling a book from the inside pocket of his jacket.*) It shall. (*He opens the book and is about to read, then stops.*) May I? (*Mary shrugs feeble consent. As Matthews reads the following passage from Frankenstein, another portion of the stage is illuminated and, if technically possible, per playwright's*

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*note, the audience sees the Creature, at first lying still on his back, then slowly becoming alive as the story describes it.)* It was on a dreary night of November, that I beheld the accomplishment of my toils. With an anxiety that almost amounted to agony, I collected the instruments of life around me, that I might infuse a spark of being into the lifeless thing that lay at my feet. It was already one in the morning; the rain pattered dismally against the panes, and my candle was nearly burnt out, when, by the glimmer of the half-extinguished light, I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open; it breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs.

*(VICTOR enters during the preceding passage.)*

**MATTHEWS and VICTOR.** *(Simultaneously.)* How can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe, or how delineate the wretch whom with such infinite pains and care I had endeavored to form?

**VICTOR.** His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful. Beautiful!— Great God! His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same color as the dun white sockets in which they were set, his shriveled complexion and straight black lips.

**MATTHEWS.** *(Still reading.)* The different accidents of life are not so changeable as the feelings of human nature. I had worked hard for nearly two years, for the sole purpose of infusing life into an inanimate body. For this I had deprived myself of rest and health. I had desired it with an ardor that far exceeded moderation; but now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart. Unable to endure the aspect of the being I had created, I rushed out of the room, and continued a long time traversing my bedchamber, unable to compose my mind to sleep. *(Lights down on The Creature and Victor, or they exit. Matthews closes the book and looks over at Mary, who has been staring off into the middle distance as he read, revealing little in her expression except perhaps her own incomprehension that she once wrote those words.)* Is that not genius?

**MARY.** It is merely words. Words on a page.

**MATTHEWS.** Immortal words.

**MARY.** *(With a small laugh.)* Immortal? Nothing is immortal. Sadly.

**MATTHEWS.** Those are ironical words coming from you.

**MARY.** Why?

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**MATTHEWS.** Mrs. Shelley, have you not created the greatest testament to immortality that man has ever known?

**MARY.** Hardly. I am not a god—

**MATTHEWS.** No. You are an artist. “A star among the stars of mortal night.”

**MARY.** There is no need to keep quoting my husband’s poetry to me.

**MATTHEWS.** My apologies.

**MARY.** My father was educated as a minister, you know. Yet, in the end he was quite godless. (*Younger Mary enters.*)

**YOUNGER MARY.** (*Stepping into the light*). Quite godless.

**MATTHEWS.** More irony.

**MARY.** My very life has been built on irony. I am named for a mother I never knew.

**YOUNGER MARY.** A great woman I am told.

**MATTHEWS.** “Strengthen the female mind by enlarging it, and there will be an end to blind obedience.”

**MARY.** (*Genuinely surprised.*) My, you know my mother’s words as well as my husband’s.

**MATTHEWS.** It is my business to know words.

**MARY.** Both their writings will live on.

**MATTHEWS.** As will yours.

**MARY.** You flatter me, Mr. Matthews. Which is your want. A professional hazard for a publisher, I suppose.

**MATTHEWS.** I speak nothing but the truth, Mrs. Shelley. *Frankenstein* is a great book. Your readers would like to hear more.

**MARY.** (*Sighs.*) The book speaks for itself.

**MATTHEWS.** I beg to differ, Ma’am. It is so rich, so much unexplained.

**MARY.** That is the purpose of literature. To find your own way.

**MATTHEWS.** But, conventional wisdom—

**MARY.** (*Interrupting him with a genuine laugh.*) Conventional! There has been nothing conventional about my life. There is nothing conventional about my work.

**MATTHEWS.** Just so. We agree.

**MARY.** I will not air my soiled linen for the world to see. (*Lights up on The Creature who rises during the following lines, and slowly “animates”—coming to realize he is alive. This movement should be completely silent. His stance changes, as he becomes more “human”—no longer the Creature but the specter of*

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*GODWIN, Mary's father. (Or, if played by a different actor or not technically possible to have The Creature appear in Act 1, Godwin enters.) Godwin's words are not heard by Mary or Matthews, except for the occasional moment when they seem to creep into Mary's consciousness.)*

**MATTHEWS.** Mrs. Shelley, there is no need to speak of things of which you don't wish to speak. But, please. Consider what you can leave the world if you share the secret of whence the monster sprung.

