

**Frankenstein Diaries: The Romantics
The Secret Memoirs of Mary Shelley**

Excerpt

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Skinner Street

It was a clear evening in May of 1814, when I had just returned from a brief, but sadly instructive attendance to a service at the old church in St Pancras with my step-sister, Claire. I shall call her Claire throughout this narrative for clarity's sake, though at this point in her life she was known by her true given name of Jane, a subject of some confusion and comity which will soon become of importance.

My father was well known to be no friend to the church in any of its forms, but my recent time in Scotland, among dear companions, had reintroduced me to the practice of kneeling before an image of that force which inhabits the mind of man in dark moments of loss or emptiness. My sister had suggested the experiment; chiefly I believe because she had taken notice of a prepossessing and handsome young vicar there employed, as this seemed the chief occupation of her mind at fifteen years and a few months of earthly existence. I acquiesced in the adventure for another pleasant look at the sylvan neighborhood I had loved in younger days, which, at the urging and arrangement of *her* (whom I refer to as little as possible in public breath), we had left Somers Town in Camden to take up residence in the dirty commercial quarter of Holborn, in the north of London, within a distance to walk, but far removed in character.

The sign above the book shop and publishing concern presented her name, and only tangentially by inference, my father, reading *M. J. Godwin & Co. Juvenile Library*. The public portion of the concern took up the lower two rooms of connected row houses

with a large latticed window facing the narrow confines of Skinner Street at No. 41. The back lower rooms housed book binding equipment and packing tables, while the upstairs warren of joined rooms provided our living quarters. She had persuaded my father that children's books were of more an economic value than the deeper works of his own vision, with the argument that there will always be a new batch of children born to the middle classes to read, while the education needed to understand the broad philosophical concepts of his interests were only available to the class of society less likely to pass by a window display, though it was my opinion that it was not commerce, but her own limited viewpoint that informed her business philosophy. Illustrated children's stories filled the soot lined frames of the bay window on stacks now barely visible in the dark shadows of gathering gloom.

As Claire and I stood outside the door of Skinner Street, we could see the luminescence of a lamp burning in the window of the parlour above, and could hear a collection of male voices echoing in the street now settled into evening silence. This was not unfamiliar to us, as Mr. Godwin, on many occasions had visitors to occupy his energy, some of wide fame who would come to give him their obeisance and respect. Many of his circle he would encounter at the publishing house of Mr. John Murray in Marylebone, at that respected gentleman's "afternoon teas", and would come to Skinner Street to carry into an evening in philosophical discussion, with a more full-bodied beverage. I recognized the sonorous voice, twinged with a mirthful crackle, of Mr. Charles Lamb, whom I enjoyed with the fondness of an uncle, and the clipped growl of the sad and compact, Mr. Taylor Coleridge. Yet, the third voice I did not recognize. It was certainly not Mr. Wordsworth, of which I was glad, as he always seemed rather colic and stern to me, and never much interested in seeing children in his presence. It was of a high pitch, youthful in tone, and though not exactly warm by any means, somehow compelling in urgent enthusiasm.

Claire and I crept quietly up the dark stairs to the parlour, removing our coats, and untying our bonnets, as such was the fashion we had adopted. We stood at the top of the stair steps

without announcing our presence and unseen by the four men in the room. They were situated as usual in chairs gathered in a circular arrangement with brandies in snifters each on a small table with one oil lamp burning for light, which cast huge ghostly shadows on the bookshelves of haphazardly arranged volumes about the octagonal cornered walls of the room. A red coal and peat fire glowed in the iron grate of the hearth, with an occasional crackle of the moss which provided a grey pallor to the room.

A thread-worn oriental carpet only covered the center of the room, mostly under father's feet as he leaned back in his centrally placed stuffed chair of unintentionally comic side wings. The oil lamp shone with a gleam on the round space of father's forehead where hair had once inhabited, it being unfortunate for him that powdered wigs had fallen from favor, except for the footmen and servants of great manors, and a few aging stalwarts one might see passing on an avenue. The two gentlemen of middle-age I knew well, but the young man who rested uneasily on the chair opposite to me, was for a moment unfamiliar; but yet, not so. I had seen him before, when he had come to dinner with his pretty wife. I then instantly knew who he was from the descriptions in my elder sister Fanny's effusive letters. My mind raced, it must be indeed Mr. Percy Shelley. Why had I not recognized him? Had he changed so much? Or had I? I suppose that now, after nearly two years away, between the ages of fourteen and sixteen, my perception of many things may have changed.