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The Mangle Street Murders

Written by M. R. C. Kasasian

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THE MANGLE STREET MURDERS

M.R.C. KASASIAN



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Introduction

It is sixty years since I first met Sidney Grice. He was still quite young – though he did not seem it at the time – and already well known in England. But he had yet to achieve the international fame that a series of hilariously inaccurate Hollywood films was to bring upon him.

He was a vain man and loved the limelight, but even he baulked at some of the more outrageous stories that were circulated. He never, for example, climbed the Niagara Falls in pursuit of a werewolf. He was neither as glamorous nor so athletic as that. But also he was not the sadistic monster that recent biographers have portrayed. It was only ill health that stopped him from suing E.L. Jeeveson for his scurrilous and scrappily researched book claiming that Sidney Grice had murdered his own father.

It was the fear of hurting the innocent and of legal (or illegal) action from the guilty that constrained my first accounts of Sidney Grice's investigations in the *Monthly Journal* but, with almost everybody dead now and my own life nearing its natural conclusion, I thought it time to set the record straight.

The London I first knew rose magnificently from its stench of rotting humanity. The London of today is being sacked, reduced to rubble by an enemy whose savagery is

unmatched since the hordes of barbarians swept away the Roman Empire.

Whether the British Empire will be destroyed also, as so many predict, remains to be seen but I know that Sidney Grice would not have fled its capital city – for all his faults he was never a coward – and neither shall I, though the lights go out and the very earth trembles as I write this here in the cold, dripping cellar of 125 Gower Street.

M.M. 3 October 1941

1

The Slurry Street Murders

Lizzie Shepherd got the chop
Right above the drinking shop.
Janie Donnell got chopped too.
Turn around. It could be you.

Victorian skipping song (from *Rhymes and Reasons*
by Jenny Smith and Alex Duncan MacDonald)

Eliza shepherd was murdered. Her body was discovered on her bed at eight o'clock on the morning of Monday 28 January 1882 by her sister and roommate, Maria. They had lived on the top floor of a ramshackle pile of rooms over the Red Lion Public House, Slurry Street, Whitechapel.

Two hours later the body of Jane O'Donnell was discovered in another room along the corridor.

Both women had been brutally murdered. Their faces, limbs and torsos had been slashed and hacked exactly forty times each. There were no signs of robbery and, though there may have been a sexual motive, neither was a known prostitute. Eliza Shepherd worked as a seamstress and Jane O'Donnell had recently started serving in the bar downstairs.

In both cases the doors were bolted from the inside and had to be forced to gain access. There was little doubt, however, about the murderer's means of entry. The windows had been smashed from the outside. How the murderer reached the windows was another matter. They were some thirty feet above street level with no drainpipes or other climbing aids and it would be impossible to carry, set up and remove a ladder in such a busy thoroughfare without being noticed. The roof was not easily accessible and proved so rotten and unstable that it would not even support the small boy sent up by the police to inspect it.

It was difficult to imagine who would commit such savage acts and theories of animal attacks abounded, a gorilla from a travelling fair being most frequently cited. Rumours were rampant and a slavering lion cornered one night in Knackers' Yard turned out to be a tethered and elderly Shetland pony patiently awaiting its fate.

Stories of Springheel Jack, the legendary demon, were revived with numerous sightings of him leaping across the rooftops. In years gone by many a respectable girl had reported him jumping in front of her, shredding her clothes with his clawed hands and crushing his deadman's lips to hers, but he had never been known to kill before.

Death was common in the East End, violence and murder not rare, but the ferocity of these killings shocked even the police and the outcry led to questions being asked in both Houses of Parliament.

There was a flurry in the production of Penny Dreadful pamphlets with lurid accounts of other crimes tenuously linked to the two murders, and the press were soon issuing sensational claims about the identity of the killer. It was said that *Rivincita*, the Italian word for *revenge*, was smeared on

the walls in blood and an account of a mysterious redheaded Neapolitan man seen acting suspiciously in the area led to a spate of attacks on immigrants around the docks.

A gruesome song, 'The Slaughterhouse of Slurry Street', became briefly popular as did a melodramatic production of *Murder at the Red Lion* but, with the lack of any real suspects and the absence of any further outrages, public interest waned.

The murderer was never caught but he was to inspire more than the writers of ballads and pamphlets. He was also to inspire at least one person to follow in his footsteps.

2

The Chelsea Strangler

This was my last day. Mr Warwick, the land agent, arrived promptly at nine, and I handed him the keys and set off in a cart without even a backward glance. My family had lived in the Grange for three hundred years and no doubt it would stand the same again without us.

