

ALMOST INVINCIBLE

A biographical novel of
MARY SHELLEY
Author of Frankenstein

SUZANNE BURDON



She is singularly bold, somewhat imperious, and active of mind.
Her desire of knowledge is great, and her perseverance
in everything she undertakes, almost invincible.

*Letter from William Godwin (1813)
describing his daughter Mary, at fifteen.*

Table of Contents

PROLOGUE Geneva July 1816.....	9
PART ONE London 1814	21
PART TWO Europe 1814	52
PART THREE London 1814 — 1816	82
INTERMISSION Shelley and Byron Lake Geneva 1816.....	126
PART FOUR England Bath and Marlow 1816 — 1819.....	131
REFLECTION Paris 1842	190
PART FIVE Italy 1819 — 1821.....	194
INTERMISSION Shelley and Byron Ravenna 1821	269
PART SIX Italy 1821 — 1823.....	278
EPILOGUE London September 1823	321
Mary Shelley—List of Works.....	329
Percy Bysshe Shelley—List of major works	332
Select Bibliography	335
Acknowledgements.....	339

PROLOGUE

Geneva July 1816

‘The ghastly image of my fancy.’

Introduction to Frankenstein, Mary Shelley

It was barely five on a summer afternoon but already eerily dark. The candles were lit and shivered in response to the wind and rain pounding against the large panelled windows. Mary took up her scribbled pages and found her voice.

‘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 ...’

She stopped reading to take a breath and took a quick glance around at the listeners in the cavernous and ornate Louis Quinze drawing room. They were too quiet. There should be interjections. None of this company was usually so silent. She cleared her throat and continued defiantly.

‘How can I describe the wretch I had formed from foraged body parts with such infinite pains and care? I had selected his features as beautiful. Beautiful! Great God! His lustrous black hair and pearly white teeth only formed a more horrid contrast with his yellow skin and watery eyes in dun-white sockets, his shrivelled complexion and straight black lips. 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, 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 ...’

Mary crumpled the edges of her paper and trailed off, feeling anxious in face of the serious silence. What did Shelley think of it? What did Albe think of it? She examined their faces and mentally prepared her defence, that it was merely the retelling of a strange

dream. She hated the feeling that they saw her as a balloon filled with creative literary gases, distilled from talented parents, which had so far failed to rise.

Then Shelley was laughing and talking, his voice high with excitement.

‘Mary, that’s the most marvellous gothic story,’ he said, coming over and coiling his tall frame to look over her shoulder, kissing the back of her neck in passing. ‘The ambition to create life, to be God-like. I adore it ...’

‘You would, Shiloh, you atheist,’ interrupted Lord Byron, his baritone almost drowned out as the enormous mastiff curled at his feet leapt up and barked loudly to join in the excitement. ‘Quiet, Mutz.’ He snapped his fingers and stared commandingly at the dog, which subsided in the face of the blue-eyed gaze. Byron’s attention shifted to the young girl with the high forehead and deep-set, serious eyes, sitting firmly upright, clutching Shelley’s hand where it rested on her shoulder.

‘Mary, it is brilliant, and it has so much of modern philosophy and natural science. You were thinking of galvanism of course, and the experiments to animate frogs with electricity that we were discussing last night ...’

‘And Rousseau – the creature would vindicate his philosophy,’ added Shelley. ‘It would be his Natural Man, fully formed but child-like and uncorrupted by society.’

Mary blushed with pleasure at the enthusiasm in their voices. Polidori took longer to react, having watched Byron for his cue.

‘I suppose you were thinking of my tales of grave-robbing when I was a medical student in Edinburgh?’ he said slowly, looking, as usual, to where he could draw credit for himself.

She nodded at him distractedly, her eyes turned up to Shelley. His approval was always acclamation enough.

‘I also thought about the story we heard when we were traveling up the Rhine and came across Castle Frankenstein. Do you remember, Shelley? We saw it from the river — the two great ruined gothic spires — and the boatman told the story of the scientist who lived there with a reputation for stealing bodies for experiments.’

