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Chapter 2

“Une Enfant de la Révolution” 1789–1792

It looks to me as if I were in a great crisis, not of the affairs of France alone, but of all Europe, perhaps of more than Europe. All circumstances taken together, the French Revolution is the most astonishing that has hitherto happened in the world.

—Edmund Burke, Member of British Parliament,
Reflections on the Revolution in France, November 1790

With all the passion of a teenager with convictions, Harriet supported the French Revolution. Its beginning has been linked to July 14, 1789, when Parisians wearing red cockades (ribbons) in their caps stormed the medieval prison called the Bastille. In London, at her home, 44 Berners Street, Harriet would don a red sash as a sign of solidarity. “Round her slight figure she wore the badge of republicanism, a wide red band,” her grandson later wrote, “and I have often heard her call herself *une enfant de la Révolution*.”¹

Today the French Revolution conjures up images of the guillotine, but then the ideals of republicanism—*liberté, égalité, and fraternité*—inspired many. William Wordsworth expressed the hopefulness of the age: “’twas a time when Europe was rejoiced, France standing at the top of golden hours, and human nature seeming born again.” Percy Bysshe Shelley praised the French for daring to break “fetters of law.”²

Harriet’s interest in France was influenced by her father. John Collins had visited France as a young man and studied its history. He sympathized with French exiles in London. Many French “Constitutionalists,” liberals favoring changes in the monarchy, came to

his home. The Collins family lived north of the Thames River in East Marylebone, a residential district developed in the eighteenth century that was popular with writers and artists. At one time painters John Opie and Henry Fuseli lived there, as did Samuel Taylor Coleridge and relatives of Charles Dickens. North of Berners Street toward Somers Town stood an important landmark in literary history: St. Pancras Church. Writer Mary Wollstonecraft would be buried in that quiet churchyard in 1797, and her daughter Mary would become Harriet's friend.³

Among the Constitutionals who gathered on Berners Street was Jean Baptiste de Boinville, "a favourite guest." Harriet noticed him, and "it happened naturally enough that in frequent intercourse [how language has changed], an attachment arose between M. de Boinville and the eldest daughter of the family, who was at that time not only an ardent admirer of all that savored of liberty—which she remained to the last—but an exceedingly pretty girl, full of generous feeling, and with a mind of unusual power."⁴

Harriet fell in love. If the memoir's effusive portrait of her beau is to be believed, how could she resist? "His temper was remarkably sweet; his spirits even and cheerful; his mind was cultivated and intelligent; his taste exquisitely refined. In person he was tall and handsome; in manners and appearance, he was singularly agreeable."⁵



Figure 2.1. Portrait of the young Jean Baptiste Chastel de Boinville. Source: Courtesy of the family.

Jean Baptiste at Versailles

Everything related to the French Revolution interested Harriet. She listened attentively to Jean Baptiste's true stories about his experiences in the service of General Lafayette. By 1789 Lafayette had become the head of the Paris National Guard and Jean Baptiste had become his trusted aide-de-campe.

On October 5, 1789, word came of a plot against the royal family. The National Guard galloped off to Versailles, twelve miles away. Angry and starving Parisians, many of them women, had begun to fill the streets around the palace. By one in the morning all was quiet. Lafayette went to bed. Jean Baptiste retired to a room nearby in the palace. Screams awakened him. He dashed out to the hall, strewn with beheaded bodies. The mob had broken down the door of the queen's quarters; "the rooms were full of ruffians, so bent on finding Marie Antoinette that they even stabbed the mattresses of her bed with their swords and knives, thinking she might be hidden under them."⁶

Lafayette averted further bloodshed by persuading the King Louis XVI to accompany him to the balcony of the royal apartment. The insurgents shouted and waved their torches below. Playing to the crowd and using exaggerated gestures, Lafayette put his tricolored cap on the king's head and the king's white cap on his own head. This pantomime quieted the people long enough for Lafayette to be able to negotiate for the safe transport of the royal family back to Paris.

The general ordered Jean Baptiste to escort the queen's carriage, a dangerous mission because the people particularly despised the Austrian-born queen known for her extravagance. Spotting Jean Baptiste on his horse, next to her carriage window, Marie Antoinette turned to one of her attendants and said: "Je ne puis pas souffrir de voir M. de Boinville" (I cannot stand to look at Monsieur de Boinville.) Why she said this has long been debated by Jean Baptiste's descendants, but the explanation is probably a simple one. She wanted to remain at the palace and he made her leave.

Jean Baptiste in London

The reason Jean Baptiste left Paris and went to London was to fulfill an important assignment for Lafayette: spying on the activities of Louis-Philippe Joseph, Duc d'Orléans. Although the duke was a member of the royal family (the king's cousin), he called himself *Citoyen Egalité*. Lafayette feared what the duke might say or do in London. Walking a tightrope between the radicals and the moderates, Lafayette relied on Jean Baptiste to keep him informed. Referring to the duke, he wrote, "There is a lot of important information to be drawn from that source. Monsieur Boinville will make it his unique occupation to obtain it. I do not doubt at all that he will give me useful opinions."⁷

While in London Jean Baptiste was approached by the American statesman Gouverneur Morris, who had his own ideas about international diplomacy. Knowing Jean Baptiste was in Lafayette's confidence, Morris asked him to persuade Lafayette that France should declare war on England. Jean Baptiste conveyed the message to his general. Lafayette refused to consider the radical idea, and there the matter was left.⁸

While Harriet was becoming better acquainted with the handsome French soldier in the comfort of her London home, events in France careened in violent directions. In April 1792 France declared war on Austria. In August 1792 a mob broke into the chateau in the Tuileries and took the royal family. The king was manhandled and forced to put on a red cap. A month later Lafayette was forced to flee his country with the Army of the North. He was captured in Austria and thrown into prison. In January 1793, 1,200 guards marched the thirty-eight-year-old king to the guillotine. Among those who had voted in favor of his execution was none other than "Phillipe Egalité." His pretense of being a man of the people did not save the duke's neck, which was severed a month after Marie Antoinette's.

