

LOST
IN
DARKNESS

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HISTORICAL NOTES

Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin (Shelley)

The spring of 1815 was a tumultuous time in the life of Mary Godwin (who was soon to be the renowned Mary Shelley of *Frankenstein* fame). She wasn't married yet and suspected her lover, Percy Shelley, was having an affair with her stepsister. Even worse, she'd recently lost her baby girl, who was born prematurely. The thought that she was in some way responsible for the death haunted her, and she spiraled into depression.

In an effort to raise her spirits, Percy Shelley suggested they leave London for the country. It was during this jaunt that she conceived her next (and only surviving) child. But her happiness was short-lived. Percy settled her into a home in Clifton, a suburb of Bristol, then left her to her own devices. She was alone, newly pregnant, still not married, and feared he'd gone back to her stepsister. Throughout her life, Mary kept detailed journals, but the one during this period is lost, rumoured to have been destroyed by her own hand years later, for such was the anguish of this dark time in her life.

And what better time or frame of mind in which to imagine a monster? For shortly thereafter, Mary Godwin Shelley began writing what was to become one of the most famous fiends ever created. I merely took the liberty of giving her a little inspiration in the tale *Lost in Darkness*.

Sir Humphry Davy

Born in 1778, Humphry Davy was a Cornish chemist and inventor. In 1799, he researched at the Pneumatic Institution in Bristol, where he experimented with nitrous oxide and discovered it made him laugh, hence the nickname "laughing gas." He wrote about its potential in a treatise entitled *Researches, Chemical and Philosophical—Chiefly concerning Nitrous Oxide and Its Respiration*. In this formal exposition, he discussed using the gas to relieve pain during surgery, so the properties were known, but nothing came of it as an actual anesthetic until 1844.

It was my artistic license to cause my fictional surgeon Mr. Peckwood to think outside the box and actually try using it.

Davy became a renowned speaker, giving lectures in London that were so well attended, traffic became an issue. He was knighted in 1812 and in 1818 was awarded a baronetcy, making him a peer. He died in 1829 in Geneva, Switzerland.

Nitrous Oxide

Nitrous oxide was first discovered in 1772 by Englishman Joseph Priestley, but research didn't really take off until the early 1800s at the Pneumatic Institution in Bristol. There, Humphry Davy experimented with what became known as "intoxicating gas," "Gas of Paradise," or what we know it as today, "laughing gas." Davy organized gatherings for his friends, asking them to record their experiences with the gas, and from there it spread. Members of the British upper class often engaged in what became known as laughing gas parties. Eventually the idea spread across the pond to the United States, where the anesthetic effects of nitrous oxide were recognized.

Joanna Baillie

Joanna was a nineteenth-century Scottish poet and dramatist who had a flair for gothic themes. And no wonder, for she was a descendant of the famed Sir William Wallace of *Braveheart* fame. Though she didn't learn to read until the age of ten, that didn't hinder her writing abilities. Once she caught ahold of words, she began writing plays and is best known for her *Plays on the Passions*. She also penned many religious pamphlets and diverse poems, one of which—"A Sailor's Song"—is featured in chapter nine when Graham Lambert dramatizes it with a series of sailor's knots. It is by my own artistic license that Graham recites this poem since the work was not first published until 1840 and this story takes place in 1815, a full twenty-five years before it became public.

Colston Buns

The character Mrs. Bap (a play on words because a bap is a soft bread roll dusted with flour and eaten for breakfast) was known for her

Colston buns before she fell on hard times. A Colston bun is a sweet bread made with yeast and flavored with currants, candied peels, and sweet spices. These treats are of Bristol origin, named after a local merchant—Edward Colston—who created the recipe. There are two sizes of these buns: “dinner plate,” which has eight wedge marks to be split apart, and “ha’penny staver,” an individual bun to stave off hunger.

Vade-Mecum

Graham Lambert, like other surgeons of the time, carried with him a *vade-mecum*, which in Latin means “go with me.” *Vade-mecums* were small books, easy to carry in a coat pocket, that summarized facts pertaining to a particular subject and were quite popular during the Georgian and Regency eras. There were several titles of interest to the medical profession: *The Anatomist’s Vade-Mecum*, *The Physician’s Vade-Mecum*, and *The Surgeon’s Vade-Mecum*, which is what my hero had tucked in his pocket.

Spilling Salt

Heroine Amelia Balfour is a superstitious person, so when salt is spilled at the dinner table, she immediately throws a pinch over her left shoulder. Why? Historically, it was believed that spilling salt was bad luck but tossing some over your left shoulder reverses that curse. The action was thought to blind the devil, who was waiting there to tempt you into acts of bad behaviour.

Blue Ruin/Geneva

Geneva was the Regency period name for what we call gin. It was probably not passed around the table after dinner by your average Regency gentleman because gin was notoriously the beverage of the depraved lower class. The nickname, “blue ruin,” is applicable in that the overindulgence of gin ruined many a man and woman.

Resurrectionists

Body snatching, especially in the nineteenth century, was most often for the purpose of selling the corpse for dissection or anatomy study.

Before the Anatomy Act of 1832, the only cadavers legally available for anatomical purposes were from those condemned to death and dissection by the courts—which made for a limited supply. Men who dug up bodies by the dark of night were known as resurrectionists or resurrection men. They (and those who used the illicit bodies) faced a misdemeanor for interfering with a grave, which was punishable with a fine and imprisonment.

Physicians, Surgeons, and Apothecaries

You'll notice in this story that, though Mr. Peckwood and Mr. Lambert are surgeons, not once are they addressed as Dr. Peckwood or Dr. Lambert. That's because in the Regency era, there were three different levels of trained professionals, all of whom were referred to as doctors, but only physicians were addressed with the honourific Dr. preceding their name. Why the differences? Great question!

Physicians were the gentlemen of the profession. They studied medicine at a university or one of the more prestigious medical schools, where they earned a doctorate in medicine. As you may guess, this was expensive, so physicians were generally of the upper class and usually gentlemen by birth. Being such, physicians didn't stoop to touching their patients or caring for the general masses. They diagnosed by asking questions and attended those higher in society. They wrote prescriptions, but it was the apothecary who then filled them.

Surgeons were the next level of caregiver, having little to no formal university training. Instead, they apprenticed to an experienced surgeon. Though socially they didn't receive as much respect, these were the men whom most people relied upon. They treated everything from wounds to broken bones to malaises of all sorts. They were not considered gentlemen because they actually touched their patients. And like physicians, they wrote prescriptions for the apothecary as well.

But you'll notice that besides being a surgeon, our hero, Graham, was also cross-trained as an apothecary. This position held the lowest rank in the medical profession. These men were trained in the use and composition of herbs, potions, and medicines and were usually found more in rural areas. Physicians and surgeons generally practiced in cities.

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