‘I do remember,’ answered Shelley, thoughtfully. ‘He was known as an heretic.’

The fifth person in the room, Claire, clapped slowly. She was arranged with her legs curled under her white muslin skirts, set to advantage in the frame of a formal striped sofa, a little back from the rest of the group. Nestled in her lap were two of Byron’s Persian cats, purring gently. Looking towards Byron she said, with a sneer, ‘Now Albe will have to concede that a woman has as much of a brain as a man.’

He glared back at her, angrily.

‘When I suggested our little diversion of creating ghost stories, did I not say that hers should be published with mine? I have great confidence in Mary. The genius emerges.’

Mary felt herself glowing and hoped her excessive satisfaction wasn’t too obvious. Even Claire had failed to find fault for once. Mary briefly wondered why.

‘So, Maie, what happens next?’ chuckled Shelley. He stood and staggered across the room, his long limbs contorted into an exaggerated stumbling gait, his fingers curled and his eyes wide and staring, his wild yellow hair completing the mime, so that Claire shrieked.

‘What happens to the student’s creation?’ he continued, putting on a croaking voice. ‘Or shall we call it Herr Frankenstein’s creation? Does it fail to take root in this earthly abode? Is the student chastened? Does he try again?’

He flopped at Mary’s feet, staring comically up at her, hands out in supplication, and she laughed and pushed him away. As he gave up his mime and sat down again, she answered thoughtfully. ‘No. I think the creature stays alive and pursues his creator, and the student is never free of him. Think what it must be to be made new and then rejected as hideous. The creature will be physically strong but will have no way to learn human morality. I know you idolise Rousseau’s philosophy, Shelley, and he thinks that man is naturally good, but I think this monster will want revenge on the creator who abandons him.’

She said the last words in low and menacing tones and, as she did so, there was a clap of thunder and lightning which illuminated the balcony and reflected on the darkness of Lake Geneva beyond. A shriek and a banging outside completed the gothic scene and Claire leapt to her feet, throwing off the cats, which then added their voices to the cacophony. She rushed, arms outstretched, towards Shelley's chair but on almost reaching it saw Mary watching her. She checked herself and huddled on a stool near his feet instead, trembling. The two monkeys on their perch in the corner ran back and forth in agitation, their chattering turning to thin screams and Byron got up languidly to soothe them and peer out into the rain.

'It is one of the guinea hens escaped and terrified,' he said, smiling. 'Tonight is not the night we will have our throats cut, Claire.'

Mary saw his look of slight disgust and wondered if he felt his liaison with her stepsister, Claire, to be worth it as the price of the company of Shelley and herself. There were plenty of other willing candidates for his attention, in particular among the dozens of young ladies who regularly jostled on the opposite bank of the Lake. They waited in all weathers with muddy feet and telescopes, hoping for a glimpse of him, the fashionable and notorious poet, whose wife had left him and accused him of unmentionable acts.

He pulled one of the thick bell-ropes which hung on either side of the marble fireplace.

'Rescue the fowl from the balcony, Braydon,' he said, as the servant bowed in. 'Or if it's dead, use it for the servants' supper. You'd better put the peacocks in the coach house too, and check on the badger and bring the other dogs inside. You may as well draw the curtains.'

'Yes, it could easily be night-time,' shivered Claire, as the butler drew the long silk curtains across each of the six casement windows, all of which were rattling as if part of a strange skeleton dance. 'It should still be light at this hour, but we've had only candles and firelight since noon. This weather,' she moaned, going back to her sofa for her shawl and drawing a straight backed chair closer to the fire. 'It's July and there has been no sun for weeks, just endless storms.'

Shelley went to the sideboard and poured himself a glass of water. He raised an eyebrow to Byron, who nodded, so he filled another

glass with Vin de Grave and seltzer and took the drink across the room. Then he stopped to glance at some newspapers laid out on a side table.

‘Look here, these papers that came from London yesterday are saying there are reports of spots on the sun causing all this strange weather, and mobs in France and England are predicting the end of the world.’