Although commoners had gained a voice in the representative assembly, this reform did not appease those in power, determined to obliterate anything related to the clergy and the nobility (the privileged groups in the *ancien régime*). Street signs were changed. Rue de Condé became rue de l'Egalité. Notre Dame became the Temple

of Reason. Even playing cards had to be ideologically correct. Kings became Génie (genius), and Queens, Liberté. Gouverneur Morris wrote to a friend, ‘The voracity of the court, the haughtiness of the nobles, the sensuality of the church, have met their punishment in the road of their transgressions. The oppressor has been squeezed by the hands of the oppressed.’⁹

An Unfortunate Son

France declared war on Britain in February 1793. Harriet did not reveal to her father that she had fallen in love with his friend Jean Baptiste. Her beau came from one of the noblest, richest, and oldest families in northeastern France.¹⁰ Born on July 15, 1756, he was the second son of Jean Baptiste Ignace Chastel de Villemont and Francoise Pauline Lucie Dupaquier de Dommartin. Chastel was a family name; Villemont signified where his father owned property. According to the custom of the time, Jean Baptiste took the name and title of *de Boinville*, from an estate and village of that name near Etain, about ten miles to the east of Verdun and to the west of Metz. Today this small village is called Boinville-en-Woëvre.¹¹



Figure 2.2. Map showing Boinville (lower left) in Lorraine in the eighteenth century. Source: Public record.

Because Jean Baptiste's name was written on the list of émigrés, he lost his property. The Jacobins hanged seventeen members of his family, and they guillotined his friend Andre Chenier, a poet who wrote satirical verse offensive to Robespierre.¹² Fortunately, Jean Baptiste had obeyed Lafayette's order to go to London. He escaped The Terror with his life—but little else. Jean Baptiste's status as a penniless refugee from an enemy nation did not matter to Harriet, but it did to her father, who forbid her to see him again.

Chapter 3

A Disobedient Daughter Marries for Love, 1793

In each other's arms, as in a temple, with its summit lost in the clouds, the world is to be shut out, and every thought and wish that do not nurture pure affection and permanent virtue.

—Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: With Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* (1792)

Jean Baptiste wrote John Collins asking for his daughter's hand in marriage and received a written reply. Often welcomed on Berners Street, he was surprised at the rejection. Collins told Jean Baptiste that he had no objection to him personally, but "avec lui sa fille manquerait le pain," which is to say, he thought the impoverished exile would be a poor bread winner. Money was the problem, not Jean Baptiste's character. Harriet's father was sure that if his daughter married him, her future would be marked by financial difficulties and real hardship. And in many respects, he was right.¹

Jean Baptiste received a good education, and when he was twenty-one, he became fermiér-général.² This profligate youth bore little resemblance to the Jean Baptiste Harriet loved. He was thirty-seven in 1793, a widower, with a grown son still in France. His first wife had died shortly after giving birth. Death, war, and misfortune had changed him.

Harriet was not dissuaded by her father's opposition. She promised Jean Baptiste she would marry him on one condition: he had to leave the French army. He complied with her demand and wrote Lafayette asking for permission to leave his service. From his prison cell in Austria, Lafayette wrote back a friendly letter. He gave his blessing and the epaulettes came off at once. Lafayette urged Jean

Baptiste to marry in London if he could.³ Twenty-year-old Harriet was eager to marry him. The war between France and England did not stop her. Neither did her father.

The Norm of Obedience

Harriet's defiance of her father broke a well-established societal norm of behavior. "Conduct books," a popular literary genre, instructed young women in the importance of deference to their fathers. In fact, submission to all male relatives was expected, a father, a husband, or a brother. Under English law, women were completely without legal or financial rights in their own name.

In *A Father's Legacy to his Daughter*, John Gregory criticized the disturbing trend in "female manners" and defended the gender disparities of the day. He was upset that some women "seem to expect that they shall regain their ascendancy over us, by the fullest display of their personal charms, by being always in our eye at public places, by conversing with us with the same unreserved freedom as we do with one another; in short, by resembling us as nearly as they possibly can."⁴ Harriet, however, was not swayed by this particular conduct book or any other. She was little interested in conformity with prevailing views of womanhood.

Two contemporaries of Harriet's (Jane Austen, born in 1775, and Dorothy Wordsworth, born in 1771) contended with the same absence of legal rights. They were more constrained than Harriet by financial circumstances. Money was in short supply in both households. The daughter of a country parson, Jane was one of eight children, and Dorothy, who lost both parents at a young age, had three brothers. As Austen scholar Lucy Worsley correctly notes, "the business of daughters in a large family was obedience and compliance and domestic duty."⁵

Harriet, however, had some financial autonomy, and she had a fiercely independent streak. The memoir describes her response when her father prohibited her from seeing Jean Baptiste again:

At this she was indignant. Her father had large estates in St. Vincent's; the marriage-portion she had a right to expect was amply sufficient to sustain a family. She had 200

pounds a year of her own, left to her by her grandmother, and on this she determined to marry.⁶

A family that aspired to gentility needed at least 500 pounds a year.⁷ Harriet had only one aspiration, to wed Jean Baptiste, and 200 pounds would suffice. She bided her time. She watched and waited. One day when her father was away from home, she seized her chance. Cornelia and Alfred helped her. The three siblings procured a carriage and four horses. Then Harriet and Jean Baptiste galloped off, taking the main route out of London in the direction of Scotland.

Harriet Elopes to Gretna Green

Harriet could not marry in England because she was only twenty and did not have her father's consent, but in Scotland boys as young as fourteen and girls as young as twelve could marry. The only requirement was that the couple be married in front of witnesses. In Scotland, blacksmiths were required to be citizens, and so these "anvil priests," as they were known, often officiated. For lovers in a hurry, the local forge was usually easy to find. A toll road to Graitney made Gretna Green the quickest village to reach across the English border. Harriet and Jean Baptiste were married in 1793 in either the Old Blacksmith's Shop, built around 1712, or the Gretna Hall Blacksmith Shop, built in 1710.