George Carpenter, the old gamekeeper, drove me with his ancient donkey, Onion, struggling up Parbold Hill and skittering down the other side so hesitantly that I feared we might miss the train, but we arrived in good time and George carried my carpet bag to the platform.

'Mrs Carpenter made you this.' He held out a small package in brown wax paper tied with brown string. 'She thought you might get hungry.'

I thanked him and he shuffled his feet.

'We held the Colonel in great regard,' he told me.

I put five shillings into his broken hand, and the train whistled and jolted and pulled away. And I wondered if ever I would see him again, or Ashurst Beacon, or the shallow poisoned River Douglas, winding as a saffron thread under the straight-cut Leeds–Liverpool Canal.

I changed stations at Wigan Wallgate, waiting head bowed at the roadside for a procession of miners' families to pass

behind four coffins. It was only three days since the colliery explosion and the town was still angry.

At Wigan North Western I purchased a book from W.H. Smith & Son, and was soon off again in a ladies-only compartment with no corridor. It was a non-smoker but, as it was otherwise unoccupied, I was able to enjoy all of Mrs Carpenter's game pie, three cigarettes and a small cup of gin from my father's hip flask before the train ground screechily to a stop at Rugby.

There was a great deal of shouting and slamming, but I was beginning to believe that I should be left alone when, just as the guard blew his whistle, the door swung open and a middle-aged, well-dressed lady clambered aboard and sat opposite me. She had a haughty humourless expression and for a while we were silent, but then the lady sniffed the air.

'Have you been smoking?'

'No.'

She took off her left glove, laid it with her hat on the seat beside her, and looked at me.

'What is that you are reading?' She peered over. '*The Shocking Case of the Poisoner of Primrose Hill*. What utter tosh. You should try *The Chelsea Strangler*. It is very grisly and much more amusing.' She sniffed again. 'You *have* been smoking.'

'I might have been,' I said and the lady smiled. She had small white teeth and her chin was pointed like a child's.

'Then you shan't mind if I do.' She produced a silver case from her handbag. 'Would you care for a Turkish?' She struck a red safety match and lit both our cigarettes with it, sucking deep into her breast. 'Oh, that is better. I have been absolutely frantic for one all day. Charles does not approve, which is why I keep my right glove on, to prevent my fingertips being oranged. Smoking is my great secret. Do you have any great

secrets? Of course you have, and you must tell me the most scandalous of them before we quit this carriage.'

A long time ago I killed a man – the finest that ever lived – but I shall never hang for it.

'Charles says it stunts the growth,' the lady was saying. 'As if I am likely to grow in any desirable direction at my age. I shall be forty-two tomorrow, not that he will remember. He can recall all Dr Grace's batting scores but struggles with his own children's names. He forces small boys to learn dead Greek. What a gruesome thing to do.'

The lady took a breath.

'Happy birthday.' I offered her my flask and she swallowed a cupful in one draught.

'Harriet Fitzpatrick,' she said. 'Call me Harriet.'

'March Middleton. March.'

'Going to London, March?'

'Yes. It is my first time.'

'The best shops and the worst people in the world.' She stubbed her cigarette out on the floor. 'You may find the most exquisite dresses but have to step over a starving child to enter the premises. Are you visiting relatives?'

'I have no relatives,' I said. 'My poor mama's heart failed with the strain of being delivered of me twenty-one years ago, and my poor dear papa was killed last July when he fell over a waterfall in Switzerland. I spent the next three months writing an account of his life, which was published just before Christmas. *Colonel Geoffrey Middleton, His Life and Times*. Perhaps you have read it.'

Harriet shook her head and asked, 'But where shall you stay?'

‘With my godfather who has kindly volunteered to become my legal guardian.’

‘Oh, you poor thing.’

She had a tiny nose and I was quite envious of it.

‘It is probably for the best.’ I dropped my cigarette on the floor and ground it out with my foot. ‘Papa took a great loss on the stock exchange last year and had heavily mortgaged the house. He left me so little capital, most of which I cannot touch until I am twenty-five, and such a small income from munitions that I could not hope to continue the maintenance of our home and, since the bloom of my youth is rapidly fading, I am unlikely to ensnare a husband before I am too old.’

Harriet laughed and said, ‘Forgive me. Please continue.’

‘If my godfather had not turned up,’ I said, ‘I do not know what I should have done for I am unsuited to trade and too proud to go into service. So I was most relieved when he wrote to offer his condolences and say that my father had done him a great kindness once, and that he was anxious to repay the debt.’

