Lesson 1

MARY GODWIN: A CHILDHOOD BY THE RIVER FLEET

Have you heard of Frankenstein? Yes, I am sure you have, but did you know that more than two hundred and twenty years ago, Mary Shelley, who wrote *Frankenstein*, grew up in London.

Her name then was Mary Godwin and for the first four years of her life she lived with her father in a part of London called Somers Town. Sadly, her mother died not long after Mary was born, and her father was on his own with her and her big sister.

There were many French people in Somers Town. They had left France because there was a lot of fighting there. It was the time of the French Revolution. Mary heard a lot of people speaking French and she loved to try and copy what she heard.

When Mary was 4 years old, her daddy thought he needed to marry again in order to have someone help him look after the two little girls. He married a woman who already had two children, so now they were a family of four children. But Mary wasn't happy about this. She liked it being just her dad, her sister and herself.

Well, at least it was nice to go out. There were market gardens where people grew flowers and vegetables. There were fields of hay, and at harvest time it was fun to climb up onto the haystacks. Mary could see all the way to the hills of Hampstead. There were streams and ponds with ducks and geese and the goose girls would walk their flocks of geese from one field to another, so the geese could find plenty of worms and snails to eat.

Mary liked to sit on the grass by the duck pond and try to make daisy chains with the little white flowers with the golden centres that grew in their hundreds among the sweet, green grass.

The air that ruffled through the windows of their house on warm afternoons smelt of honeysuckle and new-mown hay and Mary could hear the rustle of leaves, the chirrup of birds and the clip clop of horses as they pulled the small carts of vegetables to market. There were also great kilns for making bricks and tiles.

Mary liked to watch the men working. A not so nice sight were the dust heaps: great heaps of rubbish collected from the city. Very poor people would look through the heaps, hoping to find something useful or something worth some money.

But then, a change was about to happen. The new wife decided they needed to move and open a business to make some money. Mary was ten years old when they moved to Skinner Street. Mary hated it. The house was gloomy and crumbling, and the River Flee

flowed nearby and was filthy. Mary often saw dead dogs, rats and bones floating in the river. Smithfield Market was nearby and the poor animals, taken there to be killed, would cry out. Mary would put her fingers in her ears, but nothing blocked out the sound of the creatures going to their death. The air that drifted through the open windows was foul smelling and so, more often than not, the windows stayed tightly shut.

Mary's father was now selling stationery and books for children. The books had pictures, and some were very bloodthirsty. The story of how the Cyclops ate the sailors who sailed with Odysseus was very gory indeed. Her dad taught her a poem about the River Fleet in a storm, written by a writer named Jonathan Swift:

> Sweepings from butchers' stalls, dung, guts and blood,
> Drowned puppies, stinking sprats, all drenched in mud,
> Dead cats and turnip tops came tumbling down the flood.

It seemed to Mary that this part of London was all about dirt and death. Prisoners were paraded through the streets on carts on their way to the terrible Newgate Prison. Mary longed for the quiet market gardens of Somers Town.

Now she was older she went to sit by her mother's grave in St Pancras Old Church. The only sound she heard there belonged to the River Fleet, which flowed beyond the graveyard fence. The church was very old, and the Sunday service was held there only once a month.

Lesson 2

There were many memorials to the French people buried there who had fled the terror of the French Revolution. But it was a quiet place, where Mary could sit by her mother's grave and think her own thoughts, whereas in the crowded house at Skinner Street there was always something she was supposed to be doing.

Mary would visit her old home in Somers Town. A sandy path led her past the brickworks and kilns and the fields of hay. There were workmen's cottages and a watchmaker's shop and there was the muffin man, making his rounds with his tray of muffins in front of him. It was good to hear snatches of French being spoken. Mary would wave and say, 'Bonjour Madame, Bonjour Monsicur.'

But there were other people living in their old house now, so Mary would have to return to the gloomy house on Skinner Street. Mary began to make up stories. Many of them were gloomy.

Mary got up, lit a candle and found a book of ancient Greek myths. She read the story of how the giant Prometheus created human beings. He came of the race of the Titans, a giant people who were born on the earth before humankind. Prometheus saw that humankind must be made from the earth, since only gods could be made of a heavenly substance. He took handfuls of earth and kneaded them with water into the shape of a god. What separated people from all other animals was that, while animals crept on their bellies, or ran and trotted about on all fours,

Mary got up, lit a candle and found a book of ancient Greek myths. She read the story of how the giant Prometheus created human beings. He came of the race of the Titans, a giant people who were born on the earth before humankind. Prometheus saw that humankind must be made from the earth, since only gods could be made of a heavenly substance. He took handfuls of earth and kneaded them with water into the shape of a god. What separated people from all other animals was that, while animals crept on their bellies, or ran and trotted about on all fours,

people walked upright on two feet. While other creatures looked down towards the earth from which they came, humans looked up towards the heavens.

Mary looked up from the book she was reading and out of the window. The lightning and thunder continued and the River Fleet seemed to bubble and boil. Mary could easily believe that some of those bones that were being swept away in the fast-flowing flood might take on a life of their own.

She continued to read the ancient story. Prometheus had a brother, Epimetheus, and his task was to provide the creatures of the earth with what they needed to survive. He gave swiftness to the tiger, strength to the lion, wings to the birds and fins to the fishes; the fox was given cunning, the wolf ferocity and the elephant its huge size and its thick, leathery skin.

But what was to be given to humans? They could never have claws like those of the tiger, nor speed like that of the horse; humans couldn't fly like an eagle or grow horns like a deer. Even the little hare was faster and the spotted leopard better at hiding among the trees. How could humans live in a world full of creatures such as these? Human skin was fine and soft, human teeth and nails were small.

The truth was that Epimetheus had used up all the gifts in his possession and had nothing special left to give to humans, so he went to his brother Prometheus and asked him to help. 'We must give them something from heaven,' answered Prometheus. 'Something beyond the power of all others on earth.'

So, Prometheus went up to heaven and stole fire from the sun. Now humans had the heavenly gift of fire. Fire could warm, scare away dangerous beasts, and cook food. Fire could melt down metals to make tools to dig and plant the earth, grow crops, make images and statues, coins and ornaments. Fire helped people become strong and powerful beyond the strength of their own bodies.

Mary read late into the night and when she finally went back to her bed to sleep, she had strange dreams of a man made of earth and fire and water, a man who came to life and was very powerful …

***A little note**: When Mary grew up and became a writer and wrote her famous book* Frankenstein *in 1818, she gave it the subtitle,* The Modern Prometheus.

A BOAT BY ANY OTHER NAME

Barges, cruisers, houseboats,
all of these are afloat
on the Thames for you to see.
How many more can there be?

Canoes and kayaks by the score,
rowing boats and some more.
River police and fireboats too,
paddle steamers, there are a few.

Viking longboats have been found
in the mud, not underground.
Currachs, shallops, narrowboats;
the last of these are still afloat.

Trawlers, cutters, skiffs and clippers,
tall ships and square riggers.
The Thames will take you out to sea.
On which boat would you like to be?

OLD NORSE

A little note: Here are just some of the old Norse words that are still alive and kicking in the English language:

Dirt, *muck* and *mire*,
You are speaking like a Viking.
Ransack and *slaughter*,
Just the same.

If I bring you *tidings*,
You are speaking like a Viking.
Club, *bug* and *blunder*,
Just the same.

Sky, *skip* and *billow*,
You are speaking like a Viking.
Freckles and *glitter*,
Just the same.

Whisk, *scale* and *scrape*
You are speaking like a Viking,
Dregs, *eggs* and *legs*,
Just the same.