

Praise for
The Murder of Harriet Monckton

‘I loved *The Murder of Harriet Monckton*; what a *tour de force*! I’m blown away. Elizabeth Haynes completely transported me to that time and place. I also found the novel incredibly moving and I’m so glad to know Harriet’s story. The novel is an absolute triumph.’
—Elly Griffiths

‘Elizabeth Haynes evokes the language and world of the 1840s, and lifts Harriet from obscurity with a damn fine tale. In these #MeToo days, her rich and magnificent imagining of a long-forgotten murder connects the past to the present as if it were yesterday.’
—Lesley Thomson

‘Elizabeth Haynes is one of the top storytellers in a genre bursting with the best tale-spinners in the world. *The Murder of Harriet Monckton* is a page-turning mystery, charged with compassion, wisdom and a modern understanding of human nature and psychology. It is both a humane defence of women of all eras who choose not to conform and a celebration of their trailblazing. This is an important book, one which I just could not put down. If spirits exist, Harriet’s will take some comfort knowing that Elizabeth Haynes has set her trained, empathetic, forensic eye to vindicate her.’
—Julia Crouch

‘A historical whodunnit with heart; a story that was begging to be told. I can’t get poor Harriet out of my mind. Wonderful.’
—SJI Holliday

‘Elizabeth Haynes’s real-life story of a young Victorian woman who was systematically wronged by those around her resonates powerfully in the current climate. Moving and brilliantly written, this is a must-read from one of the most talented crime writers out there.’
—Cass Green

‘The writing is exceptional: I spent much of the book in a state of visceral terror for Harriet... Haynes captures the age perfectly and she’s particularly good on the precarious life of the unmarried woman, virtuous or not... The plot has a sense of completeness about it and the ending blew me away: it just seemed so right. In real life the murder might remain unsolved, but Haynes’ solution is neat, realistic and entirely plausible. Perhaps the highest praise that I can give this book is to say that it won’t be too long before I reread to see how it was all done.’
—*The Bookbag*

‘Absolutely brilliant! Elizabeth Haynes has brought to life a wonderful array of characters, recreated a truly authentic Bromley and given a voice to an intriguing mystery surrounding the death of a young woman. Highly recommended.’
—Tracy Fenton, *Compulsive Readers*

‘This page-turning whodunnit based in compelling historical reality reads like a modern psychological thriller, with all the resonance of the #MeToo movement. Haynes is a can’t-miss author for me.’
—Alexandra Sokoloff

‘Intricate and evocative, with such resonance for the age we are living through. Harriet will haunt you in the best possible way.’
—Sarah Hilary

‘A poignant and gripping reimagining of a real-life case from 1843 which skilfully evokes Victorian England in all its petty conventions and dark hypocrisy. *Brava*, Elizabeth Haynes.’
—Rachel Rhys

‘What a fascinating and deftly created novel. Drawing on real reports and statements from the time, Elizabeth Haynes recreates the final hours of a young woman murdered in Bromley in 1843. Authentic and intriguing.’
—Anna Mazzola

‘Dark, troubling and richly evocative. Elizabeth Haynes has reimagined the case of Harriet Monckton to startling effect.’
—Colette McBeth

THE
MURDER
f
HARRIET
MONCKTON
Elizabeth Haynes

myriad
m[∞]