**MARY.** (*Angry.*) Creature!

**MATTHEWS.** Creature, then. Whence did that magnificent *creature* spring? You were only a girl of, what ... eighteen when you brought to life something so.... (*He is at loss for words.*)

**MARY.** I cannot explain it. He came from the root of my intellect and the depths of my soul. I was brought up by my father to be independent. To think. Two qualities he propagated in his daughters against the fashion of the day. I spent my childhood among the greatest minds ... Humphrey Davy ...

**GODWIN.** ... the re-animator ...

**MARY.** Samuel Coleridge. Charles Lamb—

**YOUNGER MARY.** My step-sister Claire and I would hide behind the divan and listen to the adults talk of wondrous things.

**MATTHEWS.** Yes, but proximity to greatness is not enough.

**MARY.** Is it not?

**MATTHEWS.** I dare say no.

**MARY.** I had two extraordinary parents.

**MATTHEWS.** But did not know your mother.

**MARY.** True. She died when I was eleven days old.

**GODWIN.** Poisoned by your birth.

**MATTHEWS.** A tragedy, to be sure.

**MARY.** I was named for her, of course. But never knew her. And yet, because I had her books, I feel as if I did know her. Do.

**GODWIN.** *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*

**MARY.** Remarkable that she dared to believe such things, much less write them down.

**MATTHEWS.** And what you have written is no less remarkable.

**MARY.** (*Ruefully.*) All that I have written, at least the book to which you refer, is a simple gothic tale.

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**MATTHEWS.** Gothic, yes. Simple, I would beg to differ. (*Mary says nothing.*)  
And your father?

**MARY and YOUNGER MARY.** (*Simultaneously.*) My affection for him knew no boundaries.

**GODWIN.** And mine for you.

**MARY.** (*As if she has heard Godwin.*) Making the presence of others hard to bear.

**MATTHEWS.** Pardon?

**MARY.** (*Distracted.*) I am sorry. You were saying?

**MATTHEWS.** Did he love you?

**MARY.** In his way, I suppose he did.

**GODWIN.** (*Perhaps directly to Younger Mary.*) The great model of the affection of love in human beings is the sentiment which subsists between parents and children.

**MARY.** He wrote with disdain of the institution of marriage, and yet he lost little time in remarrying. (*Pauses, then with distaste.*) Mary Jane Clairmont.

**MATTHEWS.** A single man with two daughters to raise.

**GODWIN.** Two unfortunate wretches.

**MATTHEWS.** And his new wife—

**MARY.** Let us don't speak of that woman. Too ordinary. Common.

**YOUNGER MARY.** Not worthy of my father.

**MARY.** And with her came the children with whom I was coerced to share my childhood.

**MATTHEWS.** Were you lonely as a child?

**YOUNGER MARY.** Was I?

**MARY.** I suppose I was. Although the house was always filled with people.

**MATTHEWS.** And that is where you met Shelley?

**MARY.** That was later. Why am I telling you all this? I said I would not.

**MATTHEWS.** The truth.

**MARY.** The truth. I no longer pretend to know what that word means.

**MATTHEWS.** "For truth is always strange; stranger than fiction."

**MARY.** Oh, Heavens spare me. Now you quote Byron to me. He is not yet part of the story. That was all still to come.

**YOUNGER MARY.** But first I was sent to Dundee.

**MARY.** I was sent to Scotland

**GODWIN.** For your health.

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**MARY.** For the convenience of my father's wife, who wanted rid of me.

**YOUNGER MARY.** And there I wrote. But in the most commonplace style. But, it was there, beneath the trees of the grounds belonging to our house, or on the bleak sides of the woodless mountains near, that my true compositions, the airy flights of my imagination, were born and fostered.

**MARY.** Where unheeded I could commune with the creatures of my fancy.

**MATTHEWS.** And Shelley?

**MARY.** You are very persistent, Mr. Matthews. But I suppose that is the only part of my story that draws you.

**MATTHEWS.** Not the only one, Mrs. Shelley. But it is what your readers wish to know most.

**MARY.** They can wish to know, but they will never understand the half of it—

**YOUNGER MARY.** —I did not make myself the heroine of my tales—

**MARY.** —nor do I wish them to. I have no desire to revisit that part of my life. I can express myself in no plainer terms. (*She looks at Matthews and realizes that he is not going to take "no" for an answer. Sighs.*) I was fifteen, and had just returned from Dundee, when I first met Percy. He had taken to visiting my father, whose rigorous mind he revered. Sometimes, Percy would bring his wife.