Gretna Green appears in Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice*. The foolish Lydia Bennet, the heroine's sister, eloped there. "You will laugh when you know where I am gone," she wrote her family,

and I cannot help laughing myself at your surprise to-morrow morning, as soon as I am missed. I am going to Gretna Green, and if you cannot guess with who, I shall think you a simpleton, for there is but one man in the world I love, and he is an angel. I should never be happy without him, so think it no harm to be off. You need not send them word at Longbourn of my going, if you do not like it, for it will make the surprise the greater, when I write to them and sign my name 'Lydia Wickham.' What a good joke it will be!



Figure 3.1. The old blacksmith's shop in Gretna Green. Source: "Old Blacksmiths Shop Gretna Green" by amandabhslater is licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0.

Frances Burney: A Literary Celebrity

Like Harriet, Frances Burney defied her father to marry a French exile in London in 1793. His name was Alexandre Piochard d'Arblay, a good friend of Jean Baptiste's. He had served as an adjutant-general under Lafayette in the Army of the North's campaign against Austria. Following Lafayette's capture, d'Arblay managed to make his way via Holland and Harwich to London. It was through Jean Baptiste that Harriet became acquainted with Frances Burney, the most famous female novelist in Britain.

Frances Burney's mother died when she was young. She revered her father and helped him as his amanuensis, copying his manuscripts. Dr. Charles Burney was at work on the second volume of a history of music at the same time Fanny was secretly writing *Evelina, or the History of a Young Lady's Entrance into the World*, published anonymously in 1778. A timid, first-time author, she did not want her identity discovered by her father or anyone else. Before she submitted the manuscript of the novel, she copied every page in a feigned hand, lest the Fleet Street printers recognize her handwriting. As her father's scribe, they had seen it before.

Despite this arduous effort at subterfuge, her identity was discovered. Frances Burney became the talk of London. Her second novel, another social satire, added to her fame: *Cecilia; or Memoirs of an Heiress* (1782). By 1793, the year Miss Collins and Miss Burney both married, she was the most celebrated woman writer in Britain.⁹



Figure 3.2. Portrait of Frances Burney (Madame d'Arblay) by her cousin Edward Francis Burney. Source: Public domain.

Another Disobedient Daughter

Miss Burney met Monsieur d'Arblay in Surrey at Juniper Hall, where he lived with a lively and colorful group of French exiles, including Louis de Narbonne (the ex-minister of war), Anne-Louise-Germaine de Staël, Princesse d'Hénin, and Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord, the future diplomat. Narbonne's friend, Mon-

sieur d'Arblay, was the one who impressed Frances most strongly. He is "one of the most singularly interesting Characters that can ever have been formed," she wrote her sister Susan. "He has a sincerity, a frankness, an ingenuous openness of nature that I had been unjust [sic] enough to think could not belong to a French Man."¹⁰

Like her conservative father, Frances Burney was a royalist. Her politics at the beginning of the French Revolution differed from Harriet's. When British Prime Minister William Pitt wrote *Reflections on the Revolution in France* in 1790, Burney agreed with Pitt's anti-revolutionary sentiments. Later she told him in person how much she admired his reasoned argument in favor of preserving the virtues of monarchic rule.¹¹ These opinions, however, began to change after she met Alexandre d'Arblay, a Constitutionalist in favor of reform, like his buddy Jean Baptiste.

In May 1793, Dr. Burney discovered his daughter's interest in Monsieur d'Arblay, and it made him "extremely uneasy." Do not, he warned in a long letter, become entangled in a "wild and romantic attachment." It will bring you nothing but poverty and unhappiness.¹² Like Harriet's father, he was concerned about his daughter's financial future if she married a French exile with no money and no prospect of making any.

"If the Queen should be displeased and withdraw her allowance, what would you do?" he plaintively asked. From 1786 to 1791, Frances Burney had been employed at Windsor Palace as "Keeper of the Robes," a ceremonial position at Court she disliked, but it had an income of 200 pounds a year. When Fanny left after five years of service, Queen Charlotte (an admirer of her character and her novels) awarded her an annual allowance of 100 pounds, money that was needed by the large Burney family.

The letter noted that Fanny's friends in England came from "the highest and most desirable class," a matter of importance to her father, who was the son of a portrait painter and dancing master of no fixed address, as Kate Chisholm explains in her essay on the Burney family. He rose above his station in life, and assiduously cultivated friendships with the 'ton', those with inherited wealth and genteel status.¹³ Some have considered him a member of the pseudo-gentry, gentlemen without land or title but with artistic or intellectual credentials. After praising her desirable friends,

Dr. Burney said she should not “quit them, in order to make new friendships in a strange land.” Dr. Burney, unlike John Collins, had little sympathy for the French, and he certainly had nothing good to say about France in 1793: “the generality of its inhabitants seem incapable of such virtues as friendship is built upon.” He beseeched his daughter not to make the “wild and visionary” decision to marry the Frenchman.

Frances Burney considered her beloved father’s objections, but in the end she disobeyed his wishes. She was determined to spend her life with her “chevalier” and “friend of my inmost heart.” The English novelist and French exile married not once by twice. The first time on July 28, 1793, in a Protestant ceremony, and two days later in a Catholic church.