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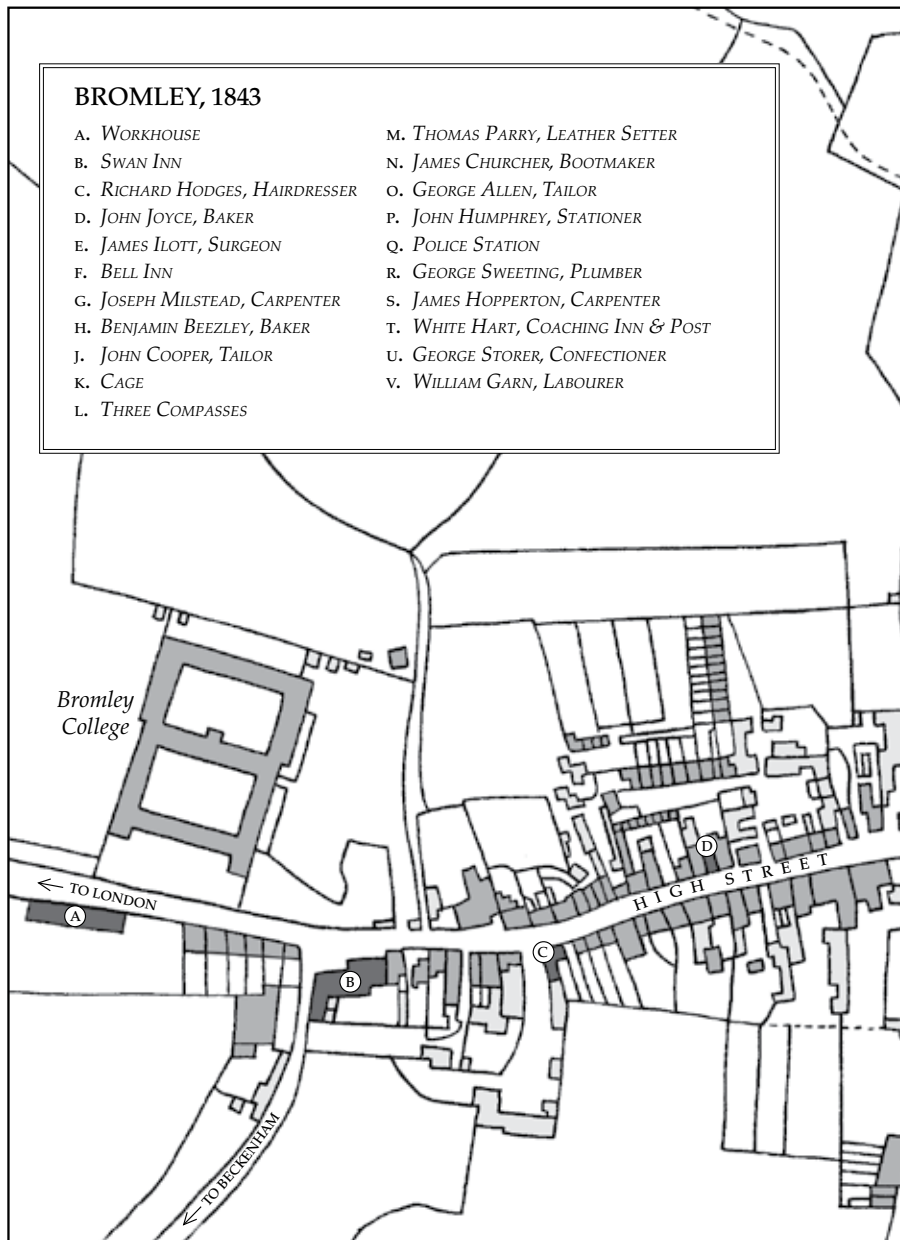
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*for Harriet, and her son
not forgotten*

BROMLEY, 1843

- | | |
|--------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| A. WORKHOUSE | M. THOMAS PARRY, LEATHER SETTER |
| B. SWAN INN | N. JAMES CHURCHER, BOOTMAKER |
| C. RICHARD HODGES, HAIRDRESSER | O. GEORGE ALLEN, TAILOR |
| D. JOHN JOYCE, BAKER | P. JOHN HUMPHREY, STATIONER |
| E. JAMES ILOTT, SURGEON | Q. POLICE STATION |
| F. BELL INN | R. GEORGE SWEETING, PLUMBER |
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| J. JOHN COOPER, TAILOR | U. GEORGE STORER, CONFECTIONER |
| K. CAGE | V. WILLIAM GARN, LABOURER |
| L. THREE COMPASSES | |



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Prologue

Monday, 6th November, 1843

When Death comes to visit, he arrives clothed in the most unexpected of disguises.

Harriet Monckton did not have time to think this, or remark upon something as profound as Death and Life. She did not even, in the end, have time to say her prayers or ask for help or confess her sins.

But at least she was not alone. Such a privilege is not afforded to all; perhaps this act visited upon her was one of mercy.

She did not deserve it – mercy, that is. Standing straight-backed, proud, a small frown as if she had been interrupted in the act of prayer, instead of what had actually just taken place, something far more earthly. The very air around her was filthy, contaminated. She reeked of sin.