**YOUNGER MARY.** Harriet, who was just two years my senior.

**MATTHEWS.** You were fifteen?

**GODWIN.** A married man!

**MARY.** Yes. But it was only later, after he had separated from Harriet, that I met him again. I knew little of men, but I was drawn to him immediately. I would often visit my mother's grave, in St. Pancras Churchyard, to read and escape the glare of the second Mrs. Godwin. (*Pauses.*) The tea has gone cold. Excuse me while I take it to the kitchen and have that useless girl make us a fresh pot.

**MATTHEWS.** I would very much like to visit ... the privy.

**MARY.** (*Slightly uncomfortable with this indelicate subject.*) Yes, of course, I'll show you the way. (*The lights dim on the sitting room and lights up on a part of the stage representing the St. Pancras Graveyard. There stands Shelley, in his early twenties. Handsome, ardent.*)

**SHELLEY.** (*Writing in a notebook.*) The originality and loveliness of Mary's character is apparent to me from her very motions and tones of voice. The irresistible wildness and sublimity of her feelings show itself in her gestures and her looks—Her smile, how persuasive it is, and how sympathetic! She is gentle and

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tender; yet not incapable of ardent indignation and hatred. I do not think that there is an excellence at which human nature can arrive, that she does not indisputably possess.... How deeply do I feel my inferiority, how willingly confess myself far surpassed in originality, in genuine elevation and magnificence of the intellectual nature until she consents to share her capabilities with me. (*Younger Mary appears.*)

**YOUNGER MARY.** (*Shyly.*) Hello.

**SHELLEY.** I was afraid you wouldn't come.

**YOUNGER MARY.** It is my usual practice to visit my mother's grave at this time.

**SHELLEY.** All women are not such creatures of habit.

**YOUNGER MARY.** (*Teasing him.*) And do you know all women?

**SHELLEY.** Hardly.

**YOUNGER MARY.** But you've known many.

**SHELLEY.** I would not go that far.

**YOUNGER MARY.** Just your wife.

**SHELLEY.** We have separated. She is my wife in name only.

**YOUNGER MARY.** And mother to your daughter.

**SHELLEY.** (*With shame.*) Yes, and that.

**YOUNGER MARY.** I have brought us a picnic.

**SHELLEY.** A repast among the tombstones and the spirits.

**YOUNGER MARY.** Do you believe in spirits?

**SHELLEY.** But, of course.

“Forget the dead, the past? O yet  
There are ghosts that may take revenge for it,  
Memories that make the heart a tomb,  
Regrets which gild thro' the spirit's gloom,  
And with ghastly whispers tell  
That joy, once lost, is pain.”

**YOUNGER MARY.** Are those your words?

**SHELLEY.** They are.

**YOUNGER MARY.** Your writing astonishes me.

**SHELLEY.** That is great praise coming from the daughter of—

**YOUNGER MARY.** Oh, please, let us not talk about my father.

**SHELLEY.** It is hard to elude the shadow he casts?

**YOUNGER MARY.** He does not approve of you.

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**SHELLEY.** (*Genuinely hurt.*) What?

**YOUNGER MARY.** Oh, he approves of your intellect. Of your talent.

**SHELLEY.** (*Slyly.*) And of my money.

**YOUNGER MARY.** Yes, he appreciates your kindness in that regard. But you are a married man—

**SHELLEY.** —Separated!—

**YOUNGER MARY.** —in pursuit of his daughter.

**SHELLEY.** I shall divorce.

**YOUNGER MARY.** I am not sure that will assuage him. For his daughter to marry a divorced man.

**SHELLEY.** But he writes nothing but harsh words about marriage.

**YOUNGER MARY.** And yet, he himself has married twice. It seems respectability trumps abstract ideals.

**SHELLEY.** I shall convince him I am an honorable man.

**YOUNGER MARY.** (*Amused.*) That, sir, will take much convincing, I assure you.

**SHELLEY.** I love you so utterly without reservation, Mary Godwin. (*A sudden thought.*) Where is your sister? Are you without a chaperone?

**YOUNGER MARY.** She is by the gate, waiting. I have convinced Claire, as she has taken to calling herself, that it is quite proper for you and me to be alone. I told her we wish to talk of philosophical subjects which would merely bore her. She did not believe me, of course, but she does not care. Or, rather, she is glad to play the accessory to our romance because she is herself trapped in fantasy of what romance can be.

