

*A Dissection  
of Murder*

FELICITY YOUNG

 HarperCollins*Publishers*

## PROLOGUE

They gathered outside Caxton Hall under a still November sky, the smoke of a thousand chimneys spiralling above their heads. Violet had never seen such a diverse crowd before: well-to-do ladies, factory workers, seamstresses and shop girls. Regardless of social rank they linked arms and swayed as they sang and waited for the Pankhursts to come to the podium.

Violet squeezed her friend's arm. 'Look at them all, Marjorie — look at the crowd. I'm so excited I think I might burst!'

'Drink it in, girls,' a woman standing next to them in a wide-brimmed hat said. 'If the bill is passed, today you will be a part of the making of history.'

Violet turned to smile at the woman and noticed her expensive kid gloves and the heavy spray of purple plumes spilling from her hat. But more impressive than these was the silver medal of a hunger strike survivor glinting on the velvet lapel of her walking coat. This woman had not only been prepared to go to prison for the cause, but she had been ready to die for it, too. Violet nudged her friend and for a moment they forgot their manners and gawped.

Violet was roused by a woman pushing her way through the crowd with a basket of rosettes in the suffragette colours. The girls bought one each and pinned them to their travelling

coats. Violet was eager for the woman in the wide-brimmed hat to see this gesture of solidarity, but when she glanced towards her, the woman had gone, her place taken by a woman dressed like a seamstress in a tattered straw bonnet and paisley shawl.

‘My three favourite colours,’ Marjorie said, gently rolling the pleated fabric of the rosette between finger and thumb. ‘White for purity, purple for dignity and green for hope.’

‘Better not let your mother catch us with these,’ Violet said.

‘We can hide them under the floorboards in my bedroom.’

‘And take them out when we’re feeling low to remind us of this historic day.’

‘And relive past glories — “Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more.”’

They burst into simultaneous giggles.

‘But afterwards we must be sure to inspect the new Selfridges department store in Oxford Street,’ Violet said. ‘We can buy your mother something to prove we were there and not attending the march.’

‘She’s partial to treacle toffee.’

‘Ush, girls,’ the seamstress said. ‘Ere come the Pank’ursts now.’

It was as if everyone in the crowd heard and paid heed to her words. The murmuring had all but ceased, bodies pressed and people strained with anticipation to hear what the great women had to say.

Mrs Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughter Christabel climbed the podium stairs and Mrs Pankhurst raised her hands for silence. It seemed an unnecessarily theatrical gesture in Violet’s opinion, but it sent a tingle thrilling down her spine nevertheless. If the oak tree outside the hall had chosen that moment to shed its last dead leaf, she was certain that everyone in the crowd would have heard it fall.

‘Ladies, I wish I could report better news.’ Mrs Pankhurst’s voice carried loud and clear through the still air. ‘This morning the prime minister, Mr Asquith, opened his first parliamentary session by informing the Commons that negotiations with the House of Lords have broken down and parliament is to be dissolved by the king on the twenty-eighth of November. From now until that date, priority will be given to government business only.’ She raised her voice and struck the air with her fist. ‘Our Conciliation Bill was not so much as mentioned!’

Violet and Marjorie joined their voices to the crowd’s cries of indignation, booing and stamping their feet. Violet knew that the Conciliation Bill was a compromise as it would only give voting rights to female property owners, but it had been a start. Now it seemed that the government wasn’t even listening. This time Mrs Pankhurst’s raised arms really were necessary to restore order.

She warned that there were to be no acts of violence from anyone involved in the march. As she said this, she glanced sideways to her daughter, Miss Christabel, who’d remained uncharacteristically silent. How Violet longed to hear her heroine speak! Christabel was one of the extreme militant members of the WSPU — the Women’s Suffrage and Political Union — and Violet was sure this modern-day Joan of Arc would give a stirring speech. Perhaps Mrs Pankhurst had instructed Christabel to remain silent. Violet wondered if she ever had trouble keeping her rebellious daughter in check — Marjorie’s mother certainly had trouble with her daughter. Mrs Ashleigh blamed Marjorie’s outspoken behaviour on the ‘radical’ female teachers at their boarding school, and was constantly threatening to withdraw her. If her friend were to leave school, Violet knew she would surely die from loneliness.