Harriet looked at me thoughtfully. ‘May I ask when you last saw this good-hearted gentleman?’

‘Oh, but I have never met him,’ I said. ‘Nor indeed do I recall my father ever talking about him.’

Harriet took another drink from my flask before handing it back.

‘Are you sure your inheritance is small?’ She looked at me as one might an injured stray. ‘I should not like you to be tricked out of your fortune by some unscrupulous scoundrel.’

‘It is very small indeed,’ I said, ‘and I did consider such a possibility. So, before I accepted the proposal, I instructed my

father's solicitor to conduct some enquiries. By all accounts Mr Sidney Grice comes from a good family and is a man of the highest reputation.'

Harriet coughed.

'Sidney Grice, the private detective?'

'You know of him?'

'I should say so,' Harriet said. 'One can hardly open a newspaper without learning something of his exploits. Why, only last week he very nearly foiled the kidnapping of the Archduke of Thuringia in Hyde Park, and it is rumoured that he has extricated the Prince of Wales from scandal on numberless occasions. Oh, you are so lucky. I wish I had such a dashing, heroic and clever man to look after me.'

We had two more cigarettes to celebrate my good fortune and finished the gin, and Harriet fell silent and I looked out of the window and watched the hills flatten and the greenery turn to brick and the bricks get higher and redder, and it seemed no time at all before we had pulled into Euston Station.

'Will you be all right?' Harriet asked, and I told her that I would.

'I come up on the same train, the first Tuesday of every month,' she said. 'If you should need a friend.'

'I am sure I shall make a great many friends,' I said, and Harriet looked at me.

'London can be such a lonely place.'

She stood and leaned forward to adjust her hat in the small mirror over my head. I got up, caught a glimpse of myself, my complexion unfashionably brown from too many long walks without a parasol and my hair dun and dull, and I thought of Edward for the hundredth time that day.

'Look out for pickpockets,' she told me, 'and foreigners. Any more gin?'

‘I am afraid not.’

A porter was coming up and Harriet pulled down the blind.

‘Have you ever been kissed?’ she asked.

‘No,’ I said as she leaned towards me, fragrant with lavender.

I closed my eyes.

‘You have now,’ she said, and the blind snapped up and the porter opened the door and we clambered down, and Harriet winked. ‘Take care.’ And she hurried off into the crowd.

3

The Pig and the Perfume

I FOUND MY way out easily to that monstrous arch known as the Gateway to the North, where I waited.

All around were the noise and confusion, but what struck me most forcibly were the smells. Smoke, horse excrement and unwashed bodies combined to create an overpoweringly noisome stench. Hundreds of carriages, from stately broughams to small landaus, vied with hansom cabs, omnibuses and delivery carts to make chaotic progress along the Euston Road, and countless pedestrians in finery or rags jostled between them, calling out to each other above the shouts of street sellers.

A grimy girl in a crumpled black dress stood against a pillar, looking about her expectantly.

'Are you Molly?' I asked.

'Shit off,' she said, and stumbled away.

'I shall take it that you are not,' I called after her.

I waited a few more minutes and looked about me. A pig had been tethered to a standpipe and a boy in a sailor suit was trying to ride it. The buildings were grimy and cloaked in a grey haze, for the air itself was dirty. I could feel it gritty on my skin.

A dumpy girl in a maid's uniform of black, with a pressed

white apron, came hurrying up and approached two young ladies before myself.

'Miss Middleton?'

'Yes.'

She had a mass of ginger hair tied up under a starched white hat. Her nose was bulbous and her face pink and freckled.

'I'm Molly, Mr Grice's maid. I'm very sorry to keep you waiting, but we had a dead duchess to deal with, and she was a lot more trouble dead than when she was alive. May I take your bag? Please follow me.'

There was a squeal and a scream as we stepped out of the arch and I spun round to see that the boy had fallen and the pig was standing on him.

'Don't be afraid,' Molly said. 'It's only a pig.'

We made our way across the road followed by a dozen or so ragamuffins.

'Clear off,' Molly said, but they gathered round me, begging for pennies until I had none left to give.

'Mind where you step,' Molly warned. 'You wouldn't believe a horse could turn hay into something so nasty. Do you have horses in the country?'

'Yes, of course.'

'We have a lot in London,' she said. 'They bite.'

We got across the road and Molly pushed her way through a group of cloth-capped men standing outside a public house.