**SHELLEY.** And you have no such fantasies?

**YOUNGER MARY.** I prefer the reality of today over the possibilities of tomorrow.

**SHELLEY.** (*Indicating picnic basket.*) What have you brought us? (*They settle onto the ground and Mary begins to unpack food from the basket. There is suddenly awkward silence between them as they begin to eat. Shelley, near bursting, speaks at last.*) I've written you a poem.

**YOUNGER MARY.** (*Hiding her pleasure and embarrassment.*) You must read it to me, then.

**SHELLEY.** (*Reading from his notebook, tentatively at first, then with growing confidence.*) Upon my heart thy accents sweet  
Of peace and pity fell like dew

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On flowers half dead; —lips did meet  
Mine tremblingly; thy dark eyes threw  
Their soft persuasion on my brain,  
Charming away its dream of pain.

*(Younger Mary is quiet for a moment.)* Don't you like it?

**YOUNGER MARY.** I've never before had a poem written to me.

**SHELLEY.** There will be a million more. *(Shelley takes her hand, then pulls Mary toward him. They kiss. Mary is both drawn to him and slowed by her innocence. Shelley rises, gently pulling Mary to her feet.)* Come.

**YOUNGER MARY.** Where?

**SHELLEY.** There is a place behind that great monument where we can be alone.  
Where no one will see us.

**YOUNGER MARY.** But ... but ... What about the food?

**SHELLEY.** Leave it for the squirrels. Or for your sister, Claire, should she come in search of us.

**YOUNGER MARY.** I don't know if I am ready, Percy.

**SHELLEY.** I have been yearning for you these two months. Tell me you yearn for me.

**YOUNGER MARY.** Yearning barely expresses what I feel.

**SHELLEY.** Come. *(Shelley gently leads her off. Lights down on graveyard and up on sitting room, where Mary is pouring a fresh cup of tea for Matthews.)*

**MARY.** Of course, my father was shocked, when Percy came to ask for his consent.

**GODWIN.** A married man.

**MARY.** All of my father's liberal views went out the window when it came to his own daughter.

**MATTHEWS.** A father's way.

**MARY.** Do you have a daughter, Mr. Matthews?

**MATTHEWS.** I have two. And I would move the earth to protect them.

**MARY.** My father had three daughters to care for, if you count my half-sister, Fanny, whom my mother brought to their marriage, and my step-sister, Claire, of course, but I was the only one of his own blood. And, so, he seemed to safeguard me with the greatest zeal.

**GODWIN.** There can never be a perfect equality between father and child.

**MATTHEWS.** Your sister, Fanny?

## AND LIGHTNING STRUCK

**MARY.** Dear Fanny. She was born from my mother's love with an American. My father raised her as his own. I fear I abandoned her for Percy. She stayed behind and bore my father's wrath. Poor Fanny. She died—

**MATTHEWS.** I did not know. I am sorry.

**MARY.** There was an incident. (*She is pensive for a moment, before taking up her story again.*) After my father refused to give his permission, Percy rushed into the room one day with a bottle of laudanum and a pistol. (*Lights remain up on Mary and Matthews, but also come up on Shelley and Younger Marty. Shelley is wild with grief and melodrama.*)

**SHELLEY.** They wish to separate us, my beloved; but death shall unite us.

**YOUNGER MARY.** Be calm, Percy. Father is not seeing clearly; he will come around to our way of thinking.

**SHELLEY.** (*Handing her the bottle.*) By this you can escape from tyranny.

**YOUNGER MARY.** What is this?

**SHELLEY.** Laudanum. You must drink it fully and embrace death. And this ... (*Holding up the pistol.*) ... shall reunite me with you. (*Younger Mary lets out a gasp or small scream, and struggles with Shelley for the gun. After a moment she wrests it from him.*)

**YOUNGER MARY.** These theatrics are not the answer. We must find another way.

**SHELLEY.** I cannot lose you, dear Mary.

**YOUNGER MARY.** I promise to be ever faithful to you.

**MARY.** When my father was told of this incident, it strengthened his resolve—.

**GODWIN.** —to keep my child from clutches of this mad man, no matter his genius.

**MARY.** Of course, the whole situation presented my father with a dilemma. Percy had been very generous with his wealth.

