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The Unseeing

Written by Anna Mazzola

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THE UNSEEING

ANNA MAZZOLA



TINDER PRESS

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1

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The investigation of truth, the art of ascertaining that which is unknown from that which is known, has occupied the attention, and constituted the pleasure as well as the business of the reflecting part of mankind in every civilized age and country.

A Practical Treatise on the Law of Evidence,
Dr Thomas Starkie, 1833

Prologue

Through her left eye she could see nothing now. Through her right, Hannah could make out the flame of the one candle that still burned, guttering and shivering low in its puddle of wax. It was only the candlelight that convinced her she was still alive. The fire was dying in the grate and the coldness of the flagstones had seeped into her bones, leaving her as icy and insubstantial as the snow that fell outside.

She knew she should call out: for a surgeon, a constable, or simply someone to bear witness. Otherwise, unless they looked closely, they would read it all wrong. But she was unable to cry out. Her body seemed to have slipped from the grasp of her mind and she had a strong sensation of falling; of the world sliding away from her. She was vaguely aware of the flame's shadows fluttering on the ceiling above her. She saw for a moment her mother's drawn, unsmiling face.

'*You shouldn't tell lies, Hannah. They always come back to bite you*.'

A gust of wintry air blew into the room: the door had opened. Just before she lost consciousness, Hannah heard footsteps coming towards her, footsteps she thought she recognised.

In the draught, the candle dipped, swayed and was finally extinguished. All was dark.

Part One

Corpus

Chapter 1

MYSTERIOUS AFFAIR

Yesterday afternoon, about three o'clock, as a police constable of the T division was on duty near Pineapple Gate, Edgeware-road, his attention was attracted towards an unfinished house, in which he saw at a distance something lying on the ground at the bottom part of the building; he directly approached the spot, and there beheld, tied up at the top, a full-sized sack, which he lifted up, and found to be of considerable weight. Without loss of time he untied the fastenings, and, to his great horror and consternation, ascertained that the said sack contained the dead trunk and arms of a female.

Morning Post, 29 December 1836

27 March 1837

'Murderer!' they shouted.

'Whore!'

'Take her eyes out: it's what she did to Hannah Brown!'

Hands battered the wooden roof and sides of the prison wagon and, above the din, Sarah could hear the voice of the driver as he tried to calm the horse and urge it forward. Silently, Sarah willed it too, knowing that if the wagon stopped and the mob got at her,

she would be done for. She had heard of such things happening: of a man accused of killing a child, seized as he left the Old Bailey and reduced within minutes to a bloody mess; of resurrection men, chased through the streets, escaping only when a pub landlord helped them over a wall. No one would help her.

The wagon inched through the crowds, away from the magistrates' court and onto a wider street where the horse picked up pace. Through the barred cart door, Sarah could see some of the people running behind them, shouting, shrieking, shaking their fists. Gradually, they fell away, some leaning forward, hands on their knees to catch their breath. The vehicle jolted on over the cobbled stones, past the great dome of St Paul's and then up a side street where the roar of London was briefly muffled.

They came to a halt and the guard wrenched open the wagon door. 'Out!'

Sarah gathered her skirts and stumbled down onto the ground. It was nearly dark now and a thin rain had begun to fall. Steadying herself, she stared up at the high stone arch and, beneath it, the great oaken door, studded with nails and topped with spikes. She had walked past this door several times before but she had never imagined that she would walk through it, for this was Newgate: the most notorious prison in London.

The guard knocked on the door and, a few moments later, a porter appeared, his face the drab colour of tallow. He nodded at the guard and looked briefly at Sarah, his expression unreadable. Without saying a word, he led Sarah through a second door, past a lodge, through an iron-bolted gate and down a narrow corridor until they reached a door that bore the sign, 'Reception Room'. It was not much of a reception. There was no fire in the large stone room and the air was chill. A woman dressed in dark grey sat on a high stool by a desk, writing in a thick, leather-bound book. She pointed at a wooden bench. Sarah opened her mouth to speak, but the woman put her finger to her lips and shook her head. The only

sounds were the scratching of the pen, the closing of doors far off and an occasional undistinguishable shout.

After a few minutes, a taller woman, her face bone-white, her eyes small beads of jet, entered the room carrying a wooden box and a bundle of clothing. She was dressed, like the first woman, in a grey dress, grey bonnet and heavy black boots. However, around her shoulders was a black mantle, and about her middle she wore a wide leather belt with a brass buckle from which dangled a chain of keys.

'Name?' she said sharply.