Mrs Pankhurst read from the memorial she had planned on presenting to Mr Asquith, calling on the government to withdraw the veto it had put on the Conciliation Bill.

Upon the signal to rally, the crowd roared and set forth towards the House of Commons; the white, purple and green banners fluttering proudly like the colours of a medieval army. The seamstress linked arms with Violet, who kept a tight grip on Marjorie with her other hand. Linked like this, they marched in lines of twelve to sixteen women, interspersed with the occasional gentleman supporter. The Pankhursts and other luminaries from the podium led the way, among them the country's first registered female doctor, Elizabeth Garrett.

Violet squeezed Marjorie's arm as they marched under the shedding autumn trees and past the imposing red-brick buildings of Victoria Street. Motorcars jostled for right of way with carriages on the wide thoroughfares, and petroleum fumes overpowered the sweeter odour of horse manure. A three-wheeled motorcar slowed to take in the sight of the procession, and its occupants, male and female, leaned out of the car and cheered them on. Violet waved back. She felt as if she was part of a victorious army marching into a newly taken city to liberate the people from slavery and oppression. It was less than a mile to the Houses of Parliament, but she wished it were longer; she wanted this glorious moment to last forever.

As the Houses of Parliament neared, however, the atmosphere began to change. There were fewer motorcars on the street and more pedestrians; roughly dressed people who shouted and heckled. Near St Stephen's entrance, the marchers were jeered and pelted with rotten fruit by groups of men and women carrying placards saying 'A woman's place is in the home', and 'Go back to your families'. The marchers waved back their own banners and chanted: 'No more shuffling, carry the bill! There is time if they've the will!'

'Can't you see we're doing this for the good of all of us?' Marjorie cried to a woman who stood amongst the hostile mob, shaking her fist.

‘Go home and make your husband’s tea,’ the woman shouted back, her face red with anger.

‘Perverted lesbians, the lot of you!’ a man yelled.

Marjorie and Violet exchanged looks; the expression on the man’s face suggested he meant something lascivious by the remark. Violet made a mental note to look up the word when they returned to Marjorie’s house.

At the steps of the House of Commons lines of police were waiting for them, big men with hard faces, not at all the type of policemen Violet would approach if she were lost. She had not thought of there being policemen present, and felt cold with the thought; the stamping hooves of the mounted officers making her especially nervous.

The other marchers seemed uneasy too. The banner bearers, massed at the head of the march, presented an irresistible target and the police made a sudden charge at them. There was an immediate scattering as banners were snatched and hurled to the ground or shredded like sails in a storm. The seamstress kept her arm linked with Violet as they all surged forward towards the Commons steps. There were people everywhere and Violet noticed crowds of rowdy men wearing scruffy clothes joining the police lines, many of them armed with clubs and bricks. She looked around her for a means of escape, but there was none. The crowd was hemmed in on all directions.

As the men and the police shoved into the line of marchers, women began to scream. A bobby lunged at Marjorie and forced his hand up her skirt, tearing at her drawers. Another went for Violet’s breasts. As he twisted her flesh she felt his gin-drenched breath upon her face and caught a tirade of foul words. ‘You’ve been wanting this for a long time, haven’t you, love?’ and then she heard that word lesbian again.

She knocked the helmet off his head and broke free, turning in panicked circles as she tried to find Marjorie in

the mêlée. Amongst the chaos she glimpsed the woman in the wide-brimmed hat — now hatless — flaying out at a bobby who was beating her about the head with a truncheon. Violet felt sick; policemen shouldn't behave like this. She tried to enlist the help of a young gentleman marcher, but he shook her off and ran away with panic in his eyes. Then she spotted Marjorie, sprawled on the cobbled street in danger of being trampled by a policeman's horse. For a moment she panicked, not knowing which way to turn, but found herself running towards her friend first. As she was about to haul Marjorie to her feet however, she was grabbed roughly by her hair from behind and flung to the ground. Then someone kicked her in the ribs. She had never felt such physical pain before, and desperately hoped she would not faint. 'Asked for this you did, disgracing yerself in public, you orta be ashamed of yerself,' a coarse voice shouted, as if she were the most hateful thing he had ever laid eyes upon.

Violet turned on her side, drew up her legs and pressed her cheek into the greasy cobblestones. As she gritted her teeth and waited for the next blow, she glimpsed the broad-brimmed hat with its spray of purple plumes being crushed into the cobbles by a pair of hobnailed boots.