The following month the new bride wrote to her friend Marianne Waddington:

You may be amazed not to see the name of my dear Father upon this solemn occasion: but his apprehension from the smallness of our income have made him cold and averse--& though he granted his consent, I could not even solicit his presence;—I feel satisfied, however, that Time will convince him that I have not been so imprudent as he now thinks me. Happiness is the great end of all our worldly views & proceedings; & no one can judge for another in what will produce it.¹⁴

Were Frances and Harriet happy with the men they chose? Frances Burney d’Arblay wrote a great deal about her feelings for her husband. Their happiness together is described in numerous letters and journals preserved in the Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature in the New York Public Library. Included in that collection is a letter Jean Baptiste wrote Alexandre d’Arblay on September 24, 1793:

I sincerely congratulate you on your happy marriage. I no longer doubt your future happiness, it is established on the amiableness and qualities of a charming woman. The rural establishment that you will get will give you plenty of space

for pleasure. I am very pleased to have learned all of this, you promise me details. Send them as soon as possible.

Jean Baptiste then relates that he had met a wonderful woman:

I left London on the 7th of July to come stay in this area, the south of England, in a pretty thatched cottage near the sea and surrounded by delightful countryside. I spent an enchanting time with someone I adore and who embodies all that is amiable and good.

In closing Jean Baptiste writes,

I await your news with impatience my dear friend. In response I will give you news of my situation. We can boast that you and I are not the emigrants most to be pitied.¹⁵

The boast was well founded. The lives of the two French exiles, far from home, were transformed by the English women determined to marry them despite their fathers' disapproval. Letters in which Harriet divulges her feelings about Jean Baptiste have not survived, but her actions described in the next chapter attest to her devotion to him.

Chapter 8

With the Proponent of Political Justice, William Godwin, 1809–1811

He blazed as a sun in the firmament of reputation; no one was more talked of, more looked up to, more sought after, and wherever liberty, truth, justice was the theme, his name was not far off.... No work in our time gave such a blow to the philosophical mind of the country as the celebrated Enquiry Concerning Political Justice.

—William Hazlitt on William Godwin, *The Spirit of the Age, Or Contemporary Portraits*¹

H. Boinville visits, William Godwin wrote after Harriet called on him August 8, 1809. He was fifty-three. Between that date and 1827, the year she moved to Paris, they met an astonishing seventy-two times. He was one of her closest friends in London. Thanks to Godwin's diary, a terse record he meticulously kept of the people he saw and what he did, a picture comes into focus of Harriet the sociable Londoner in her thirties.² No longer crossing seas, she crosses streets—from her home in the Pimlico district of London to Godwin on Skinner Street.

Harriet first heard of Godwin as a child of eleven, when his friend James Marshall made the long sea voyage to St. Vincent to meet with her father. In 1784 Marshall tried to persuade John Collins to fund Godwin's writings. Harriet's father declined to finance the work of this unknown young writer, but the close ties between Harriet's family and Godwin's family continued.

Not until 1793 did Godwin write the 835-page treatise that made him famous, *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and Its Influence on Morals and Happiness*. The author wrestled with big ideas: justice, morals, and happiness. He envisioned the regeneration of society,

not by government but by individuals. "If it could be proved that a sound political institution was of all others the most powerful engine for promoting individual good," he wrote, "or on the other hand that an erroneous and corrupt government was the most formidable adversary to the improvement of the species, it would follow that politics was the first and foremost subject of human investigation."³

Politics interested Harriet intensely. She had strong opinions about events going on in Britain and freely expressed them, both at Godwin's house and her own. Harriet took her duties as a wife and mother seriously. In this respect she conformed to the prevailing norms of how a woman should behave. But she was unconventional in the close attention she paid to developments outside the domestic sphere.

Harriet's Inheritance

Harriet may have loaned Godwin money. The diary shows that when Harriet and Godwin conferred, just the two of them, a lawyer or bookkeeper was sometimes present. Many of his relationships frayed and ripped over money. He had the tendency to shake a prospective benefactor like a fierce terrier, determined to wrest away a bone. Harriet and Godwin may have had financial interactions, but their warm rapport lasted.

Harriet's wealth came from the sugar estate that John Collins had once owned in the British island colony of St. Vincent. Her father sold this property at some time before 1806. (Slavery was abolished in Britain in 1807. Not until 1834, when the Abolition of Slavery Act of 1833 took effect, was slavery outlawed in British colonies.) The terms of her father's will were specified (or proved, to use the legal language of the day) on March 15, 1806. Collins is identified as a retired planter of Berners Street and a signatory of the 1783 address to George III by absentee owners and merchants. This legal document makes no mention of property in St. Vincent.⁴

After her father died in 1808, Harriet and her siblings received the money specified in 1806. Harriet received an annuity of 200 pounds per year, and 5,000 pounds for her children, Cornelia and Alfred, at her death. This sum was more than enough to live on.

Consider the inheritance of Dorothy Wordsworth. When her father died, she and her four brothers each received about 24 pounds a year. At that time, the minimum for living was about sixty-five pounds a year.⁵

Harriet's brother Alfred suffered from mental illness and is referred to in the will as my unfortunate son. Collins bequeathed him 500 pounds per year. Harriet's sister (Cornelia Newton, wife of John Newton of Grosvenor Place) received a generous 16,000 pounds in trust. Perhaps Harriet's choice of Jean Baptiste, against her father's wishes, explains why he left her less money than her sister. In 1808, Harriet and Jean Baptiste, and their children, sued her sister and brother-in-law and their children in London's Court of Chancery, a court made famous by Charles Dickens in *Bleak House*. At issue was how a trust of 200 pounds a year established for Harriet by her paternal grandmother (Anna Collins) was handled in her father's estate. While Collins was alive he managed this trust. After he died, Harriet expected to have access to the principal of the trust, but she received only the interest. The outcome of Harriet's suit against her sister and brother-in-law is not known, but the truly remarkable truth is that Harriet maintained very cordial relations with Cornelia and John Frank Newton until their deaths, and later with their children.

In his thorough and insightful biography of Godwin, Peter Marshall explains an important point about Godwin's unconventional view of property (money):

Godwin believed that property is a trust which should be distributed according to need. He lent to those worse off when he could, and expected others to do the same. He may have been more on the receiving than the giving end, but this was the result of having a large family and an unsteady business rather than personal profligacy.⁶

The son of a Trinitarian minister and one of twelve children, Godwin did not inherit any wealth. A disciplined scholar, he stayed at his desk reading and writing hour after hour. He was a frugal person of simple tastes—and habitually broke.

Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft

Harriet never met Godwin's first wife, Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797), but the extraordinary daughter they had together, Mary Godwin, became a member of Harriet's circle in London when she was a pre-teen and in Paris when she was an adult. Mary Wollstonecraft's determination and achievements are well presented in this portrait of her by Peter Marshall:

A self-taught farmer's daughter, she had decided at the age of fifteen never to marry for interested motives or to endure a life of dependence. Consequently, she was obliged to work at different times as a lady's companion, school-teacher, governess and even seamstress. Her ambition was to be the first woman to achieve economic independence through writing, and with the help of the publisher Joseph Johnson she eventually became novelist, historian, essayist, reviewer, translator, and philosopher.⁷

Wollstonecraft and Godwin met for the first time in 1791. They both attended a goodbye dinner for Thomas Paine, who was about to leave London for Paris, where he had a seat as a delegate to the French Revolutionary Convention. Godwin was eager to talk to Paine and became annoyed by Wollstonecraft, whom he thought monopolized the attention of the guest of honor. Despite this inauspicious first meeting, Wollstonecraft decided to renew her acquaintance with Godwin in 1796. By then they each had written their masterpieces: *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793) and *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792).

On April 14th Wollstonecraft called on Godwin at his house on Chalton Street. Uninvited and unchaperoned, she breached eighteenth-century proprieties by knocking on his door. A stunning woman, thirty-six years of age, stood on the doorstep, "her face fuller and softer than he remembered but with the same large brown eyes and striking mass of auburn hair worn short, unpowdered, and falling carelessly over her left brow. Wollstonecraft saw a stocky, energetic, balding man whose eyes sparkled behind round gold spectacles."⁸

They became lovers, an event noted in Godwin's diary. August 21, 1796: chez moi toute (at my house, everything). The celibate Godwin experienced passion and profound happiness in her company. He also welcomed into his life Wollstonecraft's two-year-old daughter Fanny, the result of an unhappy affair with an American named Gilbert Imlay.

When Wollstonecraft became pregnant with Godwin's child, the couple discussed what to do. They each had written disparagingly about the institution of marriage in the past, but now they wanted to marry. Godwin's best friend, James Marshall, witnessed their vows in London's St. Pancras Church on March 31, 1797.⁹

1809		
Aug. 6.	Sa. Dictionary, gala.	14
7.	Th. Dictionary, gala. Visit of Westminster. Call on Mylins; b. w. Mf, or Darnel & H. P. W. meet G. M. C. & F. M.	15
8.	Sa. Dictionary, gala. Mrs. Boinville calls: Lancaster's Lecture, w. Mf; Dr. Paine, Mrs. F. & M. Taylor & Mrs. Linn: G. M. sup. G. M. calls.	16
9.	Th. Dictionary, gala. Write to Botha & Fozzac. Call on Major G.: Dance & Supper sup: meet Wad. & J. M. for Somerset Town.	17
10.	Th. Dictionary, gala. Call on Fanny; write to her: meet Mylins.	18
11.	F. Dictionary, gala. G. M. breakfast: L. M. sup. Mrs. Tolpington calls.	19
12.	Sa. Dictionary, gala. M. calls: G. M. dines.	

Figure 8.1. "Mrs. Boinville calls," William Godwin's diary, August 8, 1809 (numbered 8).

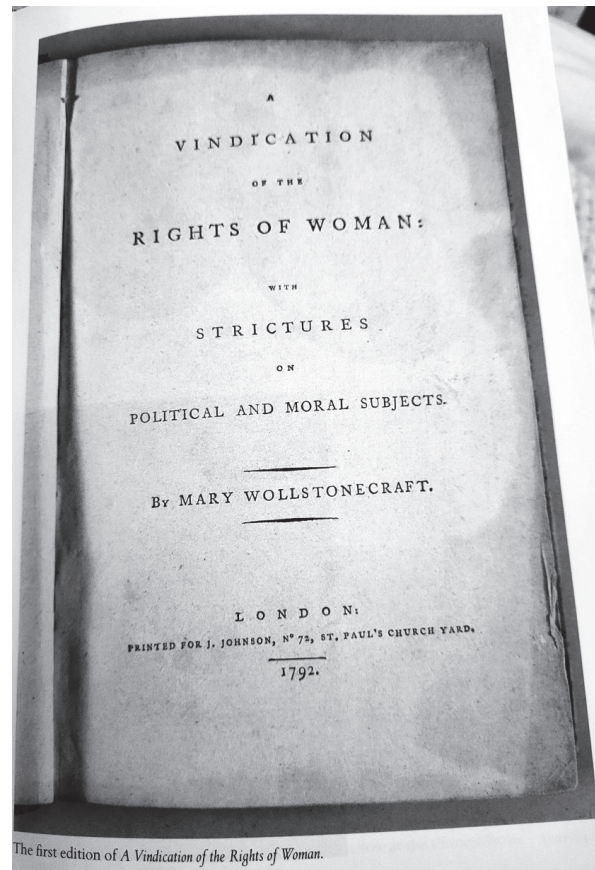


Figure 8.2. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* by Mary Wollstonecraft, first edition printed in London in 1792 for J. Johnson, No. 72, St. Paul's Church Yard.