'Look out for pickpockets,' she told me over her shoulder, 'purse snatchers, sailors and foreigners. Those—'

There was a shrill wail, and I turned to see a man in a sealskin coat standing over a cowering woman and striking her upheld arms with a long stick.

'Stop that at once,' I called out, and he twisted round to look at me.

'Says who?' His words sprayed rancid into my face.

'We do,' I said.

'I don't,' Molly said, taking a step back.

'Not her,' I said. 'Me and Monsieur Parquet.'

His eyes flicked about.

'I don't see no foreign geezer wiv you.' He poked the stick under my nose.

'Monsieur Parquet is the inventor of the synthetic perfume known as Fougère, which means "fern",' I said. 'You are probably unfamiliar with it.' I wiped my cheek with my handkerchief. 'But I always carry a little wherever I go, and if you will excuse me for a moment…' I delved into my carpet bag. 'There you are.'

The man glanced at my bottle and laughed mockingly.

'What the hell—'

'Please do not swear,' I said, and puffed two squirts into his eyes.

'What the—' The man dropped his stick to clutch his face.

The woman put down her arms and grinned bloodily. ''E smell better now.' She scrambled to her feet and hobbled away.

'I'll get you later,' he called after her, violently rubbing his eyes. 'And you,' he added as we hurried off.

'A word to the unwise,' Molly said. 'It don't do to interfere between a man and a woman.'

'Would you rather I had let him hit her?'

Molly wiggled her nose. 'Who's to say she didn't ask for it? Men are more reasonable than we are. She probably looked at him funny or something.'

We turned left on to Gower Street and the commotion, though still great, decreased as we went along it. 'Another word,' Molly said. 'I shouldn't mention this to Mr Grice when you meet him. He don't like ladies what show off.'

A water cart trundled by.

'Why are the cobbles made of wood?' I asked.

'That is to muffle the horses' hooves,' she told me, 'so the sick can get some rest and the dying go to theirs a bit more peacefully. That's the Universitaly Hospital there. Mr Grice explained it all to me. He's a very clever man and very nice and he didn't even tell me to say that.'

Number 125 was a tall, terraced Georgian house, white-fronted on the ground floor and red brick above, with an iron balcony on the first floor and separated from the pavement by a basement moat and railings. We climbed the four steps to the black-painted front door, and Molly produced a key on a string from around her neck and admitted me to a long narrow hallway.

'One moment, please,' she said, and went to the first door on the right to announce me.

'And not before time,' a man's voice said. 'I have not had a cup of tea for forty-two and a half minutes.' And with that, the creator of the voice came out of the room to offer me his hand.

4

The Listeners

Sidney Grice was not at all what I expected. Though he stood erect, he was not much taller than my five feet and two inches, and slightly built. His hair was thick and black and swept back from a high forehead. His nose was long and thin and there was something almost effeminate about his appearance, with his bowed lips, smooth pale face and a dimple on his delicately constructed chin.

'Miss Middleton.' His greeting was civil but not effusive. His hand was small with long slender fingers, but his grip was strong. 'How unlike your dear mother.' His voice was soft but clear.

His eyes were pale blue and glassy, though his gaze was direct and his lashes were long and curled up in a way that I could only dream of.

'You knew her?'

'It was my privilege,' he said. 'The pity is that you did not. You have no luggage?'

'Only this travelling bag. My boxes are to follow.'

'We will take tea at once, Molly. Come, Miss Middleton. Let me show you around your new home.'

I followed him through the open doorway into a good-sized morning room. Straight ahead were two high-backed

leather armchairs either side of a fireplace. To the right were six upright chairs round a low mahogany tea table. At the far end, behind a wooden filigree screen, tall windows opened on to the street.

'The screen is to conceal me from snipers,' he said.

'Have you ever been shot at?'

'Many times.' He touched his left shoulder. 'But only hit once. I prefer it when they miss.'

I laughed and Sidney Grice looked at me bleakly.

'That was not a joke,' he said. 'Get down!' With that he threw himself to the floor and I kneeled quickly beside him. 'Absolutely hopeless,' he said. 'You will have to be faster than that in a real emergency.'

'If you were wearing a bustle you would… Oh!' I looked up at the window in horror. 'Look out!' Sidney Grice flung himself down again as I got up. 'Annoying, isn't it?' I said. 'I do not think we shall play that game again.'

Sidney Grice brushed himself off. 'It is a game that may well save your life one day.'

'I would rather die sensibly,' I told him, and he put his hand to his right eye.