## CHAPTER ONE

Dody McClelland was the last passenger to alight from the Edinburgh train. After hauling her luggage from the railway carriage she remounted the step and scanned the milling crowds. She did not spot him immediately. And then, in a gap through the hissing steam, there he was; one of the few figures not engaged in the mad scurry that Euston Station seemed to demand. He stared right through her, then turned towards the exit.

‘Rupert!’ she cried, waving wildly, ‘Don’t go, I’m here!’

The tall figure stopped, swivelled, and the Honourable Rupert Sotherby took off his cloth working-man’s cap as if he might see better without it. Dody smiled to herself; had he not changed at all in the last year? With the looks of Adonis (a widely held opinion) and the bearing of an Officer of the Guard, he would have looked less incongruous in the station if he had dressed in white tie and tails.

Then he was rushing across the platform towards her, wrapping his arms around her and lifting her from the ground. ‘My dear,’ he said, beaming, ‘I thought you must have changed your mind and decided to stay on in Edinburgh.’

‘I’m sorry,’ she gasped through his bear hug. ‘It took me a while to gather my things together.’ When he finally put her down, she pointed with her rolled umbrella to the trunk,

portmanteau, Gladstone bag and assorted hatboxes strewn upon the platform floor. ‘You see?’

‘You should have called a porter,’ he said.

‘I lugged it on myself, I was quite capable of lugging it off myself.’

‘Well, I hope you don’t expect me to do the same, it looks far too heavy.’ He winked at her, replaced his cap and looked around vainly for an unoccupied porter. ‘So, you home for good this time?’

‘For the time being. How are Mother and Poppa? Have you seen them recently?’ She already knew the answer. He adored her literary-critic mother and had been practically living at her parents’ home, in Sussex, near Tunbridge Wells.

‘They are both in fine fettle. Your mother is all for purchasing a new Daimler and your father is against having anything to do with motorcars, all resulting in a series of somewhat lively conversations around the dining table.’

‘I would expect nothing less.’

‘But I’m afraid they are united in their worry about Florence.’

Dody laughed. Her parents were hardly conventional members of their class, some even saw them as radicals. So the fact that the rebellious Florence was giving them cause for concern was an irony Dody could not help but find amusing — her sister was only following in the family tradition. ‘Why, what has the young madam been up to this time?’ she asked with a smile.

But Rupert’s expression was serious. He nodded towards the paperboy standing next to a *Times* billboard. ‘You haven’t heard?’

‘Rupert, I’ve been on the night train from Edinburgh; I haven’t even seen a newspaper — what are you talking about?’ As she spoke she got out her purse and moved towards the boy, handing him threepence for a paper.

‘Page ten, I think,’ Rupert said, taking the paper from her. He riffled through the pages. ‘Here it is: “Disorderly Scenes and Arrests at Westminster ...”’

‘Oh, no — is Florence all right? Has she been arrested? No? Thank heavens. Rupert, you must take me to her at once! She is all right?’ Hastily folding the paper, Dody slid it into the pocket of her portmanteau. She would read it later in the comfort of her own home.

‘Don’t worry, she’s fine, although quite a few aren’t, so I’ve heard. But as for going home I’d better warn you that since you left, your home has become less of a townhouse and more of a military headquarters.’

Dody sighed. ‘I hope she hasn’t let any of her rabble into my rooms. When I was last home, my microscope slides were covered in sticky fingerprints.’

But Rupert wasn’t listening. He had caught the eye of a porter who’d just returned to the platform with an empty trolley. He beckoned the man over with an impatient wave. ‘Come on, Dodes, let’s get your things stowed away.’

They followed the porter, merging with the crowds under the coffered ceiling of the Great Hall. Outside the shelter of the station the wind was bitter, the warning pricks of an imminent cloudburst cold upon Dody’s cheeks, and she pulled her cape tightly around her shoulders.

Hansom cabs rattled up and down Drummond Street, jostling for space, and there were still more motor taxis than she’d seen during her whole year in Edinburgh. As Rupert seemed in no hurry to hail a driver, she raised her own hand, eager for the comparative warmth of a cab. She was tired. She never slept well in strange beds and the bunk on the train had been narrow and hard. All she wanted to do was get home, kick off her travelling boots and settle in front of her hearth in her own private rooms. Much had happened in the year

she had been away; decisions had to be made and she needed time to think. Alone.