Mary Godwin was born on August 30, 1797. Eleven days later the tiny infant's mother was dead. Wollstonecraft died from childbirth complications. Raw with grief, Godwin began to write a tribute to his dead wife: *Memoirs of the Author of a Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1798).¹⁰ He described the love they had shared as "the purest and most refined style of love." It was a partnership, he explained. "Their love grew with equal advances in the mind of each. It would have been impossible for the most minute observer to have said who was before, and who was after... . It was friendship melting into love."¹¹

Godwin praised Wollstonecraft's literary accomplishments. He also revealed personal details: that she had a child out of wedlock, that she attempted suicide after Imlay deserted her. In the Preface, Godwin tried to explain why he revealed so much: "The more fully we are presented with the picture and the story of such persons as the subject of the following narrative, the more generally shall we feel in ourselves an attachment to their fate and a sympathy in their excellencies." Readers, however, did not focus on Wollstonecraft's excellencies.

Progressives, who revered Wollstonecraft for her championship of women, slammed the memoir as a betrayal of their idol.¹² The Conservative *Anti-Jacobin Review* was outraged: "This account of his wife's adventures as a kept mistress ... informs the public that she was concubine to himself before she was his wife."¹³ Godwin had hoped his book would be a lasting tribute to his beloved wife. Instead, it damaged her reputation and his. It also irreparably harmed Wollstonecraft's biological daughters, Fanny Imlay Godwin and Mary Godwin.

Godwin and Mary Jane Clairmont

One May evening in 1801 the forty-five-year-old widower was sitting on his balcony when a plump, smiling woman waved from a window in the building next door and called out, "Is it possible that I behold the immortal Godwin?"¹⁴ She knew perfectly well who he was. Her flattering approach had the desired effect. Godwin became acquainted with the feminine and flirtatious Mary Jane Clairmont. Three weeks later the couple brought the children together. Fanny, age seven, and Mary, age three, met Charles, age five, and Clara Mary Jane (Jane for short), age three.

Godwin's neighbor had introduced herself as the widow Mrs. Clairmont, but, as Janet Todd explains,

she was in fact Miss Mary Jane Vial and her two children were illegitimate, with different fathers. More circumspect than her predecessor [Mary Wollstonecraft], she had not allowed the circumstance to be generally known—and possibly Godwin was unaware of the unconventional parentage

of the children—but it did mean that, when she too became pregnant, and wanted marriage, she had to marry twice, once for public consumption as the widow Clairmont and an hour later for legal purposes as what she was: the spinster Mary Jane Vial.¹⁵

Mary Jane miscarried. Godwin was fond of his wife, although many of his friends were not, and rejoiced when a son was born, William Jr., in 1803. Hoping to pay their mounting bills, the couple created a publishing company called the Juvenile Library, which developed and sold children's books.¹⁶ The family—and the book business—moved to 41 Skinner Street, a tall corner house with five stories and large bay windows perfect for displaying books on the ground level.¹⁷ In addition to managing the bustling household, Mary Jane wrote publications for sale, met with customers, and reached out to prospective buyers. With her excellent French, she was able to form useful ties with the French émigré community. Godwin's literate and hard-working wife lost her temper easily. She also favored her biological children. Mary Godwin detested her stepmother, the usurper of her father's affections.

The looks and the temperament of the three girls differed greatly. Fanny, the oldest, tried to obey her mercurial stepmother and to be a peacemaker. She was plain in appearance, modest, and the least assertive about her own needs. Mary, a pale-skinned and fair-haired beauty, was serious and studious. Jane had flashing dark eyes, dark hair, and a flamboyant personality.

Mrs. Boinville on Skinner Street

Cornelia, fourteen in 1809, often accompanied her mother to Skinner Street. She was about the same age as Fanny and about two years older than Mary and Jane. With Mrs. Godwin snapping orders to her daughters, do this and do that, and Mary glaring at her stepmother with undisguised disdain, the presence of Mrs. Boinville, a calm and self-controlled adult, must have been welcome. In her well-researched and readable biography of Mary Godwin, Miranda Seymour speculates about how the three girls viewed Mrs. Boinville:

Perhaps Mary, Jane, and Fanny rather envied Cornelia a glamorous mother, who looked remarkably young, spoke French and Italian as easily as English and flaunted her views by tying a broad red sash around her slender waist. It must have been hard not to draw unfavorable comparisons with dumpy Mrs. Godwin in her green tinted spectacles and drab black velvet gown.¹⁸

A beauty by all accounts, Harriet in her late thirties still wore the red sash she had donned in 1789 at the beginning of the French Revolution. She wore it proudly, a way to demonstrate her republican ideals and her solidarity with her French husband as the war with France dragged on.

No portrait of Harriet at this age exists. Did she rouge her cheeks, a custom Mary Wollstonecraft had despised? Did she wear, like Madam d'Arblay, high hats? Harriet's contemporary Jane Austen commented on petticoats and headgear: "I am amused by the present style of female dress—the coloured petticoats and ... enormous bonnets upon the full stretch, are quite entertaining." Harriet may have squeezed into tight corsets or preferred roomy gowns made popular by Rousseau's advocacy of loose clothing, but one thing is certain: ladies' fashions were not foremost in her inquiring mind. Many who knew her commented on her lack of vanity and gracious manners.

With Godwin and his interesting and intellectual guests, each one mentioned in his diary, Harriet had lots to talk about. Wars were fought across the globe: the Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815), the Anglo-Russian War (1807-1812), the Anglo-Swedish War (1810-1812), and the Peninsular War (1808-1814). In 1810, riots broke out in London. A member of Parliament who called for reform, Sir Francis Burdett, was charged with libel and imprisoned. King George III demonstrated symptoms of mania and was declared mad. His son assumed royal functions. "The Prince Regent upheld his father's Toryism, which favored continued war with France, while opposing Catholic emancipation and parliamentary reform. He was also a gambler, womanizer, begetter of bastards, and fat," writes Eric G. Wilson in a biography of Charles Lamb. The Triumph of the Whale, Lamb's political poem, did not land him in jail, the fate of Leigh Hunt for his libelous remarks about George IV.¹⁹

In the 1790s Godwin had attended the trial of Thomas Holcroft, imprisoned for his support of the French Revolution. Harriet met Holcroft's widow in 1810. Louisa Mercier Holcroft was French, and Harriet's fluency in French may have been why she was invited to that dinner. That same year she dined at Skinner Street with Henry Crabb Robinson, a notable barrister, journalist, traveler, literary socialite, and diarist.²⁰ He became one of the founders of London University.