**MATTHEWS.** Your father wished to protect you.

**MARY.** Yes, but at a financial cost to himself and the household.

**GODWIN.** The watchful care of the parent is endless.

**MARY.** It was an untenable situation. And so, we resolved to elope.

**MATTHEWS.** (*Trying to hide his middle-class disapproval.*) But, wasn't he— Shelley—married to another?

**MARY.** Yes. And Harriet was with child.

**MATTHEWS.** And yet he abandoned her?

## AND LIGHTNING STRUCK

**YOUNGER MARY.** I too was with child. But did not yet know it.

**GODWIN.** A crime. (*Exits.*)

**MARY.** We took a boat from Dover to Calais. Percy, myself, and my sister, Claire. Always my sister Claire, like a thorn in my side. (*Claire steps into the light, looking somewhat frail and distracted. She stands quietly as Mary tells of the journey.*) It was July 28, 1814. The voyage took all night and proved rough. I was sick during much of its course. Claire's mother—that woman—pursued us and tried to persuade her daughter to return to England.

**CLAIRE.** No, Mother. It is adventure I seek, not respectability.

**MARY.** The three of us continued on our journey south. We rode a donkey, then a mule to Paris.

**MATTHEWS.** You travelled like gypsies.

**MARY.** We had less than gypsies. Percy had but sixty pounds—scant enough for our intended journey. Claire and I had only the clothing that we wore and would have to wash the dust of road and the stains of the rains from our dresses at night and let them dry as we slept. But France was filled with many worse off than we. Great and extraordinary events had recently taken place there—

**MATTHEWS.** —the revolution—

**MARY.** —and all along our route we found desperately poor people who nonetheless were filled with joy to be free of tyranny.

**MATTHEWS.** Were you frightened?

**MARY.** Not at all. The French wore strange costumes and ate curious things, but they were no less human than we. Steadily we made our way south and across the border into Switzerland, where the bell of independence and self-determination tolled.

**MATTHEWS.** (*Getting excited.*) And this is where you wrote *Frankenstein*? By the shores of Lake Geneva.

**MARY.** No, no. You are jumping ahead. That was another trip.

**MATTHEWS.** (*Disappointed.*) Another? Then why do you tell this tale?

**MARY.** Because it was on this trip that the first seeds of my creature were planted. (*Pauses.*) Percy took a six-month's lease on a small house in Brunen, but ...

**SHELLEY.** (*Interjects with a dreamy manner, as if remembering.*) ... money was like the white and flying cloud of noon that is gone before one can say Jack Robinson.

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**MARY.** ... it was soon apparent that we would need to return to England immediately.

**YOUNGER MARY.** The twenty-eight pounds which we possessed was all the money that we could count upon, and we now resolved on a more economical mode of travelling. Water conveyances are always the cheapest, so, Percy had made a bargain for a boat to carry us to Mayence, and the next morning, bidding adieu to Switzerland, we embarked. (*The three perhaps mime standing in a moving boat.*)

**SHELLEY.** The wind was violently against us, but the stream, aided by a slight exertion from the rowers carried us on. Suddenly the river grew narrow, and the boat dashed with inconceivable rapidity round the base of a rocky hill covered with pines ...

**MARY.** It was a picturesque journey. I remember a ruined tower, with its desolated windows, which stood on the summit of another hill that jutted into the river; beyond the sunset was illuminating the distant mountains and clouds, casting the reflection of its rich and purple hues on the agitated river. We reached the town of Gernsheim, where the boatman insisted we stop until the moon rose. We disembarked and took in the town, where we saw the twin towers of the ruins of...

**YOUNGER MARY, MARY and CREATURE.** (*Simultaneously.*) ... the Castle Frankenstein.

**MATTHEWS.** No!

**MARY.** We also heard a local legend, of a man named Dippel, who lived in the castle more than a century before—an alchemist who believed he could bring back the dead. So, you see ... that is whence the first thoughts of my creation sprung. (*Matthews is at a loss for words. Perhaps lighting alters to highlight Shelley and Younger Mary. Claire remains illuminated, too, though set apart from the others. Godwin reenters if he has exited earlier.*)

**SHELLEY.** Gone but forty-two days and the world seems to have changed irreparably.

**YOUNGER MARY.** My father refuses to see me. Our former friends have drawn a curtain on our friendships and judged us infamous.

**SHELLEY.** We do not need the world, my angel. None of them can understand the life we choose to live, the purity of our love—

**GODWIN.** Harriet, Shelley's lawful wife, gave birth to a son and heir. Charles Bysshe Shelley.

**YOUNGER MARY.** And what of the purity of your love for Claire?

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**SHELLEY.** Claire? What do you mean? You are not being serious.