Unfortunately it appeared that Rupert, one of her chief decisions, had other ideas. To her consternation he waved away the slowing hansom and took her hand. 'Dody, we need to go somewhere and have a long talk. Speaking across the country over the telephone just isn't the same.'

Dody squeezed his arm. 'Rupert, I ...'

'I have exciting news. Your mother thinks my new play has great potential — she wants to show it to Mr George Bernard Shaw. This could make my name, Dody, set me up as a writer. It will need funding of course, and your father seems a bit reluctant. But with you and your mother's encouragement, I think we might be able to turn him around. I told your parents we would be seeing them next weekend.'

'That's wonderful, Rupert; I'm very excited for you,' she said as she scanned the street for another cab. 'I intend on seeing my parents soon, of course, but I don't know if it will be next weekend. You will have to give me a few days to settle back home first.'

'Well, there's something else, too, and it doesn't involve travelling down to Sussex. Dody ...' Rupert loosened his coarse wool scarf and cleared his throat. 'I was hoping we might take tea together this afternoon. Now that I am getting established, there are other matters to discuss that are of equal importance. There's a new teahouse opened down the road from you, the Copper Kettle, they make a splendid teacake. I could pick you up at about three — does that give you enough time to rest and unpack?'

Dody tore her gaze from the street, back to his pleading puppy eyes. How could she refuse? She swallowed down a sudden feeling of trepidation. 'Certainly, if that is what you wish.'

He looked delighted, and very much as if he might attempt

to kiss her. Oh Lord, please don't try, she willed silently as she drew back. A year ago she'd have been eager for his attentions, and the strength of her feeling now surprised her; but this was a good sign, she decided. Now she knew how she felt. Really, her decision was made. It just had to be told.

She looked again for a cab, there was one drawing near.

'Oh, I almost forgot,' he said, patting the pockets of his threadbare overcoat and reaching into one of them. 'This note was delivered to your house this morning and Florence forwarded it to me.'

Her name on the envelope — Doctor Dorothy McClelland — was written in the unmistakable scrawl of Doctor Spilsbury from the Home Office. Her breath caught in her chest and her search for a cab was temporarily forgotten. She removed her gloves and handed them to Rupert, the trembling in her fingers having nothing to do with the cold now. After reading the note she attempted to speak, but it was as if she had been struck mute. How could she explain its content to Rupert?

'I say, Dody, you've become quite flushed. Not bad news I hope?'

He attempted a glance at the note, but she dropped the hand that held it, pulling it into the warmth of her cape.

'No, not bad news, it just came sooner than I expected. I need to go directly. Would you mind seeing that my things are delivered safely home?'

'Of course not, but what is it, where are you going?'

'I won't be long. I'll tell you all about it this afternoon at tea.'

Had Rupert ever shown the slightest bit of interest in her work she would have told him long ago the nature of the postgraduate course she'd just completed. Although if he had known the precise nature of what she had been up to in Edinburgh, he might not have been quite so eager to meet her upon her return.

## CHAPTER TWO

'He's late,' Superintendent Shepherd grunted, returning his watch to the voluminous folds of his mackintosh. Detective Chief Inspector Matthew Pike stepped further back into the portico, partly to shelter from the mud-splattering rain and partly to distance himself from the dank odours exuding from his superior's rubber coat.

Pike indicated the peeling door to the mortuary with a tilt of his head. 'When I last checked the basement, sir, they hadn't finished setting up.'

'Huh, just as well. Still, I won't stand for poor timekeeping. Spilsbury should have impressed that upon him. I have enough to do and so do you.'

'I suppose there was a lot to sort out before he went on leave and Doctor Spilsbury was left exhausted by the Crippen case.'

'But not you, eh, Pike? You ex-military men are made of sterner stuff.'

Pike had learnt long ago to ignore the digs of his superior officer. 'My role in Crippen's conviction was administrative and not as demanding as that of Inspector Dew or Doctor Spilsbury.'

'Yes, obviously,' the superintendent said, fixing his small eyes on Pike's walking cane.

I set myself up for that one, Pike thought.