Charles Lamb and his older sister Mary were among the learned and talented writers Harriet met at Godwin's table. Their *Tales from Shakespeare*, sold by the Godwins in their Juvenile Library, remain popular today. In August 1810 Mary Lamb had one of her recurring breakdowns and returned to the Hoxton House asylum. Her first manic episode had occurred a decade earlier, a day of horrors, when Mary killed their mother with a kitchen knife. Because of her brother's vigilant care, Mary was sometimes able to live at home with him. Harriet had a brother who demonstrated dangerous and erratic behavior—the unfortunate son mentioned in John Collins's will. On March 21, 1811, Harriet dined with the poet, lecturer, and sparkling conversationalist Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

Because of the terseness of Godwin's diary—names of people and places—the conversations on Skinner Street and Harriet's contributions to them are silent, but the seventy-two mentions of her name speak loudly of their friendship. Harriet looked up to Godwin, nineteen years older than she. Influenced by Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the French Enlightenment, Godwin was a rationalist and humanist. In his memoir, Harriet's grandson Charles, a minister, criticizes the false philosophy of the Enlightenment, but praises his grandmother for how she lived: "I have often heard her call herself *une enfant de la Révolution*. With this claim she had also unfortunately accepted the principles of the false philosophers of the age, but her general conduct, unbounded generosity, devotedness of character, and unfeigned modesty of nature, might well have put many professing Christians to the blush."²¹

Chapter 9

Harriet's Husband Rescues Madam d'Arblay, 1810–1812

In the year 1810, when I had been separated from my dear Father, & dear Country, & Native friends, for 8 years, my desire to again see them became so anxiously impatient, that my tenderest companion proposed my passing over to England alone, to spend a month, or two at Chelsea. [Many] Females at that period, & amongst them the young Duchesse de Duras, had contrived to procure passports for a short similar excursion; though no Male was permitted, under any pretence, to quit France, save with the Army.

—Frances Burney d'Arblay's recollection of events of 1810¹

While Harriet was in London, going back and forth to William Godwin's home and meeting writers and radicals, her friend Frances Burney d'Arblay was in Paris. She had left England after the announcement of the Peace of Amiens, but when war with France resumed fourteen months later, she became stranded in her husband's native country. Her happiness with him and their son Alex did not assuage her longing to see her father, Dr. Charles Burney, and siblings again. With each passing year, she missed her family more. Her husband, her "tenderest companion," encouraged her to attempt a Channel crossing for a visit in 1810.

"There are few events of my life that I more regret not having committed to paper while they were fresher in my Memory, than my Police-Adventure at Dunkirk," Frances Burney d'Arblay wrote many years later. That she did not put pen to paper at the time is understandable, considering the dangers and uncertainties. Her record of her life (whether writing about recent events or events

from her distant past) little resembled William Godwin's diary—a terse, emotion-stripped list of names of people and places. Her words skip along, page after page, as she describes in colorful detail conversations, characters, settings, and feelings. She possessed an exceptional memory, and “there was some element of hindsight at work in almost all her autobiographical writing,” notes Burney biographer Claire Harman.²

By 1810 Napoleon had gained control of much of western Europe, including Spain, northern Italy, and large parts of Germany. Paris had become, in effect, the capital of Europe, as well as the capital of Napoleon's empire. When not planning and executing military campaigns, Napoleon directed his tremendous energy to the improvement of Paris. His domestic ambitions produced new roads, bridges, and monuments, including the Arc de Triomphe.

Napoleon's focus on Paris resulted in strict security measures. In her remembrance of 1810, Madam d'Arblay described herself as “a person known to have lived a life the most inoffensive to government & perfectly free from all species of political intrigue.” She explained that when Napoleon was away from Paris, police enforcement of travel restrictions eased, and she managed to obtain a passport. She could not recall the destination on the passport, but “certainly not for England,” enemy territory.

In his letter of September 24, 1793, to his compatriot Alexandre d'Arblay, Jean Baptiste concluded: “Adieu mon cher bon et ancien ami. Comptes bien à jamais sur moi,” which is to say, “Goodbye my dear old friend. You can always count on me.”³ In 1810 he was as good as his word. Alexandre and Fanny both had reason to rely on him, their trustworthy neighbor in Paris. Once he had rescued Harriet at Dunkirk, when she was detained as a British spy. In 1810 Jean Baptiste came to the rescue of Madam d'Arblay. With characteristic flair, she tells the story of what happened:

... I prepared, quietly & secretly for my expedition, while my generous Mate employed all his little leisure in discovering where & how I might embark: when, one morning, while I was bending over my trunk to press in its contents, I was abruptly broken in upon by M. de Boinville, who was in my secret, & who called upon me to stop! He had re-

ceived certain, he said, though as yet unpublished information, that a universal Embargo was laid upon every Vessel, & that not a Fishing Boat was permitted to quit the Coast.

Confounded, affrighted, Disappointed—and yet, relieved—I submitted to the blow, & obeyed the injunction. M. de Boynville then revealed to me the new political changes that occasioned this measure, which he had learned from some confiding friends in office; but which I do not touch upon, as they are now in every history of those times.⁴

Having accepted a position with the wartime government, Jean Baptiste knew what was afoot. At this time, his wife and children were back in London. Jean Baptiste's business in Paris is explained in the 1880 memoir by Harriet's grandson Charles. "During his wife's absence, he determined to accept a good position in a Commissariat department of the army, and was named Directeur des Vivres, a high and lucrative position."⁵ Jean Baptiste was one of the officers responsible for provisioning Napoleon's army, which may have been how he learned about the embargo on ships leaving the coast. His timely warning—"Stop!"—saved Fanny from undertaking a fruitless trip from Paris to Dunkirk, and what could have been a prolonged and unpleasant confrontation with the constabulary on the coast.