Byron took a swig of his drink, lit another cigar and said dreamily, ‘Morn came and went — and came, and brought no day; and men forgot their passions in the dread of this their desolation; and ... and all hearts were chill’d into a selfish prayer for light.’

‘That sounds like the beginnings of a tragic poem, Albe,’ Shelley observed in a tone of genuine admiration.

‘A few lines so far. I’ve been thinking about men’s fear of this darkness. What would happen, Shiloh, if the darkness were to remain? If there were never again a sliver of sun or moon? How would people behave?’

‘Not well, I think. The apocalypse would come not from Divine intervention, but from man’s own nature, as with all things. There would be despair, riots, food would run out. The animals would die. People would need to keep warm, to make fires. They would have to burn everything.’

‘They would fight tooth and nail over the dwindling resources of the earth.’

‘I agree it would be bloody,’ said Shelley sadly. ‘Even my best hopes for human nature would be severely tested.’ For a while the only sound was the still driving rain.

‘Talking of blood, metaphorically, we also have the *Aeneid* magazine arrived from London,’ said Mary, deliberately cracking the silence. She picked it up from the table beside her and held it up. ‘It prints what it calls a ‘*Monstrous, Deformed, Titanic Rumour*,’ saying we four are unbridled libertines, living in an incestuous foursome: Claire and me and Albe and you, Shelley.’

‘Which annoys you most, Albe, the libertine or the deformed part of the libel?’ giggled Claire.

Byron blushed, glancing down at his club foot disguised in its heavy boot, and slightly wide-ankled pantaloons. He reflexively crossed his unwithered calf over, pulled across his velvet smoking jacket and shot Claire a look of hatred. He had thought her handsome enough, with her flashing eyes, until she had proved to be not just outspoken but sarcastic and often hysterical as well. It didn't help that she saw his admiration of Mary, whom he pointedly referred to as a calm beauty. He would casually remark on her hazel eyes or the richness of her golden russet hair, and Claire would toss her own dark curls in frustration.

Mary knew he was still suspicious about why she and Shelley had taken Claire with them when they eloped. Even though Shelley had given Byron his word it was not a ménage, she saw that the underlying hostility between her and Claire made him wonder.

The butler called supper and they moved to the dining room, chilly in spite of a blazing fire, and sat to the usual plates of vegetables.

'You brought me here as your physician, so I think you should take my advice that your constitution would be better served if you ate meat occasionally,' commented Polidori to Byron, sighing.

'Nonsense, Polly Dolly, don't fuss,' responded Byron. 'Look at Shelley. He's been on the vegetable diet for years with no harm.'

Mary wanted to support Polidori's plea, but held her tongue. In her opinion, Shelley's frequent illnesses, his ethereal pallor, his too lean frame and his weak lungs was partly a result of this diet. But the vegetable diet was his passion, and Shelley's passion was part of what she admired in him. It was different from the obsessive anxiety about his weight that caused Byron to limit what he ate or purge it out after every meal. Shelley's commitment was based on belief, the belief that eating animals was wrong, and only the fruits of the earth were man's intended consumption.

She left her meal half finished. 'I must go and feed William,' she said, rising, feeling an irrational urge to hold her baby, not yet six months, to be reassured of his wellbeing by his newly learnt smile. She wondered if this was common to all mothers, or was it stronger in

those, like her, who had lost a baby? She was only eighteen, and her own mother had died giving birth to her. There was no-one to ask.

She pretended not to notice Claire's little cough and mockingly raised eyebrows in Shelley's direction, implying that Mary was fussing. In this though, she knew Claire had it wrong. Shelley was gazing at Mary with admiration. Unlike most in European society, he believed that mothers should feed their babies themselves and not use a wet nurse. His first wife — still wife — Harriet had refused to breast-feed their daughter and he had never forgiven her.

'Bring the child down for me to kiss goodnight afterward, Dormouse,' he said with a fond smile, and Claire's lips tightened. 'I don't think his vaccination has had any adverse reaction, has it Polly?' he turned to the doctor.