Sarah got to her feet. 'Sarah Gale.'

The woman stared at Sarah, her gaze as cold and hard as a knife.

The first woman spoke. 'She's the one just been charged with aiding and abetting the Edgeware Road murder, Miss Sowerton. I've written it all down.'

'Oh, I know who she is,' Miss Sowerton said.

Sarah lowered her eyes, but felt the woman's gaze still on her, dissecting her.

After a few moments, the woman held out her hand: 'Possessions!'

Sarah looked up.

'Give me your *things*!'

From her pocket, Sarah removed the few items she had brought with her – an old silk handkerchief, her locket, and a tortoiseshell-backed brush. The woman took them and put them into the wooden box. To Sarah it felt as though the last pieces of her were being stripped away.

'Undress!'

Sarah looked at Miss Sowerton and then at the other woman, who nodded.

'Do as the matron says.'

Slowly, Sarah removed her cloak, gloves and shoes, then undid the fastenings on her dark green dress and removed her petticoats

until she was standing in just her shift, stockings and stays in the cold room. Miss Sowerton regarded her steadily, her arms folded.

Finally mustering up the courage to speak, Sarah said, 'I'm not what you think. I didn't do what they say.'

The matron's mouth slid into a semblance of a smile. 'Oh, no, 'course not. You're innocent as a babe unborn. None of the inmates in this prison is guilty. The place is fit to burst with innocent souls.' Her lips set again into a line. 'You're not to speak unless spoken to. We don't want to hear your lies.'

She looked carefully over Sarah, as though eyeing a suspect piece of meat at market.

'Dark brown hair . . . brown eyes . . . sharp features . . . scars to the chest, wrists and lower arms.'

With cold fingers, she lifted Sarah's petticoat.

'A mole above the left hipbone.'

The woman on the stool scribbled in the leather-bound book. The matron folded Sarah's clothes, placed them in the wooden box and snapped the lid shut. Then she handed Sarah the bundle. While the two women watched, Sarah put on the clothes: a blue wincey dress with dark stripes, a blue checked apron and matching neckerchief, a patched jacket, and thick brown stockings that scratched against her skin. For an instant, she was reminded of her dress fittings with Rosina when they were children: standing before their mother's cold gaze in dark silks and stiff lace. Would it have always come to this?

A thud: two black shoes – old, dirty and mismatched – had been thrown at her feet.

'Put these on and follow me.'

The matron led Sarah along a succession of winding alleyways and down dark, low-roofed passages and staircases, her heels clicking against the stone. They came eventually upon a row of identical doorways and Miss Sowerton paused.

'The condemned cells,' she said, watching for Sarah's reaction.

Sarah shivered, pierced with a shard of fear. Condemned: damned; sentenced to death. If the court decided that she should hang, this would be where she would come on her last night. She realised that she had instinctively raised her hand to clasp her throat, and she lowered it before the matron could notice.

They walked through another corridor that led onto a large, empty quadrangle, lit only by the sickly yellow light from two gas lamps. This, the matron announced, was 'the women's area', with its own taprooms, breakfast room and kitchen. Sarah was hungry, for she had taken nothing since a few mouthfuls of porridge at Clerkenwell Prison that morning. The smell of the place, though, turned her stomach: a sour smell of unwashed bodies and chloride of lime. It was for the best, she told herself, that George was not here. Some convicts were allowed to take their children into Newgate with them, but this was no place for a child. This was no place for any human. Still, the thought of him without her was a sharp, almost physical pain.

Miss Sowerton stopped before a black door and produced a large key. A rumbling came from within the lock as the key turned, and Sarah had the sudden idea of the place not just as a prison, but a terrible creature: flesh and bone, iron and stone.

'Your cell,' the matron said.

When Sarah failed to move, Miss Sowerton pushed her firmly into the room, locking and bolting the door behind her.

Sarah's first impression was one of complete darkness. After a few seconds, however, she saw that a few grey rays of light filtered through the glass of a small iron-barred window. Against the far wall, under the high window, was a bed. She felt her way to it and ran her hand over the bedding: a blanket and a rough pillow, so cold they felt damp. There was a stale odour to the cell – a tang of must and sweat and something unidentifiable. Fear, perhaps. She could hear the sound of footsteps in the

corridor outside and, from far away, a scream cut short.

On a small table beneath the window stood a jug, a book, a candle and a little metal box. Sarah opened the box and struck a match against the sandpaper. There was brief crackle of phosphorus before the candle was lit. In the glow of the flame she saw a three-legged stool, a burnished copper washbasin fastened to the wall with a water tap over it and, in one corner, a water-closet seat.