By 1811, the French people had grown restive from the long war. Short of men and money, Napoleon was forced to cancel arrears of pay owed soldiers killed in action. Veterans' families protested, and that summer terrible storms wrecked crops, creating flour shortages. "Bread, Work, or Death" appeared on posters throughout the country. Censorship tightened.⁶ While France experienced these national shocks and struggles, Madam d'Arblay experienced a personal crisis. On September 30, 1811, she faced a danger far greater than hostile policemen. At the age of fifty-nine she underwent major surgery without anesthetic in her home in Paris. She had advanced breast cancer.

“My Heart Beat Fast; I Saw All Hope Was Over”

Six months later she wrote to her sister Esther about her mastectomy, a day of horror. In an essay on Frances Burney d’Arblay’s journals and letters, John Wiltshire notes the letter’s importance as an early example of pathography, “the story of an illness or medical intervention from the patient’s viewpoint.” Esther’s letter, sent to England, “was copied for safekeeping in France, a communication simultaneously recognised as a piece of history.”⁷

Dr. Baron Larrey, Napoleon’s personal physician, performed the operation. His renowned surgical skills had been honed during battlefield amputations. On the dreaded day, the patient spared her husband, “her too sympathizing partner,” from witnessing her ordeal. She had hoped to have female friends by her side, among them “Mademoiselle de Chastel belle soeur de Madame de Boinville.” Fanny was friends with Harriet’s sister-in-law and had wanted her to be there.⁸

The patient waited on the elevated table. “I assumed the best spirits in my power, *to meet the coming blow.*” When it was time, “my heart beat fast; I saw all hope was over.” Seven men, draped in black, solemnly approached: Dr. Larrey and six assistants. Seven hours later, the operation ended. The patient survived.



Figure 9.1. Portrait of Frances Burney. Mezzotint by Charles Turner after Edward Francisco Burney, published 16 May 1840 by Paul and Dominic Colnaghi & Co. Source: <https://victorianweb.org/previctorian/burney/gallery/1.html>

Frances Burney d'Arblay's father was eighty-five and ailing. Esther learned from the letter how anxious her sister was to see her father again. And she was worried her family had heard about her ordeal:

Separated as I have now so long—long been from my dearest Father—BROTHERS—SISTERS—NIECES, & NATIVE FRIENDS, I would spare, at least their kind hearts any grief for me but what they must inevitably feel in reflecting upon the sorrow of such an absence to one so tenderly attached to all her first and for-ever so dear & regretted ties—nevertheless, if they should hear that I have been dangerously ill from any hand but my own, they might have doubts of my perfect recovery which my own can obviate. And how can I hope they will escape hearing what has reached Seville to the South, and Constantinople to the East? From both I have had messages—yet nothing could urge me to this communication till I heard that M. de Boinville had written it to his Wife, without any precaution, because in ignorance of my plan of silence.⁹

Jean Baptiste had been told about the surgery. “Without any precaution,” he wrote his wife about their friend. He knew she would be concerned. There is no evidence that Harriet ever said anything to members of the Burney family or to anyone else.

Frances Burney's novels had made her famous—and skittish, as the reference to “Seville to the South and Constantinople to the East” shows. She was an intensely private person and understandably upset. To the fragile patient, it felt like the whole world now knew about her personal business.

“My Second Attempt in the Year 1812”

Madam d'Arblay recorded her memories of 1812 many years later—in 1825. She had promised her husband she would write down all that she remembered of her past for the benefit of their son—and for posterity in general. Once she was “sufficiently recovered for travelling after a dreadful Breast operation,” she prepared for her

second attempt to leave France. There was no time to lose. "Buonaparte was now engaging in a new War, of which the aim & intention was no less than the Conquest of the World: this menaced a severity of Conscription." Alex was seventeen. His parents, fearing he would be called to arms against England, decided he must accompany his mother back to England.¹⁰

Again it was difficult to obtain passports. Monsieur de Saulnier was the head of the police in charge of issuing them. Upon learning that he admired her first novel, *Evelina, or The History of a Young Lady's Entrance into the World*, she decided to improve her chances. "I could do nothing more acceptable to M. de Saulnier than to present him with a Copy of *Evelina*, in English, for his little Daughter, who was then studying that language." By the time she applied for passports, "Buonaparte had left Paris to proceed toward the scene of his next destined Enterprise; & he was, I believe, already at Dresden when my application was made." Success required subterfuge. "For what place, Nominally, my Passport was assigned. I do not recollect; I think, for Newfoundland; but certainly for some Coast of America. Yet every body at the Police office saw and knew that England was my object."

Napoleon and the Grande Armée were headed toward Russia when mother and son prepared to depart. "General d'Arblay, through his assiduous researches, aided by those of M. de Boinville & some others, found that a vessel was preparing to sail from Dunkirk to Dover, under American Colours." Dunkirk, the famous port on the northern coast of France, was only twenty-one miles across the Channel from England, and the captain planned to make a surreptitious stop on the English coast before continuing on to New York.

After a delay of six weeks, the *Mary Ann* set sail. Soon it was boarded by *English* officers. They took possession of the vessel, "not as French, but American booty, War having been declared against America the preceding Week." What Americans called the War of 1812 was now under way.

Greatly relieved, Madam d'Arblay and Alex sailed home under English command. She thus described her first blissful moment on shore: "I took up, on one knee, with irrepressible transport, the nearest bright pebble, to press to my lips, in grateful joy at touching

again the land of my Nativity, after an absence nearly hopeless of more than 10 Years."¹¹

Jean Baptiste had helped facilitate the long-awaited reunion, but his military responsibilities precluded a reunion with his own family in England. In 1812 Jean Baptiste was unable to return to London to attend his daughter Cornelia's wedding, festivities that included the Godwins' daughters Mary and Jane as well as their American friend Aaron Burr.