'The child seems very well,' reassured Polidori assuming his professional voice. 'I ordered the best quality cowpox lymph for the vaccine. I think you are very wise. Smallpox has declined in the past twenty years and it is the vaccine that has done it, despite the scaremongering of the Anti-Vak movement. I have yet to see a person develop cow horns!' He drew a gold watch from his breast pocket as he spoke, tapped it and nodded to Shelley. 'And this is good payment for my services.'

Later, after dinner, over green tea in the music room, Polidori asked Shelley if he had thought of a ghost story.

'I have nothing more than the images that overcame me three days ago, when I almost fainted from the vision ... the girl whose nipples became eyes. As to how this strange situation should come about, I have not yet found a story for her, or a meaning.' Shelley sounded faintly exasperated. 'It was probably just because we were sitting in the half dark reading *Christabel*. Coleridge's lines have a powerful resonance. But at least that made Albe throw out the challenge of ghost story making, and now we have Mary's wonderful idea. I will be a tyrant and make sure she writes it in full.' He smiled, turning to Mary next to him on the sofa and feigned a whip, which coiled into an embrace.

'You can't be any more of a tyrant than you are already. Perhaps now you'll give me a rest from learning Greek.' Mary laughed and wriggled free. 'Anyway, I'll start now. I will sit at the bureau by the window, with the thunder and lightning as my muse, and leave you two to continue your discussion of Plato and the Trinity.'

'Stay here, Mary, by the fire,' urged Byron, softly.

Mary laughed. 'I know your opinion of women philosophising, Albe. I have heard you say that you only need to give a woman a looking-glass and a few sugar plums to keep her happy. Well, tonight I will pander to your prejudices and absent myself – but not to sugarplums, to a sweeter labour.'

Claire moved towards the piano. 'Shall I sing, Shelley?' she asked, hesitantly.

Shelley contemplated her, nervously fiddling with the cameo at her throat. It was unlike Claire to ask. She knew her voice was good and that it always pleased him to hear her sing. She would normally just begin, but he also saw Byron's face become taut and he wanted to provoke no more tension. Claire needed to stay in the background. He had seen Byron getting more and more irritated with her. Shelley failed to understand how anyone could bed someone he so clearly disliked. He knew that he never could. For himself there had to be love — if not marriage. They needed to get Claire away from Byron for a while. Maybe a trip around the lake.

'I think, sadly, the noise of the storm is too loud tonight, Claire,' he said gently.

Claire moved on, towards Byron's side.

'Well then, is there more of your poem, *Childe Harold*, to copy, Albe?' she asked.

Why, Mary wondered, as she observed this exchange, was Claire being so unusually demure?

'Yes, on the pile there.' Byron, not turning to look at Claire, indicated the strewn sheets of manuscript on the chaise longue. Claire gathered them up and sighed as she glanced at the blotted and crossed lines, some spattered with wine or cigar ash. She took them to a little drum pedestal table in the corner, where there was fresh paper and an inkwell set out, and the room settled to the sounds of

the scratching pens of the girls and the arguments and laughter of the young men.

It was two a.m. before Shelley, Mary and Claire wound their way down the rocky path to Maison Chapuis, their little cottage on the lakeside, wrapped in blankets against the night chill. Byron's Villa Diodati stood high above the lake, its three stories commanding a magnificent view but vulnerable to the icy winds of the past weeks. Maison Chapuis, because it was lower down on the lakeshore and surrounded by trees, was more sheltered, and they reached their porch with relief. Claire had not tried to hang back to be alone with Byron as she so often did, and he had made no attempt to detain her.

The rain had made the short descent to the cottage treacherous and they arrived cold and dishevelled. Claire took off her shoes by the door, the thin white leather and velvet trim clogged with mud.

'Ugh. These are ruined. I hate this weather.' She pulled on some slippers and tried to brush the dirt off the hem of her skirt.

Mary went to check on William, who had been brought back earlier and put to bed by the nurse, Elise. Claire drew Shelley into his study.

'I need to talk to you. I'm pregnant,' she said, unceremoniously.

Shelley staggered slightly, then managed a weak smile.

'That's wonderful, Claire. And Albe ... is the father?' He tried to keep the question out of his voice, but failed enough for Claire to step up close and poke him disgustedly in the chest.