Behind us was a library with four-leafed doors folded back so that the two rooms flowed into one. The library was lined with shelves, all crammed with books and papers, and one wall backed a row of oak cabinets each with four drawers.

'These two chambers make up my study, the heart and mind of the house.'

'You have a great many files,' I said.

'I am compiling a catalogue of every crime committed in this country throughout the century,' he told me. 'A Herculean task, but I am convinced that it is time well spent. It is a proven fact that criminals repeat their own and each other's

acts. So I am creating a system whereby every crime can be cross-referenced and an instant solution found as to its method and perpetrator. Is that alcohol I detect on your breath?'

He looked at me sharply.

'I felt a little faint as I disembarked,' I said. 'But a passing parson very kindly gave me a sip of brandy, from what I believe is called a hip flask, to revive me.'

'It is gin,' Sidney Grice said.

'Oh, really? I would not know the difference.'

He narrowed his eyes and we went back into the hall.

'Surely there must be *some* new crimes,' I said, but Sidney Grice huffed.

'The criminal mind is perverted and convoluted but almost invariably unimaginative,' he said as Molly came out in a fluster.

'Oh, sir.' She went pink. 'What an incomplete disaster. We are quite out of Afternoon tea. We have some Morning and mountains of Evening but there is not a mouse-dropping of Afternoon to be had.'

Sidney Grice scowled.

'Then go and get some immediately, and be sure it is weighed properly,' he said. 'Idiotic girl,' he added as she scurried out. 'That,' he pointed past the stairs, 'is the domestic world. I shudder to think what goes on down there.'

The first floor had a drawing room looking across to the university buildings. At the back was the dining room with a dumb waiter and the faint smell of cabbage.

'Whilst we are alone I shall tell you something which you will find embarrassing,' Sidney Grice told me. 'You are wearing brown shoes.'

'I know.'

He winced. 'Brown is for the country. One wears black in town.'

'But I left the country this morning,' I said. 'At what stage should I have changed them?'

Sidney Grice frowned. 'I see you have spirit – a modern but not a feminine quality. With regard to your question, I believe that Kilburn is generally regarded as the outermost reach of civilization. I never venture beyond it.' He sniffed the air. 'I smell smoke.'

I sniffed too but could only smell his coal tar soap.

'Do you mean metaphorically?'

'No, literally. I dislike metaphors.'

'And brown shoes,' I said. 'Is your house ablaze?'

'My house is never ablaze,' he said. 'It is tobacco smoke. I trust you do not indulge, Miss Middleton.'

'The train was so heavily laden that I was obliged to travel in a smoking compartment,' I said.

Sidney Grice's right eye disappeared, his eyelids collapsing into a meat-red cavity. I yelped and he caught his eye and popped it back into place.

'Damnable thing.' He pulled his upper eyelid down. 'I went all the way to Egeria in Bohemia to have it made, hand blown to Professor Goldman's precise measurements, and still it does not fit.'

'How did you lose your own?'

'I did not *lose* it.' He flicked his hair back with a proud jerk of the neck. 'That would imply a carelessness which is alien to my nature. It was plucked from its socket by a Prussian renegade when I thwarted his attempt upon the life of the Crown Prince. The world has yet to appreciate the debt it owes me for that deed. When Kaiser Wilhelm II is on the throne of the unified German states we can look

forward to an era of peace across Europe that will last a hundred years.'

'The world already holds you in high esteem,' I said. 'My friends often compare you to Edgar Allen Poe's detective, Auguste Dupin.'

Sidney Grice's lips curled.

'How splendid it is to be compared to an idiotic fantasy from the scribblings of a colonial lunatic,' he said, 'especially as he has obviously read of my achievements and made a clumsy attempt to emulate them.'

He had a curious gait, I noticed, dipping to the right, though he seemed to have no trouble mounting another flight of stairs.

The second floor had two bedrooms, his at the front and the one to be mine, facing a red-brick hospital building. Between them was a small room.

'The pride of my house.' Sidney Grice stepped aside to show me the bathroom. The fittings were indeed splendid, a white-enamelled bath on clawed brass feet, a white porcelain sink on a tall fluted pedestal and a matching water closet with a high cistern. 'We have running water, cold and hot, as long as Molly keeps the stove alight.'

'What luxury.' I did not tell him how unsavoury I thought it to have a closet in the house. Little wonder one heard accounts of so much pestilence in London if all houses were so unhygienically equipped.

The top floor was an attic, he explained, which contained a box room and the servants' quarters.