‘Indeed,’ the superintendent went on, ‘so demanding that the forensic surgeon’s chuffed off to the Lake District for a holiday leaving us with some stranger to hold the fort who probably can’t tell an arse from an elbow.’

‘The new man might not be as eminent as Spilsbury, sir, but he cannot be as incompetent as many of the coroner’s medical appointees.’ A hacking cough from the mortuary anteroom reached them through the closed door, as if someone were trying to dispute this claim. ‘He’s an experienced medical practitioner,’ Pike went on, ‘with a qualification in forensic autopsy.’

Superintendent Shepherd answered with a snort. Pike knew that he had little time for the new forensic sciences and in this he was not alone at New Scotland Yard. Even Pike, who was more open than most to new ideas, found some of Spilsbury’s methods questionable. Pike could still picture the bespectacled Hawley Crippen as he had last seen him, awaiting his execution date, head in hands, on his narrow prison cot, sick with worry for the fate of his lover, Ethel Le Neve. The man was guilty of something, Pike did not dispute that, but he had his reservations about whether it was the deliberate poisoning and subsequent dismembering of his wife, as Spilsbury’s forensics apparently proved.

He tried to push away his doubts. ‘Well, like it or not, we have need of specialist help,’ he said to Shepherd. ‘The cause of two of the deaths is self-evident, the signature of the Home Office pathologist a mere formality, but we do require the autopsy surgeon’s detailed opinion on the third lady.’

‘We’re under a magnifying glass over this — you appreciate that don’t you, Pike?’ Shepherd asked.

‘If you mean we are being accused of unnecessary brutality in the suppression of the women’s riot, yes sir. And of course one of the ladies who died was a prominent member of society. The press will be watching our every move.’

‘We can deal with the press, to some extent at least. You weren’t there, naturally,’ another glance at Pike’s cane, ‘but I heard all about it. It was pandemonium, utter chaos. Insane females scratching and spitting like wildcats, yelling like Red Indians. Our lads did their best, though I have to admit it sounds if there were a few who were overly zealous.’

‘I will be interviewing several officers from the Whitechapel division this afternoon, sir. Am I permitted to deal with them at my discretion?’

Pike caught the look of relief in Shepherd’s eyes. Having risen through the ranks to become deputy head of Scotland Yard’s Detective Division, Shepherd preferred to pass the more distasteful jobs to his underlings so he remained in favour with the men. Pike, on the other hand, had little to lose; he was already unpopular with the men. Not only was he resented for never having walked the beat, many envied the apparent ease with which he exchanged the role of army captain for that of plain-clothes inspector, followed rapidly by promotion to chief inspector.

‘Yes, yes, Pike, deal with them as you will, though I doubt you will find much to concern you. They are good men, just a trifle zealous.’

‘And the roughs,’ Pike went on. ‘It’s more than a coincidence that there were so many armed layabouts around the place. I think they might have been organised troublemakers.’

Shepherd pulled at his moustache. ‘There is an odour of the Fenians about this, Pike, I can smell ’em.’

The fact that Shepherd still called the Irish Nationalists by their old name, the Fenians, showed how steeped in the past he was. In an attempt to distance themselves from their own atrocities, the Fenians had changed their name to Sinn Fein. They were still desperate for the end of British rule in Ireland, but at least for now their violent acts had been tempered.

‘Special Branch are asking questions in known Sinn Fein hang-outs, public houses et cetera, though personally I feel Sinn Fein involvement unlikely. They’ve gone very quiet since the Queen Anne Hotel bombing.’ Pike ignored Shepherd’s quick glance at him. ‘And I do wonder why they would involve themselves in a women’s riot.’

‘To foment unrest, of course, get that damned Home Rule Bill passed. If it can be proved that an Irish Nationalist bludgeoned the lady to death we can all breathe a sigh of relief.’ He kicked a muddy boot at Pike’s foot. ‘And you’d rather like that too, I imagine, eh?’

Pike kept his body rigid against the door, his face blank. Whatever Shepherd might think, he was not seeking vengeance against the Irish. The Queen Anne Hotel bombing ten years earlier, in which his wife had perished, had been a terrible end to a distressing period of his life and was well behind him now. His wife’s lover had died with her. There was no one left alive who knew quite how much of a sham his marriage had been.