'You, of all people, should know that it could only be his.'

'We must tell him. Have you told Mary?' As he said this, Mary came in, looking between the two, suspicious.

'What is it?'

Shelley told her, while Claire went to face out of the window, looking for light in the darkness, keeping her back to them.

Mary pulled Shelley to the far corner of the room and exploded, hissing into his ear. 'Oh yes, now she has it all. She has achieved her ambition to be just like me. She has the poet, and now the poet's child.' Her voice got louder, so that it became audible to Claire. 'Except that it won't be that poet,' — pointing back up towards the Villa Diodati — 'who takes responsibility for it, I'm sure of that,' she

rasped. 'It will be this poet.' His already dishevelled shirt suffered another poke. 'The drain on our limited resources will not just be for my stepsister, as it is now, but for my stepsister's child as well, who everyone will say is yours, and our lives will be even more complicated and hateful.'

From the window came the sob of someone who was not prepared to allow herself to sob. Or someone who knows that a restrained sob can be more wrenching than an overt one.

'She is right in one thing,' said Claire, turning to face them. 'Albe won't want anything to do with the child, because he no longer wants anything to do with me. I will go away. I'll go to ... I don't know, Russia, and earn my living as a governess, and leave the baby with a nursemaid. I don't want to be any more of a drain on you, Shelley, and I don't want to face Mama back in London. It was bad enough me refusing to go back home after running away with you both. This would kill her, and yes, she and everyone else will assume it's yours. What a mess! Ten minutes of happy passion, and it discomposes the rest of your life.'

Shelley looked at Mary, worry and appeal distorting his features. He was choosing to ignore her bitter and vindictive explosion. In a situation like this, she was resigned to knowing that compassion would be his strongest emotion. This man who could not comfortably walk past a beggar without tossing a coin, who sought out orphans to subsidise, this man could only see distress, not justice.

Yet again I must maintain the image of Mary that he has constructed, she thought tiredly, the calm and in control Mary who can soothe her distraught stepsister, hiding the angry and insecure Mary who more often finds her stepsister selfish and manipulative.

So she went to Claire and enfolded her, while Claire stared piteously at Shelley over her shoulder.

'I'm sorry, Claire, it was a shock. We will look after you, of course, and Shelley will talk to Albe for you.' Mary was conciliatory and Shelley nodded, vigorously.

'We will demand that he acknowledges the child and takes responsibility for it,' he said firmly.

‘But he will not acknowledge me, so how is that to be managed? He has already said he wants me to leave.’

Mary was also wondering just how Byron was to be made to take responsibility for Claire’s child. He would feel no compassion for Claire and would need to be assured that the child was his. Perhaps he could be appealed to as a potential father, since Lady Byron never allowed him to see his legitimate child. Perhaps he would do it out of friendship for Shelley. Shelley would be prepared to support Claire and her baby as much as he could, but, as things stood, his father barely gave him a decent allowance, and if he were thought to be responsible for a child by yet another woman he would be completely disowned.

‘Not, of course that I would ever want to be married. Hateful institution,’ Claire went on, defiantly.

Mary felt the surging hatred of Claire that ebbed and flowed, but whose peaks had become continually higher since they had allowed her to come with them when they eloped, two years ago. Shelley had adopted responsibility for her, since he and Mary were supposedly at fault in Claire’s tumble from the rickety heights of respectability, but Mary constantly worried that it was not only duty that drove him. She saw that Shelley was drawn to Claire’s freethinking attitudes, which were more extremely liberal and careless of what society thought than her own. It unsettled Mary that Claire knew her secret, that her true nature was essentially modest and conservative. And Claire knew just how to use that knowledge.

Since Mary had first met Shelley in the St. Pancras churchyard, in North London, she had learnt to share many of his passions and admired him for those she could not quite endorse. The problem was that he expected her, the daughter of two radical thinkers, to lead him in liberality, while in reality she felt she was desperately trying to keep pace. With Claire always on her heels, threatening to overtake and overcome.

PART ONE

London 1814