'How many servants do you keep?'

'I only have Molly and a cook. The cook does not live in and keeps to her kitchen. I do not believe I have seen her since she had the impertinence to offer me seasonal greetings on

Christmas Day two years ago. The occasional scullery maid comes and goes, I am told, but they are of no interest to me.' He paused. 'Clearly Molly is not yet returned. It seems we must answer the summons of that doorbell ourselves.'

'I did not hear anything,' I said, and Sidney Grice clicked his tongue.

'Your ears are younger and probably more sensitive than mine. You hear but you do not listen. The call is obviously urgent to judge from the rapid tugging at the pull. Let us stand quietly for a moment, then tell me what you hear.'

'Should we not answer the door first?' I asked, but Sidney Grice shrugged and said, 'An urgent caller will always wait. Listen.'

We stood together in the corridor and far away I heard a bell, small and sharp, repeatedly clinking.

'I hear it now.'

'What else?'

I listened. 'Nothing.'

'Do you not hear the traffic outside, the rattle of wheels, the clop of hooves on cobbles, the cries of hawkers and mendicants in the street, the flutter of pigeons on the roof, the west wind drawing across the chimney tops?'

I listened harder. 'I hear a faint hubbub,' I said, 'and the bell is getting frantic.'

'A bell is inanimate and can no more be frantic than it could formulate an algebraic theorem.' Sidney Grice scrutinized a small ink stain on his little finger. 'But it would seem that our visitor is.'

We made our way back down the stairs.

'See to the door,' he said, and went into his study.

The lady to whom I answered the door was tall and elegant, with finely carved features white as limestone, though

her cheeks were a little flushed as if by exertion. In her early forties, I estimated, she was well, though not richly, dressed in black and her hair was dark brown, neatly pinned under a simple hat with a gauze trim hanging just over her eyes.

'Is this Mr Grice's house?' She was struggling for breath.

'It is.'

'I must see your master.' She was clearly in a state of great agitation.

'I have no master,' I said, but took her through.

Sidney Grice was pretending to browse through a geological journal, but stood up from his armchair and ushered our visitor into the chair facing his across the unlit fireplace. I stood in the middle of the room, uncertain whether to stay or go.

'You cannot know how glad I am to see you.' The woman arranged herself. 'I have heard it told many a time that you are really a fictional character.'

Sidney Grice's neck reddened a little and his cheek ticked; he put his hand to his right eye.

'The blame for that lies in the luridly inaccurate reportage of my cases by cheap periodicals,' he said. 'As you can see for yourself, madam, I am here before you in flesh and blood.'

The lady put her hands over her mouth and nose. She had a ruby ring on the third finger of her right hand.

'There was so much blood,' she said.

I looked at her green eyes. They were wide with horror, and I looked at Sidney Grice and, though it was not possible, it seemed that both of his were shining.

5

Horrible Murder

'It is too horrible.' Mrs Dillinger caught her breath. 'My poor daughter.' She swallowed. 'Stabbed… stabbed to death and my son-in-law arrested for her murder. You must help me, Mr Grice.'

Sidney Grice sighed. 'I am under no such obligation, madam. But, since you are here and I am bored, what is your name and those of the people involved?'

'I am Mrs Grace Dillinger.'

'I assume you are a widow.'

'Yes, my husband died two months ago.'

'And left you with child?'

'Yes. It is expected in August.'

Sidney Grice waved his hand. 'Continue.'

'My son-in-law is William Ashby. His wife, my daughter is—'

'Was,' Sidney Grice corrected her.

'Was Sarah.'

Sidney Grice took a small brown leather-bound notebook from the table by his chair and jotted the details on the first page with a silver pencil, as Mrs Dillinger reached into her handbag and brought out a rectangular white envelope. Her nails, I noticed, were neatly clipped and she wore

a heavy rose-gold wedding band twined with a fine black thread.

'William has written you a note.' She held it out and Sidney Grice took it as if it were soiled, flicked the envelope open, withdrew a twice-folded sheet of paper and let it fall into his lap with little more than a glance.

'What evidence is there against your son-in-law?' he asked.

'None at all.' Mrs Dillinger knotted her slender fingers.

'Then he has no more to fear than I,' he told her, 'for there is no evidence against me either.'

Mrs Dillinger pulled on the lapel of her coat.

'He was in the house at the time,' she said, 'but he was asleep in the next room.'

'Is he a heavy sleeper?'

'Quite the reverse. He usually wakes at the slightest noise. It was the sound of a door opening and closing that disturbed him.'