Silence hung like a tainted mist between the men. They stirred only when a clapping cab halted in the road adjacent to the mortuary house.

‘Good, he’s here at last.’ Shepherd pulled the hood of his mackintosh over his head and stepped from the portico into the rain. Within seconds he’d rushed back under the shelter. ‘Dash it all — it’s only a woman!’ he said through the water dripping down his face. ‘Where can the bloody fellow be?’

St Thomas’s mortuary was a dilapidated two-level structure, for reasons of hygiene situated as far away from the main hospital buildings as the grounds would allow. There were two entrances, the front portico, to which Dody now headed, and an underground passageway where corpses from the hospital were discreetly wheeled.

They all introduced themselves. Dody spent some time shaking out and folding her umbrella to give the policemen a chance to gather their lost composure. Then they stepped into the quivering gaslight of the anteroom where the wheezing mortuary attendant, Alfred, instructed them to hang their coats and hats upon the pegs provided. Dody hung up her travelling cape and hat, but chose to retain her jacket. It was cool in the anteroom, but it would be colder than an ice house downstairs. She wished she'd had the chance to go home and change. When working she favoured tailored skirts and jackets, butterfly-collared blouses and men's ties. The lace blouse and tweed travelling suit she wore now were hardly appropriate.

The superintendent slid his eyes down her body and let out a low sigh, which did nothing to alleviate her self-consciousness. She resisted the temptation to mimic his sigh back. He was hardly a paradigm of professionalism himself in that dreadful mackintosh. A juggernaut of a man with moustache and side-whiskers, he had a bulbous nose and a florid face that suggested a fondness for strong liquor. When the attendant offered to hang the mackintosh up for him he declined, quipping that when he descended the stairs, he would need all the waterproof protection it offered.

The other man, Pike, seemed his complete opposite; smaller, clean-shaven and finer featured. He leaned heavily on a cane as he walked the few steps to the coat pegs. His physique under a worn but well-cut overcoat appeared straight-backed and trim — he had not yet surrendered to the portliness of middle age — yet the antique-blue eyes with their dark pouches spoke of a weariness beyond years. Standing next to the anteroom wall he seemed almost to blend into it. If not for the cane, his unobtrusive appearance and mild manner would have rendered him the perfect invisible policeman, or 'defective detective,' as her sister Florence was wont to call men of his kind.

The elderly attendant sat behind his desk and slid a

leather-bound register towards them. His request for them to enter their names was interrupted by a fit of painful coughing. Unable to speak for a moment, he rapped himself on the chest and pointed with a crooked finger to the place they were to sign. Upon his recovery, he cocked his head and read aloud the string of initials Dody had written after her name. The policemen, neither of whom had yet said a word to her beyond that first introduction, looked at each other. A small glow of satisfaction melted Dody's earlier feelings of trepidation. She could and would go through with this. She had the training and she would prove to them that she could do the job as well as anyone.

'This can't be a healthy environment for someone with as delicate a chest as yours, sir,' she said to the attendant as she passed the pen on to Pike.

Alfred gave her a toothless smile. 'Goose fat and brown paper, miss, that's what keeps the chill away.'

'Well it doesn't appear to be working very satisfactorily,' she said, and withdrew a glass bottle from her Gladstone bag. 'Here, try this camphoric lotion; you will find it much more effective than goose fat. Rub it on to your chest and the soles of your feet too. It will tide you over until you get the chance to purchase a carbolic ball from the chemist, which will be better still. You can carry the ball around with you and inhale its fumes whenever the need arises.'

The old man took the bottle from her, got to his feet and clasped both of her hands. 'Why thank you, miss, thank you very much. But I'll 'ave to owe you for this medicine, I ...'

'Please don't worry about it.' Dody smiled.

'Then if I can ever be of any extra assistance, you'll find me 'ere six days a week and sometimes into the night, too.'

The superintendent had finished signing his name and was pointing to a bleak stone staircase. 'Time is of the essence; lead on if you please, Alfred. After you, miss.'

‘It’s Doctor McClelland, Superintendent,’ Dody reminded him.

His mumbled response was lost on her.

Dody followed Alfred down the stairs, the two detectives clumping behind.

Halfway down Shepherd stopped. ‘You don’t say much, Pike,’ Dody caught Shepherd’s loud whisper, ‘but I can tell you’re as unhappy about this as I am. Impudent creature, answering me back like that. What in God’s name do you think would induce a woman to get herself involved in the Beastly Science?’