She knew that most of the other prisoners had to share cells, some four to a room. Evidently the warders did not trust her with other women. Maybe they thought she would slit their throats as they slept.

A draught, finding its way under the door, caused the candle flame to ripple. In the centre of the cell door, carved into the wood, was an eye, complete in every detail – pupil, eyelashes, brow. A spyhole. Sarah bent down to look through it to the corridor outside, but there was only darkness.

Chapter 2

On Saturday morning, about half-past eight o'clock, as Mathias Ralph, the lock-keeper of the Ben Jonson lock on the Regent's Canal, at the World's-end, Stepney, was engaged in closing the lock after a coal-barge had passed through, he found that the falls or sluices would not close, and that there was a space of several inches between both. On examining minutely to ascertain the cause he was horror-struck to find that it was a human head.

Morning Chronicle, 9 January 1837

Chief Justice Tindal charged the Jury very fully, and very impartially, but rather, as we think, leaning to the impression that Gale may have been innocent. The Jury, however, brought in a verdict of guilty against both.

Spectator, 15 April 1837

20 April 1837

Edmund stood in the bright gas-lit doorway and pulled a shining brass bell, which gave a muted clang. A man in full livery admitted him into the entrance hall and led him to a door with a small glazed aperture, through which Edmund knew he was

closely watched. After a few seconds, the door opened, and a second man appeared, held out his arm and bowed.

'Good evening, sir.'

Edmund passed up the richly carpeted stairs to the first floor and made his way to the large, red-curtained gaming room. The place was already full of people absorbed in play. Around a long table covered with a dark green cloth, twenty or so men sat or stood, their eyes fixed on the dice and the game. Two croupiers faced each other across the middle of the table.

A waiter approached Edmund and handed him a glass of brandy and soda water from a silver tray. Money flowed more freely from a gentleman who had been oiled. The back room contained a large table loaded with cold chickens, joints, salads and glistening puddings. The gambler need never leave. Except, of course, when his money ran out.

Edmund waited for the next game of hazard to commence and then joined the table, feeling the blood pumping faster in his veins as the dice were cast. He would, he reminded himself, stay only for an hour and wager only a guinea. But one hour became two. One guinea became three. Eventually, Edmund conceded defeat. This was not a quick way to make money; only a fast way to get rid of it. He took the stairs back to the street, cursing quietly. He could not afford to lose.

It was after ten o'clock by the time he left the Regent's Quadrant. The streets were still ablaze with gaslight and revellers dressed in velvet, satin and lace returned from the theatres or made their way out into the smoky night in search of excitement or oblivion. Edmund cut through the maze of alleyways to the north of the Strand, his feet crunching on discarded clay pipes and broken bottles. Here was a different kind of London. Barely clothed beggars stretched out their hands from the darkness and a pair of drunks – arm in arm – splashed past through the stinking puddles of refuse. A scrawny woman in a tattered cape pressed herself

so close to Edmund that he could smell the bitterness of gin upon her breath.

He was disillusioned and weary by the time he reached his chambers on Inner Temple Lane, where he rented rooms on the second floor of a grimy, once-white building, the stucco façade darkened by decades of smog and soot. He took the stairs quietly, hoping that his wife would already be in bed asleep.

As he opened the door to their rooms, Edmund saw an envelope on the floor on top of the mat. Stooping and taking the letter in his hand, he noticed that it bore a ministerial stamp. He cracked the wax and read the note within.

> The Right Honourable Lord Russell requests that Mr Fleetwood call at his earliest convenience at the Minister's office on Whitehall.

Edmund's heart jumped. Why on earth would the Home Secretary want to see him?

He turned the letter over, but it gave nothing away.

Edmund set off shortly after eight o'clock the following morning, his hair combed, his boots freshly blackened. He walked through the Temple Gardens and left the relative quiet of the inn to meet the chaos and stench of Fleet Street. Omnibuses, hackney coaches, one-horse cabs and carriages navigated the dust-filled road. At the dirtiest sections, young crossing sweepers ran nimbly between the vehicles to sweep the dirt into piles at the side of the road. Street sellers cried out their wares and steeple bells chimed together to make the noise of London that rose and fell but never stopped.

He joined the stream of clerks pouring into Westminster: middle-aged men in white neckcloths and black coats, some turning a rusty brown with age; younger clerks with flashes of

colour like tropical birds – pea-green gloves, crimson braces, tall shining hats.

