

# DEATH AND THE SISTERS

by Heather Redmond

## EXCERPT

“Come, Mary.” Jane flopped onto her bed. “Tell us a story about the prisoner ghosts wailing.”

“I’ll have to think it up,” Mary said and then began to quote. “This relation is Matter of Fact, and attended with such Circumstances as may induce any Reasonable Man to believe it.”

“What’s that?” Jane asked. The floor creaked as she kicked off her slippers and knocked them to the floor.

“Defoe, I think,” Mary said, already considering the form of her story. If only Mother had written such fanciful tales, to give her ideas on how to construct them. “I’ll consult his works in the bookshop for further inspiration. It seems like quite a good start to a ghost story.”

Mary placed her slippers next to Jane’s and walked down in her stocking feet, hugging the wall so as not to set off the worst of the creaking stairs. If Mamma heard her, she’d be set to mending something. Her stepmother never thought about the cost of candles when she could make her daughters work themselves into exhaustion after dark.

The bookshop’s interior door hung open. Very odd, as Mamma was particular about making sure that the smells of domestic life, particularly cooking odors, did not damage the books.

Mary shrugged, glad she had come downstairs, because if Mamma had been the first to notice, she’d have no doubt blamed Mary. She lit the lantern kept in readiness for customers who wanted to browse in the dark corners.

While she knew exactly where Defoe was kept, she first went to a back corner of the shop and dropped to her knees, then pulled out a much-loved volume that Mamma kept in stock because she knew that it sold, even though it was anything but highbrow or philosophical. Ann Radcliffe’s *The Romance of the Forest*. Feeling a little breathless, like a Gothic heroine about to swoon, she opened the book to her favorite page. With the lantern held over the engraving, she examined the bare legs of the man removing a blindfolded girl from a house.

She bit her lip as she looked over the engraved musculature, feeling a familiar shiver dance up through her body. Did Shelley have legs so magnificent? He certainly possessed the broad shoulders and narrow waist of the figure on the page. She set down the lantern when it shook in her hand.

“Oh, to see a form like that,” she whispered to herself. None of her Scottish suitors had possessed a body she wanted to caress. As such, none of them had enticed so much as a kiss from her. After a last heated glance, she closed the book and tucked it away again.

The next shelves were in front of the bow windows. The Juvenile Library was shelved there, at the perfect height for children. Works of historical merit were on the other side. Mary rose.

Her foot twisted as she took the first step. She grabbed for the edge of the bookcase with one hand, the other gripping the lantern tightly. Her fingers were trembling by the time she righted herself. She reached down and swiped at her foot. Something sticky coated her fingers. What was on the floor?

“Honestly,” she muttered to herself. More cleaning. She set the lantern on the bookcase and walked past the windows. Slatted lines from the shutters were illuminated by the oil lamp that burned all night at the corner of the road.

Distracted by the sudden reflected light, she tripped again. “Blast,” she cried.

When she tried to take another step forward, her way was blocked by something solid. Confused, she prodded it with her foot. It felt warm, dry, and slightly yielding. She backed up to take the lantern in her hand again, then cupped the side of it with her hand to keep the illumination from the road. When she reached the mass again, she held the lantern out over the floor.

Her mouth dropped open when she saw what lay in front of her. A man, like something out of a painting of the French Revolution, was sprawled on the floor. Facedown. She swept the lantern over his body. Her hand shook as she saw first one knife, then another.

The first was impaled in his back. The other, in the mysterious recesses between his legs.

“Faith!” Wobbly, Mary blinked hard, then forced herself to kneel down beside the sprawled figure, to touch the man’s hand.

Still warm. She squeezed it, feeling that strange sensation of callused male flesh under hers, then dropped the hand. What was she doing? Molesting a corpse?

She scooted back, her eyes closed, then opened them again, feeling her lips tremble at the sight of the dark blue velvet coat, the dark stain around the knife gleaming wetly in the light. She knew that coat. Shelley! That fine figure of a man, ended so cruelly. They had just seen him leave not twenty minutes earlier. Had he been accosted in the street and dumped here?

“I could have loved such a being.” Tears sprang to her eyes, and she let them fall, keenly feeling her sensibility. Hadn’t he said he was a new father? And his poor young wife, not even twenty yet, a widow.

“Mary?”

*Drat that Jane.* Could she not offer up a moment’s solitude to anyone?

Her stepsister’s footsteps came closer, along with the bobbing of a candle flame.

“Don’t come any closer,” Mary warned. She set the lantern down.

Ignoring her, Jane came down the space between the bookshelves and turned in the nook in front of the windows.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

Mary scrambled to her feet, hoping to block her sister’s view. The candle wavered as Jane took in the scene. She gasped loudly.

“What,” Jane asked, “is that?”

“Knives,” Mary said. “Murder has been done here.”

“What?” Jane repeated, some frantic power coming into her voice. “Papa?”

“No,” Mary said, grabbing the candleholder before the candle dropped. “Shelley.”

She saw what was going to happen and held up her other hand, hoping to forestall it. But she failed, and Jane, coming closer, screamed. Mary bent under the onslaught and grabbed her sister’s hand.

“Hush,” she begged, pulling her away. “We have to tell Papa before the watch comes.”

Though Jane resisted, Mary pulled her through the bookshop, then forced her to sit on the steps and hold the candle while she went back for the lantern. She set it on the table in the hall.

“Stay here,” she commanded.

“But,” Jane whispered. “But the body.”

“Papa will know what to do.”

“But the watch.”

“Papa should call them, not us. Do you want him surprised?”

“The bookshop,” Jane said next.

“Yes, it’s very bad,” Mary agreed.

“It isn’t S-Shelley,” Jane stuttered. “He just left.”

Mary pulled the handkerchief from her sleeve and tucked it into Jane’s unresisting hand. “It must be,” she said. “Who else? Cry quietly, please.” Hoping her sister obeyed, she picked up her skirts and ran up the steps to her father’s library.