



# MIDNIGHT FIRES

A MYSTERY WITH  
MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT

Nancy Means Wright

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# *Midnight Fires*



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CHAPTER I.

*A Most Humiliating Occupation*



THE CROSSING from Holyhead to Dublin had been relatively calm, but just as the Irish coast came into view, a contrary wind blew up. Wrapped in her black greatcoat, Mary Wollstonecraft clutched the railing and watched the sky go purple, the clouds turn grey. Her stomach churned, her breath quickened. Wind tossed the packet boat to and fro like a child's toy in a pond. "I am that toy," Mary shouted into the wind. "I am a vessel of fate!"

The words blew back to her like an echo from the wailing sea.

Mary was on her way to Ireland to be a governess—a most humiliating occupation. She was still reeling from a catastrophic love affair. She was deeply in debt to a pack of hungry creditors. Her mother was dead. Her younger sisters had failed at the teaching posts she procured for them; they were hammering at her gates for help. To appease them, she was about to be delivered into the hands of one of the most notorious families in Ireland, and all for the paltry annuity of forty pounds.

She thought of the pound of flesh exacted by Shakespeare's Shylock; she worried that the Anglo-Irish Lord and Lady Kingsborough would extort that pound from her. Oh, she did hope her employers would be kind.

"Ahh!" The final blow: her beautiful new blue hat, the gift of a dear friend—whipped off her head by wind. She lunged for it. She teetered on a boot heel; pitched forward....

A callused hand yanked her back on her feet. She glanced about, hoping to see the young clergyman who had engaged her in dialogue when she first boarded the vessel. But it was not Henry Gabell. It was a blue-jacketed, claret-haired sailor who handed over the drenched hat. "Powerful wind, eh, miss?"

Her feet more stable on the deck now, she thanked him and lifted her chin to show that Mary Wollstonecraft was not to be undone by a vagary of nature. In his solemn eyes she saw an appreciation for her person. “You’re a brave one, you are, to be out here on the deck,” he said in the thick brogue of the Irish peasant, “but ’twill blow over soon. I’ve seen the like. We’ll be in port and headed for home, by the grace of God.”

He spoke the word *home* longingly, as though he had been away a long time, and she asked if he had. Her spirits rose to be conversing with such a sturdy, well-formed lad. Men of her own class, she had lately discovered, were not only untrustworthy—but downright boring.

“In the American Colonies,” he said, “and then back over the seas again, and of late in England.”

Mary was intrigued: the English newspapers had earlier announced the ascendancy of the rebel colonists. *Boors*, the London journalists called them, but if there was one trait she valued in man or woman, it was a spirit of independence. She offered the sailor her opinion.

“And whose side did you favour?” she demanded. His thick hair was pulled back in the long pigtail of the common sailor—was the American Revolution fought, as well, by sea? She was not able to keep up with *all* the news. Or afford the papers that broadcast it.

It was the rebels who had his sympathy, he confided—in a half whisper as though an English officer might overhear and string him up from the yardarm for treasonous remarks. “An Irishman fight for the English? By Christ, I’d die first!” His voice grew husky, passionate, although he continued to glance about for eavesdroppers. He was only a year in the Colonies, he allowed; he had won a few pounds in boxing matches, and purchased a bit of land in a place called Massachusetts.

“Where they had the Tea Party!” she cried. She recalled talk of a Boston “tea party” that had eventually exploded into cannon shots. And then blood. She frowned to think of the blood. Her youngest brother, Charles, was talking of America. And having no other occupation, would probably go there and join the rebels—if, indeed, the bloodshed was over. Charles was no fighter; he wasn’t much of anything, to tell the truth.

The sailor looked amused, then serious again. Someone was

waiting for him in Ireland, he said; he would take her back to America with him. He was blushing as he spoke.

Mary liked a man who was able to blush. She liked a romantic tale, although she struggled against the sentiment in herself, and in her sisters, who had a predilection for mawkish novels.

But he was still talking.

“In good time, that is,” he said with an upthrust of his squarish chin. First he had things to do in his native country—he was a loyal patriot. He had been shipping between Ireland and England for ten months now, working toward his goal. He did not say what goal, but Mary suspected; she was aware of the Irish troubles. North Cork, for instance, where she was headed, had a long history of violence between rulers and ruled.

She smiled to show her support for his cause (and he *was* charming).

Mary had Irish blood herself on her mother’s side—though this fellow was probably Catholic; her late mother was from County Donegal, a long way north of the Mitchelstown castle where her daughter was about to be incarcerated. Was it a prison she was headed for? She had heard tales of the confinement for a governess: the control, the isolation. And what would happen when they discovered her poor French, her lack of skill with the needle? Her halting fingers on the keys of the pianoforte? The application had called for a woman proficient in all those skills, and desperate for the position, she had applied. And then had to beg her older brother, Ned, for guineas enough to buy cloth for a greatcoat. It was damp, they said, in Ireland, damper even than mouldy England. She shivered to think of it.

“Now where,” the sailor asked, “would a young lady such as yourself be going in Ireland? To Dublin, I suppose? There’s a fine theatre there, they say, though I never been. Nor can I,” he added, holding out empty palms to show his lack of birth and funds. There was the flash of a dimple in his rugged cheek, a hint of scorn in the blue, blue eye.

Did she hear the slightest mockery when he said *lady*? He was looking at her shabby boots. Never mind. She vented her concern about being a governess—an inferior sort of position, she added, neither fish nor fowl, neither lady nor servant. It was a species of nursemaid to three ungrateful and raucous (no doubt) young girls.

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