'Which door?'

'The outer door of the shop at the front of the house. It has a bell which sounds when the top of the door strikes it.'

She was lightly perfumed with Damask.

Sidney Grice toyed with his signet ring. 'Is the bell suspended on a hinge or a coiled spring?'

Mrs Dillinger touched her forehead with the fingertips of her right hand and the ruby glinted darkly.

She said, 'What? A hinge, I suppose. What does it matter?'

My guardian observed her for a moment. 'A hinged bell sounds but twice whereas a sprung bell makes a repeated clatter, on average five to seven double clangs, depending upon the force with which the door strikes it.'

Mrs Dillinger composed herself. 'I see.'

'But nothing until then?'

'No.'

'And where was your son-in-law?'

'In the back room. The kitchen.'

Her boots had been well cleaned and blacked, but were splattered with fresh drops of mud.

'And your daughter?'

'The middle room. Their sitting room.'

'And these rooms are confluent?'

'Yes.'

Her clothes were well made but old. They had been repaired in places and obviously dyed for her mourning period, as the original floral pattern was still just discernible.

'With no other access to the middle room? A window perhaps or a skylight?'

'No. None.'

Sidney Grice leaned towards her.

'So your lightly sleeping son-in-law slumbered through the brutal slaying of his wife only a few feet away?'

Mrs Dillinger stood up suddenly and caught hold of the mantlepiece.

'Really, Mr Grice,' I said and stepped towards her, but Sidney Grice signalled me to stay back.

'Was there any blood on your son-in-law's clothes?'

'He was covered in it.' Mrs Dillinger closed her eyes. 'He took her into his arms.'

Her voice was barely audible and she was breathing heavily.

'And she was already dead?'

'Yes. I think so.' Her voice rose suddenly. 'I do not know.'

Sidney Grice wrote something else in his book. He had a small scar on his right ear, I noticed.

'And nobody else was in the house at the time?'

'No. No one.'

Sidney Grice looked at her for a while.

'Where were you when all this was going on?' he asked.

'In church.'

'On a Monday night?'

'There was a meeting of the Society for the Conversion of Heathen Children in Africa.'

'There is no shortage of those in London,' Sidney Grice said. 'Was your daughter happily married?'

Mrs Dillinger broke into sobs and Sidney Grice tapped his teeth with the pencil. His teeth were clean and straight.

'How can you put her through this?' I asked.

'This is nothing compared to what the police and prosecution will ask of her and her son-in-law.'

'I thought you were supposed to be on my side,' Mrs Dillinger said.

'I do not know what misled you to that conclusion,' Sidney Grice said. 'I have not expressed any support for your cause.'

Mrs Dillinger let go of the mantlepiece and swayed, and I stood ready in case she collapsed.

'Then I must go and find somebody who will.'

Sidney Grice shrugged, but Mrs Dillinger stayed where she was.

'I repeat my question,' he said. 'Was the marriage a happy one?'

'Very… They were devoted to each other. He called my Sarah the apple…' Mrs Dillinger stopped, unable to continue.

'Would you like a glass of water?' I asked, but Mrs Dillinger whispered, 'No. Thank you.'

I took her arm and guided her back into her chair, pulling up one of the upright chairs to sit myself beside her.

Sidney Grice tapped his feet together and said, 'Did they have financial problems?'

'No more than anybody else. They made enough to live on.'

Mrs Dillinger cleared her throat.

'They?'

'Sarah worked in the shop also.'

'Are you employed?'

'I give private tuition in the pianoforte and French Conversation, and I sometimes take in children whilst their parents are unable to look after them.'

'For money?'

'Yes. I need it all the more since my dear husband died.'

'And how did he die?'

Mrs Dillinger shivered. 'He was killed by a footpad on Westminster Bridge for his father's watch which did not even work. Is this relevant?'

Sidney Grice compressed his lips. 'I do not know yet. Was your daughter's life insured?'

The front door slammed and footsteps raced along the hall.

'For a very small amount, I think, but I do not know the details.' Mrs Dillinger's face tightened. 'And I do not see what that has got to do with anything.'

'The court may find it has something to do with everything. How old was…' Sidney Grice consulted his notes '… Sarah?'

'Nineteen.'

'Why, she was younger than I,' I said, and Sidney Grice said, 'Please do not interject again, Miss Middleton. How old is your son-in-law, Mrs Dillinger?'

'Thirty-four.'

The mantle clock struck the quarter.