As Edmund passed a baker's shop he caught a whiff of the doughy air. He stopped to join the queue and bought a small cottage loaf and a pennyworth of milk.

Continuing west along Fleet Street, Edmund was jostled and hustled until he reached the centre of London, the point that marked the separation of the City and the West End: Temple Bar. He paused there to take his breakfast, thinking of the heads of traitors that were once impaled on its spikes and left to rot – a warning to the people. How much had things really changed in the past century? Four hundred death sentences had been handed down in the past year alone.

As he approached Whitehall, he wondered, again, what the Home Secretary could possibly want with him.

Lord John Russell was a small angular man of five and forty. He sat before a large walnut desk, covered with orderly bundles of paper tied with different coloured ribbons. To his side was a tall, greying clerk with an unnerving face, misshapen like a reflection in a spoon. Edmund stood before the desk in his best waistcoat and a crisp linen shirt. There was a chair on his side of the desk but he had not been invited to sit on it.

'I have been sent a petition for mercy,' Lord Russell said to Edmund, picking up a letter from the table as though it were a dirty object. 'It alleges that the prisoner Gale is innocent and that I should look into the matter. Your father tells me you are already well versed in the facts of the Edgeware Road murder.'

Edmund swallowed. 'My lord, yes, fairly well. I've followed the case since the papers reported the discovery of the torso. I find it interesting professionally.'

Professional interest. That was how he had justified to himself his visit to Paddington Workhouse to view the victim's head,

preserved in spirits. It was certainly a strange thing: a pale, swollen face suspended in solution, the dark brown hair floating across it. A pickled head.

'I receive hundreds of these petitions a week from all over the country,' Lord Russell continued. 'Most of them are mere appeals *ad misericordiam* – "Spare oh mercifully my husband", et cetera et cetera. Unless there is some glaring anomaly or injustice in the case, we respond with a standard form saying that the law must take its course. We are, after all, a devilishly busy department. Is that not right, Mr Spinks?'

The greying clerk gave a slight bow.

'But you are aware of the excitement this case has caused, Mr Fleetwood?'

'Indeed, my lord, yes.'

Since Christmas, the newspapers and penny bloods had run red with details of the grisly treasure hunt for the body parts and the search for the killers. Every appearance of the suspects had been attended by a crowd of hundreds.

'In addition to which, there are various names at the bottom of this petition: Miss Fraser; Mrs Fry. Names that carry some weight.' Lord Russell's mouth stretched into a thin smile. 'I must therefore be seen to have considered the matter in earnest. This is where you come in. You are to look at the evidence that was before the court and make a recommendation as to whether the death sentence should be carried out. A month should be enough, I would think.'

'A month?' Edmund ran his fingers through his hair. 'This is a very interesting commission, my lord. However, in order to do the matter full justice, might I not need a little longer?' He swallowed again. 'Two months, perhaps?'

Lord Russell pushed his glasses further down his nose and peered at Edmund over them. 'Let us understand each other, Mr Fleetwood. I am, as you know, attempting to reduce the number of offences to which capital punishment applies, and I am willing

to exercise discretion where there has been an obvious miscarriage of justice. However, this is a crime for which the great majority of the public (the abolitionist lunatics aside) would support a hanging. The jury took fifteen minutes to convict Miss Gale of aiding and abetting James Greenacre in the horrific murder of a blameless woman. You know the state the body was found in?'

'Yes, my lord,' Edmund said, thinking of the mutilated face, the eye gone, the neck crudely sawn through, perhaps before she was dead.

'Unlike most of those tried in this country, she was represented. She was given the opportunity to make a statement but she chose to say virtually nothing at all. There is nothing I have seen,' the Home Secretary continued, 'to suggest that she has not received a fair trial. However, there are different degrees and shades of guilt and it may be that the punishment here does not fit the crime. I must show that I have considered the matter on His Majesty's behalf, and that is what I am asking you to do. You may have until the end of the first week in June, if you insist, but certainly no more. Mr Spinks here will show you all you need to see. He will also discuss with you your remuneration. We shall ensure it is more than adequate.'

'Thank you, my lord.'

'And, of course, if you do well in this commission you may expect further such appointments in future.'

For three years, Edmund had been struggling to make a name for himself at the criminal bar and now, at last, a high-profile case was being placed in his hands; a case that would provide at least a temporary solution to his financial difficulties. And yet he felt a twinge of unease.

'Would it,' he asked, 'not be normal in these circumstances to ask the police, rather than a lawyer, to look at the matter afresh?'