What indeed, Dody thought, other than the lack of any other specialist surgical positions available to her. She remembered all too well the revulsion she’d felt for the dissecting rooms as a raw medical student, and how those feelings had returned during her first few weeks in Edinburgh. But it was amazing what one could get used to, especially when there was no choice. Of course she would rather be working with the living than the dead, but she had soon discovered that her talent for detached observation put her in good stead for such a profession. Irrespective of the gore in which she was sometimes steeped, the wonder of the science and a natural inclination to solve a mystery had soon put paid to the horrors she once had. After a while, even the odours ceased to bother her. *Mortui vivos docent* — the dead teach the living. She wondered what the dead bodies awaiting below would teach her.

At the bottom of the stairs she looked around the small autopsy room. It was a far cry from the facilities in Edinburgh. No amphitheatre here with raised seats on which craning students sat and observed; no benevolent pedagogues and powerful electric lighting, ventilation and decent drainage. Here she would be a one-woman show, performing in a primitive environment for sceptical men who didn’t believe

women should be engaged in the practice of medicine, let alone the Beastly Science. The sudden weight of it hit her as she stepped into the icy cold room.

Exposed pipes clung to the chipped and dingy whitewashed walls. A stained porcelain sink rested against the far wall between shelves of books and specimen jars. Above the sink there hung a portrait of King Edward VII, black mourning crepe still wound about the frame. There was no portrait of the yet to be crowned King George V. It seemed appropriate somehow: a dead king to rule over the kingdom of the dead.

The tap over the sink dripped and gaslights spluttered from their brackets on the walls. In bygone years, Dody reflected, autopsies would have been conducted in police stations or public houses; either would have been preferable to this dank, foul-smelling cave.

A bowler-hatted gentleman in a suit of loud checks stepped forward and introduced himself as Mr Bright from the coroner's office. He gave Dody a little bow, doffing his hat to reveal a skull as bald as an egg. Another mortuary attendant, marginally younger than Alfred, appeared from the cadaver keep and told them everything was ready.

Shepherd fumbled in the folds of his coat and produced a fat cigar. He bit the end off it and spat it onto the sawdust-strewn floor. After lighting up he gulped down the smoke like he was slaking a thirst. Pike took a silver case from his inside pocket, offered a cigarette to Bright and the attendants, took one for himself and snapped the lid closed.

Dody gave him a quizzical look, which he did not appear to notice. From her Gladstone bag she removed the velvet pouch containing her own smoking paraphernalia. Five pairs of eyes converged on her as she expertly packed her clay pipe, swiped the match across the rough wall and coaxed the tobacco to a gentle glow.

‘How many bodies are there, Superintendent?’ she asked between puffs.

Shepherd was staring at her in undisguised disbelief. A most unbecoming habit in a lady, she could imagine him saying to his colleagues later in the station house. But what did he expect her to use to combat the stench — lavender water?

‘Superintendent ...’ she repeated.

‘Three, miss, all from yesterday’s riot at Westminster.’

Good God, the women’s march! Spilsbury’s note had made no mention of that riot. Now she wished she had allowed Rupert to read her the whole article from *The Times*. She bit hard upon the pipe stem. She would be fair and professional, of course she would. But if these policemen were to find out that her sister was a prominent suffragette and had also been present at Westminster, would they have faith in her impartiality? What a way to start a new engagement. But it was too late to back down now; they might think she had no stomach for the job.

With the combined smoke swirling around the room, Dody removed her jacket and replaced it with an apron she found hanging on a peg near the sink. Some nurse’s cuffs also rested near the sink and these she slipped over the sleeves of her lace blouse.

‘The first body, if you please,’ she said.

Shepherd snapped his fingers and Alfred appeared from the cadaver keep pushing a wooden trolley with a sheeted body upon it. A parcel of personal effects rested at the body’s feet. Dody glanced through them while the attendants heaved the body onto the marble slab.