'Quite a difference.' Sidney Grice leaned back. 'Perhaps your daughter was tired of being with an older man.'

'Fifteen years is nothing,' Mrs Dillinger said. 'And I have told you… they were devoted.'

'Perhaps he caught her with another man and killed her in a rage.'

Mrs Dillinger straightened her back. 'She was a loyal and decent girl and would never have betrayed him, and my son-in-law is a gentle and kind man. He could never have been so cruel.'

'Where is he now?' Sidney Grice extruded a little more lead from his pencil.

'He is being held in Marylebone Police Station.'

'And what is the address of this incident?'

'13 Mangle Street, Whitechapel.'

'Mangle Street,' my guardian mused. 'Now there is a place with history. I know of six other murders along that road, the first being in seventeen forty as I recall, and the most recent being that of a certain Matilda Tassel and her two daughters, who were killed with an axe.'

'How tragic,' I said.

'Thank you for your shrewd forensic critique, Miss Middleton.' He scratched his cheek. 'Perhaps William killed them too.'

'Or perhaps their murderer killed Sarah.'

'I believe her husband died of consumption whilst awaiting trial,' Sidney Grice said, 'but I shall check with my records later. One last thing.' He was still writing. 'My services are very expensive and your means are obviously limited. Quite how do you propose to reimburse me?'

Mrs Dillinger took a small black-edged handkerchief from

a pocket in her coat. 'But surely your first concern is to see justice done?' And Sidney Grice smiled unpleasantly.

'It might be a novel diversion,' he said, 'but if word got about that I was prepared to lower my extravagant fees for the deserving poor, I should have every jackanapes in London sitting on my doorstep.'

'But I have no money.'

My guardian raised his left eyebrow.

'Then how do you propose to pay for this consultation?'

Mrs Dillinger looked at me and back at him blankly.

'I thought…'

'I do not want your thoughts,' Sidney Grice said. 'I want your money.'

Her eyes filled with tears.

'Have you no human feelings?' I said.

'I am neither silly nor sentimental if that is what you mean.'

Mrs Dillinger rubbed her forehead. 'I will pay whatever you ask.'

'This,' Sidney Grice held his pencil vertically, 'is a Mordan Mechanical of the very latest spring-loaded design, silver-plated and engraved with my initials. It was a gift from one of my many grateful clients and must have cost her twenty-four guineas. I doubt you have that much to your name.'

Mrs Dillinger folded her handkerchief and blotted her tears with a corner. 'William will pay you. He has a regular income.'

'Which has been put into abeyance by his arrest and will cease the moment the trapdoor opens,' Sidney Grice said, and Mrs Dillinger sat back heavily.

'You are a monster.'

'We both earn our keep protecting the innocent.' Sidney Grice twisted the lead back into his pencil. 'But in my case the stakes and therefore the remuneration are higher.'

'But I have nothing to give you.'

Sidney Grice shrugged.

'Then I have nothing to give you either, and your son-in-law will almost certainly hang.' He snapped his notebook shut. 'I bid you good day, Mrs Dillinger. Expect my bill of charges by the next post.'

Molly came, carrying a black-lacquered tea tray.

'Shall I bring another cup, sir?'

'That will not be necessary. Our visitor is about to leave.'

Mrs Dillinger stood up again as if in a dream, casting about for something she did not have. I rose to steady her.

'Show Mrs Dillinger to the door, Molly.'

For some reason Molly turned to me. I looked away.

'This way please, madam.'

A tress of Molly's hair was escaping from under the side of her cap. It dangled over her ear.

'No,' I said, and Sidney Grice glanced up sharply.

'Whatever do you mean?'

'Mrs Dillinger may not have the money,' I said, 'but I have a small portfolio of shares in my inheritance. I do not know if you follow the stock exchange.'

'I never gamble.'

'I have one thousand shares in the Blue Lake Mining Company of British Columbia, which are currently valued at two shillings and sixpence each, which makes them worth one hundred and twenty-five pounds in total. I am unaware of your usual scale of fees but you can have them all if you agree to take on this case.'

Sidney Grice's face was expressionless.

'I will think about it.' He spoke so casually that I knew this must be much more than he would demand normally.

I took a small breath. 'There is, however, one condition.'

'And that is?'

'That I accompany you.'

Even as I spoke I knew that he would tell me it was out of the question.

'I should like to see how my father's money is spent,' I said, 'and I may be of some use.'

Sidney Grice smirked.

'I cannot imagine how,' he said, 'but it might be amusing. Very well, Miss Middleton. Consider my services engaged.'