Again the thin smile. 'Mr Fleetwood, the police have already conducted a thorough investigation. The case has already been

tried. Spinks will take you through the papers. Look again, Fleetwood. Look again.' He lifted his hand to indicate Edmund was dismissed.

'Just one more question, my lord. Do I take it that it was my father who suggested me for the post?'

'Yes. You know we were at Edinburgh together? He said you were already acquainted with the case, and would do a good job.'

Edmund did his best to prevent his surprise from showing in his face. If that were true, it would be the first time in all his thirty-two years that his father had shown any faith in him.

The clerk led Edmund into an adjoining room and, from a large cabinet, removed a bundle of papers bound with a red ribbon.

'This is the report from the inquest. These are the affidavits and notes of evidence from the magistrates' court and the defendants' subsequent appearances. You will see that Miss Gale has changed her account slightly on each occasion. Hardly the mark of an innocent soul.'

Edmund did not reply. He would draw his own conclusions. 'Are there any other papers?'

'Here is a letter from the presiding judge, whom the Home Secretary asked to comment on the case. He considered that the verdict, although harsh, was appropriate, given the jury's findings that she helped to conceal the murder, and that there is no need to interfere with it. Nevertheless, as Lord Russell said, in a case of such notoriety we must show we have done more than that. This is the petition, and here are the trial notes. You've said you are familiar with the case?'

'I attended part of the trial,' Edmund said. In truth, he had sat through the full two days. He had stayed late into the evening, after the oil lamps were lit.

'Did you form an opinion?'

Edmund thought of Sarah Gale's slight figure in the vast dock,

the mirror above reflecting a ghostly light onto her expressionless face. 'The prosecution did a very good job with the evidence they had,' he said carefully.

'You may also wish to look at the various articles that have been published about the crime. Much has been said.'

'Yes, most of it pure nonsense.' The papers had vied with one another to produce the most salacious and far-fetched stories about Greenacre and Gale. It was no wonder they had been convicted, given what the jury must have read about them.

The clerk raised his eyebrows. 'No doubt you know best. If I can be of further assistance . . . ?'

Edmund had the distinct feeling he was being mocked. 'Has Greenacre himself not petitioned for mercy?'

'Oh, yes, of course,' the clerk said.

'Then, am I not to investigate his petition also?'

Spinks gave Edmund a look of mock surprise. 'I thought you were already acquainted with the case, sir?'

Edmund gave a curt nod.

'Well, then you will know that the prisoner Greenacre admitted to having cut Hannah Brown's body to pieces and distributed them around town. The man carried the head on his lap all the way to Stepney. Difficult to see how such a man can deny murder or, indeed, expect clemency.'

'Nevertheless, I would like to see his petition. On what basis does he say he is entitled to the King's mercy?'

The clerk gave a shrug. 'I can arrange for you to be provided with a copy, but his lawyers merely say the same as they did at the trial: that their client returned to his house to find Hannah Brown already dead and that he decided in "a moment of temporary insanity" to dismember her with a carpenter's saw.' He smiled. 'The Minister does not intend to appoint an investigator to consider his case. He is capable of making a decision on the papers.'

'Yes, I suppose he is. And does the prisoner Greenacre continue to say that Sarah Gale knew nothing of the whole affair?'

Spinks nodded. 'Yes, same story. She was entirely ignorant and wholly innocent, apparently. Almost endearing, really, how they continue to cover up for one other.'

Edmund ignored him. 'And if I find that the death sentence is not warranted—'

The clerk cut him off. 'The Minister will make a decision as to the appropriate punishment, should you recommend commutation: full pardon, penal servitude, transportation for the appropriate term, and so on. But he is, as I'm sure you know, attempting to reduce the number of convicts sent to the colonies. Strangely enough, they don't seem to want our society's cast-offs.'

Edmund thanked him brusquely and asked to be shown out.

As he descended the steps to the outer hall, Spinks called out, 'Might I remind you, sir, of the usual rule in these matters? Take nothing on its looks; take everything on evidence. Even the things you think you know.'

The promise of money to come was enough for Edmund to command Flora, their maid, to buy a large joint of mutton for dinner. He opened a bottle of claret and brought it to the dinner table himself.

'Well, Bessie, finally our luck appears to be turning.'

His wife looked up from the candle she was lighting and fixed him with her clear blue eyes. 'Why? What's happened?'

Edmund explained the commission, speaking hurriedly in his excitement. 'It could turn out very well for us. The Home Secretary said that there may be more such work in future; and having my name associated with such a high-profile matter may lead others to seek me out.'

Bessie was silent, looking down at her plate.