**YOUNGER MARY.** She loves you, that is apparent.

**SHELLEY.** And I love her, too, but only as your sister.

**YOUNGER MARY.** If only I could trust the veracity of those words.

**SHELLEY.** Mary, don't be absurd.

**CLAIRE.** (*An aside.*) I would come to see him as the man whom I have loved, and from whom I have suffered much.

**YOUNGER MARY.** When this child is born, you will love me again.

**SHELLEY.** My love for you surpasses all.

**GODWIN.** My daughter gave birth to a baby girl on February 22, 1815. The infant lived but eleven days. The same interval that had claimed my wife after Mary's birth. (*Exits.*)

**MARY.** My baby was dead.

**YOUNGER MARY.** She lived on in my dreams: in a vision, my little baby came to life again—that it had only been cold and that we rubbed it before the fire and it lived—I awoke and found no baby—I thought about the little thing all day.

**MARY.** (*Pauses.*) I told Percy, that Claire had to go. He sent her to Devon.

**CLAIRE.** Mary had her Shelley. I wanted my Byron. I was young and vain and poor. He was famous beyond all precedent, so famous that people, and especially young people, hardly considered him as a man at all, but rather as a god. His beauty was as haunting as his fame, and he was all-powerful in the direction in which my ambition turned.

**MATTHEWS.** What was he like?

**MARY.** Byron? Beauty sat on his countenance and power beamed from his eye. (*Lights up on Byron (or he enters). He might recline on the divan. Mary may show Matthews Claire's letter and all three—Claire, Byron and Matthews, peruse a letter simultaneously.*)

**BYRON.** I received a letter from a young girl. The stepdaughter of Godwin, whom I much admired. I had heard that this poet Shelley was living in the company of the daughters of Godwin.

**CLAIRE.** (*Writing.*) An utter stranger takes the liberty of addressing you. It is earnestly requested that for one moment you pardon the intrusion and laying aside every remembrance of who and what you are, listen with a friendly ear....

**BYRON.** She had my attention.

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**CLAIRE.** (*Writing.*) It may seem a strange asserting, but it is not the less true that I place my happiness in your hands. If you feel tempted to read no more, or to cast with levity into the fire what has been written by me with so much fearful inquietude, check my hand: my folly may be great, but the Creator ought not to destroy his Creature. If you shall condescend to answer the following question you will at least be rewarded by the gratitude I shall feel. (*A pause while Byron visibly awaits the question.*) If a woman whose reputation has yet remained unstained, if without either guardian or husband to control she should throw herself upon your mercy, if with a beating heart she should confess the love she has borne you many years, if she should secure to you secrecy and safety, if she should return your kindness with fond affection and unbounded devotion, could you betray her, or would you be silent as the grave?

**BYRON.** I did not respond. There were so many girls such as this one ... writing me of their love ...

**CLAIRE.** I have called twice on you but your servants declare you to be out of town.

**BYRON.** Perhaps.

**CLAIRE.** I am now wavering between the adoption of a literary life or of a theatrical career.

**BYRON.** Clearly made for the dramatic stage ...

**CLAIRE.** *Lasciate ogni speranza, voi ch'entrate* ...

**BYRON.** Hm. Dante. Abandon all hope, ye who enter here ...

**CLAIRE.** I think it is a most admirable description of marriage.

**BYRON.** We shall meet. And bring your sister.

**MATTHEWS.** And this is how you came to meet Byron?

**MARY.** Yes, we went to meet him. Claire, Percy, and I. How mild he was! How gentle! So different from what I expected.

**MATTHEWS.** What did you expect?

**MARY.** Only what I had heard from others. Carolyn Lamb ...

**MATTHEWS.** ... called him mad, bad, and dangerous to know.

**MARY.** She did. And there was talk of so many women. Claire could not get enough of him.

**CLAIRE.** It seems to me almost needless to say that the attentions of a man like this, with all London at his feet, very quickly completely turned the head of a girl in my position. And when you recollect that I was brought up to consider marriage not

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only useless but as an absolutely sinful custom, that only bigotry made necessary, you will scarcely wonder at the result ...

**BYRON.** If a girl of eighteen comes prancing to you at all hours, there is but one way ...

**CLAIRE.** God bless you...I was *never* so happy.

**BYRON.** I am not in love—nor have any love left for any.

**MARY.** Byron announced that he would be leaving London in April.

**MATTHEWS.** I have heard it said that creditors descended upon his house mere hours after he departed.

**MARY.** I believe that to be true.

**CLAIRE.** Please send me your address. I assure you, nothing shall tempt me to come to Geneva by myself since you disapprove of it. (*Byron is silent. Claire tries a different tack.*) Mary is as delighted with you as I knew she would be; she entreats me in private to obtain your address abroad that we may, if possible, have again the pleasure of seeing you.