She read aloud from the victim’s file. ‘Seventy-year-old Miss Jemima Jefferson. Witnesses say she was complaining of shortness of breath before the riot, then later they saw her clasp her chest and fall to the ground.’ Dody spent another

minute reading the case notes provided by Miss Jefferson's physician and the police surgeon respectively. She noticed Pike had found himself a spot leaning against the far wall, puffing on his cigarette, apparently listening to a murmured conversation between Mr Bright and the attendants. Superintendent Shepherd seemed unable to stand still and glided about the room in his oversized mackintosh like one of Count Zeppelin's airships.

But when she drew back the sheet covering the body the men stopped what they were doing. They are probably expecting me to faint, Dody thought. I have never fainted before in my life and I will not start now.

There was no need for dissection, the oedematous ankles backed up what she had already read in the notes. Evidence of pink froth on the lips, since dissipated, but reported by the police surgeon soon after the woman's death, also assisted her with her conclusion.

'Death due to heart attack, the result of long-standing congestive cardiac failure,' she dictated to Mr Bright. She stared at the body for a moment longer, wondering what force of passions, now extinguished, had compelled this frail old lady to participate in such a vigorous demonstration.

The cause of death of Mrs Margaret Baxter, age forty-five, was also self-evident, but required some thoracic dissection to discover the precise nature of the injuries beneath the gaping chest wound. From the row of autopsy instruments on a nearby bench, Dody took a heavy anatomist's scalpel and with a few deft strokes performed a Y incision from armpits to groin. What blood there was — the women had been on ice since yesterday and there wasn't much — was directed by Alfred into the runnels of the slab, and from thence to the blood bucket below. Dody peeled back the skin, then set to with the bulky rib-cutters, snipping through the bone to reveal the heart where the bulk of the blood had pooled.

Superintendent Shepherd watched over her shoulder, spilling ash from his cigar into the thoracic cavity. She waved him away with a flick of her scalpel, then used the chest spreader to part the lungs. There was no need to remove the heart; a cursory glance revealed all that was necessary. The railing upon which Mrs Baxter had impaled herself had penetrated the thorax and diaphragm at a forty-five degree angle, piercing the left ventricle and the descending aorta. Death would have occurred within seconds. Small comfort to her family, Dody mused, as she finished dictating her findings to Mr Bright. She rinsed the scalpel and her gory hands under the tap while Alfred repaired the damage to Mrs Baxter with needle and thread.

The other attendant wheeled in the next body from the cadaver keep and Dody refilled her pipe.

‘Now this death has to be regarded as potentially suspicious,’ Shepherd said as the attendants exchanged one body for the other on the slab. ‘We are obliged to perform a full medico-legal autopsy, though I’m sure you will be able to confirm accidental causes. We don’t need to take too long about it.’

Dody riffled through the items in the effects parcel: an expensive walking outfit, gloves, boots, stockings, silk blouse, assorted linen and a somewhat crushed wide-brimmed hat. Under this, something metallic glinted against the brown paper packaging. She picked it out and turned it over in her hand. The silver medal of a hunger strike survivor gleamed back at her — her sister Florence had one just like it. For a moment Dody ceased to breathe. She dreaded what she might find under the sheet.

But Florence was alive and unharmed, Rupert had told her so. Drawing a lungful of pipe smoke, she pulled back the sheet and found herself looking upon the familiar face of Lady Catherine Cartwright, one of her sister’s close friends.

Closing her eyes, she prayed her vision was playing tricks on her. She opened them again. It was not. She felt herself grow dizzy.

She must not faint.

To steady herself she reached for the dissecting slab. With the other hand she replaced the sheet.

‘Doctor? Is something the matter?’ Pike appeared from nowhere, moving to her side.

‘Fetch some smelling salts, Alfred, the lady is going to faint.’ Shepherd made no effort to hide the glee in his voice.

‘I am not about to faint, Superintendent,’ Dody managed. ‘Alfred, stay where you are if you please, I am perfectly all right. But I regret to inform you that I cannot proceed with this autopsy. I know this woman; she was a friend of my sister. It would be unprofessional of me to continue.’

Shepherd smacked a heavy fist into his hand. ‘Damn it, this is all we need. Are you quite sure? It is most important we ascertain a cause of death immediately.’

‘Sir,’ Pike cut in, ‘Doctor McClelland is correct; she can’t be expected to continue.’ He spoke with a peculiar emphasis, and Dody looked up to see him giving his superior a meaningful glance, as if he was trying to signal something to the superintendent that should already have been self-evident.