**BYRON.** You may write to me *Poste Restante*.

**MARY.** In care of General Delivery.

**CLAIRE.** I told no one, and most certainly not him, that I was carrying his child. (*Lights down on all but Mary and Matthews, or all others exit.*)

**MARY.** It was during these weeks back in London that I attended a lecture on the subject of electricity. And what I heard stayed with me in the months ahead when I would compose *Frankenstein*. On January 26, 1816, I gave birth to my son.

William. Named for my father. But that choice of name did nothing to soften his heart. (*If Godwin has remained onstage then after a moment, turns his back on Mary. Curls back down into the Creature position he had at the start of the play. Lights down on Mary and Matthews. The sound of rain intensifies, in the darkness, then fades away as lights go up on Byron and POLIDORI, or the two men enter.*)

**BYRON.** Mr. Polidori! My publisher recommended you. You will travel with me to Geneva? You are a doctor?

**POLIDORI.** And a poet.

**BYRON.** (*With disdain.*) A poet. Of course.

**POLIDORI** (*To audience.*) Byron's own publisher promised me five hundred pounds to keep a diary of the great man's journey.

**BYRON** (*To audience.*) A journal? I was not privy to that fact.

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**POLIDORI** (*Reciting from his journal.*) As we crossed the Channel, the sea dashed over us, and all wore an aspect of grief ... no light save a melancholy twilight, which soothed the mind into forgetfulness of its grief for a while—a beautiful streak following the lead through the waves.

**BYRON.** (*Moaning.*) Overwrought.

**POLIDORI.** I am very pleased with Lord Byron. I am with him on the footing of an equal ...

**BYRON.** (*To audience.*) Hardly! (*To Polidori.*) Come, poet.

**POLIDORI.** ... everything alike ... We have a suite of rooms between us. I have my sitting room at one end, he at the other. On the twenty-fifth of May we reached Geneva and the Hotel d'Angleterre. Shelley and his party were staying there as well.

**CLAIRE.** (*To Younger Mary, who holds a baby.*) Byron refuses to see us.

**YOUNGER MARY.** Refuses?

**CLAIRE.** Well, he is always absent when I try to call on him. He has not answered my entreaties.

**YOUNGER MARY.** I do not care. I feel as happy as a new-fledged bird, and can hardly care what twig I fly to, so that I may try my new-found wings.

**CLAIRE.** (*To Byron.*) I am sorry you are grown so old, indeed I suspected you were two hundred, from the slowness of your journey. I suppose venerable age could not bear quicker travelling. (*Byron looks away without speaking.*)

**POLIDORI.** One day, Byron and I took a boat out on the lake, and upon our return, discovered Shelley and the two ladies waiting for us on the quay. Byron arranged that we gentlemen dine that night, without the ladies.

**BYRON.** I do not recall inviting Polidori, but he was impossible to keep away.

**POLIDORI.** We were soon, the five of us, great friends.

**CLAIRE.** (*To Byron.*) I have been at this weary hotel this fortnight and it seem so unkind, so cruel of you to treat me with such marked indifference. Will you go straight to the top of the house this evening at half past seven and I will infallibly be on the landing place and show you the room.

**BYRON.** (*To audience.*) Don't scold, but what could I do? A foolish girl, in spite of all I could say or do, would come after me. I could not exactly play the stoic with a woman who had scrambled eight hundred miles to unphilosophize me. (*A light on Mary who observes and narrates the scene.*)

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**MARY.** Then, in June, Percy, Claire, and I moved to a cottage on the southern shore of the lake.

**POLIDORI.** Byron and I moved to another house, built by Diodati, the friend of Milton, which had contained within its walls, for several months, that poet whom we have so often read together, and who—if human passions remain the same, and human feelings, like chords, on being swept by nature's impulses shall vibrate as before—will be placed by posterity in the first rank of our English poets.

**BYRON.** ... the prettiest place on all the Lake ...

**POLIDORI.** ... just ten minutes' walk from the Shelleys.

**MARY.** At first, we spent our pleasant hours on the lake, or wandering on its shores; and Lord Byron, who was writing the third canto of *Childe Harold*, was the only one among us who put his thoughts upon paper. These, as he brought them successively to us, clothed in all the light and harmony of poetry, seemed to stamp as divine the glories of heaven and earth, whose influences we partook with him. (*The sound of a storm begins beneath the following lines and Intensifies throughout the rest of the act.*)

**BYRON.** The sky is changed!— and such a change! O night,  
And storm, and darkness, ye are wondrous strong—

**YOUNGER MARY.** The thunderstorms that visit us are grander and more terrible than I have ever seen before, but when the sun bursts forth it is with a splendor and heat unknown in England. One night we enjoyed a finer storm than I had ever before beheld. The lake lit up, the pines on Jura made visible, and all the scenes illuminated for an instant, when a pitchy blackness succeeded, and the thunder came in frightful bursts over our heads amid the darkness.

**MARY.** It proved a wet, ungenial summer, and incessant rain often confined us for days to the house. Some volumes of ghost stories, translated from the German into French, fell into our hands. I have not seen these stories since then; but their incidents are as fresh in my mind as if I had read them yesterday.

**POLIDORI.** One evening Lord B., Shelley, the two ladies and I, after having perused a German work, which was entitled *Phantasmagoriana*, began relating ghost stories; when his lordship having recited the beginning of *Christabel*, then unpublished ...

**BYRON.** 'Tis the middle of night by the castle clock,  
And the owls have awakened the crowing cock;  
Tu—whit! Tu—whoo!

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And hark, again! the crowing cock,  
How drowsily it crew  
Quoth Christabel, 'So let it be!'  
And as the lady bade, did she.  
Her gentle limbs did she undress  
And lay down in her loveliness.

*(Shelley lets out a gasp and runs from the room to a nearby corner. Byron stops reciting, and he and Polidori, perplexed, go to Shelley.)*

**BYRON.** What is it, my friend?

**POLIDORI.** You are covered in perspiration. Your breathing is irregular.

**SHELLEY.** *(Gasping.)* I do not know.

**BYRON.** Get him some refreshment. *(Polidori fetches a glass of water.)*

**SHELLEY.** *(After regaining his voice.)* It was an image that came to me. A horrible image. A lady, whose exposed bosom was graced with eyes.

**POLIDORI.** Eyes?

**BYRON.** Absurd.

**SHELLEY.** Nonetheless, that is the image that came to me, and drove me from the room.

**MARY.** Byron would later write of the incident, which left us all shaken.

**BYRON.** The story of Shelley's agitation is true. I can't tell what seized him, for he does not want courage. He was once with me in a gale of wind, in a small boat, right under the rocks between Meillerie and St. Gingo. We were fine in the boat—a servant, two boatmen, and ourselves. The sail was mismanaged, and the boat was filling fast.

**SHELLEY.** I cannot swim.

**BYRON.** I stripped off my coat—made him strip off his and take hold of an oar, telling him that I thought (being myself an expert swimmer) I could save him, if he would not struggle when I took hold of him—unless we got smashed against the rocks, which were high and sharp, with an awkward surge on them at that minute. We were then about a hundred yards from shore, and the boat in peril.

**SHELLEY.** *(Calmly.)* I have no notion of being saved. I beg do not trouble yourself. You shall have enough to do to save yourself.

**BYRON.** Luckily, the boat righted, and, baling, we got round a point into St. Gingo, where the inhabitants came down and embraced the boatmen on their

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escape, the wind having been high enough to tear up some huge trees from the Alps above us, as we saw next day.

**MARY.** Some semblance of calm was restored, and we reconvened by the fire. Within the hour, the first seeds for *Frankenstein* were sown. (*A flash of lightning and a crash of thunder.*)

**BYRON.** And this is in the night: Most glorious night!

Thou wert not sent for slumber! let me be

A sharer in thy fierce and far delight-

A portion of the tempest and of thee!

How the lit lake shines, a phosphoric sea,

And the big rain comes dancing to the earth!

And now again 'tis black,— and now, the glee

Of the loud hills shakes with its mountain-mirth,

As if they did rejoice o'er a young earthquake's birth.

**POLIDORI.** It was Byron who proposed that each of the company present should write a tale depending upon some supernatural agency.

**SHELLEY.** Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought.

**MARY.** Each of us assented. The contest of great minds had begun.

**BYRON.** We will each write a ghost story.

**POLIDORI.** Of vampires.

**BYRON.** Of the mysterious East.

**YOUNGER MARY.** Of a modern Prometheus. (*Another crash of thunder and the lights go out. A final strike of lightning. Blackout.*)

## END OF ACT 1

***THE PLAY IS NOT OVER!! TO FIND OUT HOW IT ENDS—  
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