There had been conversation, a little of it: hushed, although this late and in this place there was nobody to hear. Perhaps someone might be walking home from a visit, along the lane, some thirty yards away, but, here, they were entirely alone.

There is something else I could do to help you.

She said, ‘I thought we agreed—’

You’re not the first girl to find herself in trouble, you know. It’s obvious to anyone with an eye and half a brain. Look at you.

She even looked down at herself. Dresses hide a great deal, but there comes a point when the swelling of a girl’s belly lifts the bottom of her stays and the whole shape of her looks odd. Looks wrong.

‘If I just had enough money,’ she said, ‘then I should go away and not trouble anyone any further ...’

This is a better way. Solves the problem altogether. Do you want it or not?

‘What is it?’

A draught. It will help you get back to the way you were; the effect is very quick.

She considered it. She even looked at the bottle, although she did not read the label. If she had, she would have seen this:

THE CORDIAL BALM OF SYRIACUM

For treatment of those who have fallen
into a state of chronic disability.

Nervous disorders of every kind, sinkings,
anxieties, and tremors which so dreadfully
affect the weak and the sedentary will, in a
short time, be succeeded by cheerfulness
and every presage of health.

Provided by R. and L. Perry, and Co.

PERRY’S PURIFYING SPECIFIC PILLS

19, Berners Street, London

The Cordial Balm of Syriacum, of course, was not what the bottle contained.

‘Surely it would be a terrible sin,’ she said, but already she was wavering.

The look on her face. Dismissal, followed by doubt. Whatever plans she had made herself, they were not foolproof. Things could always go wrong. And how much easier it would be to wipe clean the slate, to start again. She would do things differently, of course. And her life could slip back to the way it was. She would be respectable, whole. She could go to Arundel, as she had planned to, before her problem manifested itself. She could still – although she was getting on in age – make a fair match.

All of these thoughts visible on her face.

‘Will it hurt?’ she asked, and Death rubbed his hands with glee, knowing she was almost his.

A little, perhaps. Not much worse than you suffer every month. It will be quick.

It wasn’t a lie, not really. At least this particular suffering would be over with swiftly, and she would, actually, get back to the way she had been, albeit the state of existence before she was born. The state of oblivion.

There was a moment’s hesitation, but then she uncorked the bottle and drank the contents down. Her last act on earth was a brave one. Perhaps that would make a difference.

The look upon her face at the end, after the initial spasms and the shock of the pain that seared down her gullet as the poison took effect – thirty-five grains of it, they would estimate, when three-quarters of a grain was supposed enough to kill a man – was almost one of peace. Surprise, perhaps, that it should end thus. And here, of all places, illuminated only by a guttering candle. The supplier of the poison could slip away unnoticed. The agony was swift and profound. The spasms caused her to bite down on her tongue and arch backwards as she fell. There were no screams. Nothing but a squeak, and some rasping sound like someone trying to clear their throat. By the time she hit the floor, she was already dead. Dark blood bubbled from between her lips, the colour of varnish. Her eyes were half open, glassy.

For some moments, there was silence.

She would have to be moved, of course; she could not stay here. The second part of the plan was set in motion. Half lifted, half dragged ... but then the small bottle that had been clutched in her spasmed fingers slipped free and clinked on to the stone floor, along with some coins.

She was heavier than she looked. Perhaps she could be left, after all.

The world would forget about Harriet Monckton. Within a few years, even her family would cease to talk about her.

Just another girl who had fallen into sin, like so many others. It was better this way. After the initial shock, her family would thrive without her; her friends would be able to resume their lives in peace. The town would go back to the way it was, eventually: honest, righteous, sure in the knowledge that order had been restored.

There had been no other choice. For the greater good, it had to be done.

From outside the chapel came the sound of footsteps on the flagstones.

Someone was coming.



Tuesday, 7th November, 1843

Frances Williams

At first light I sent a boy to Harriet's mother, to ask after her. Half an hour later, he returned with a note. Harriet was not there. She had not been seen by them since yesterday morning, when she went there to change her dress.

The reply washed over me like cold water, and I knew then that something ill had befallen my dear friend.

The conversations you have with yourself, at times such as this: you try to remain rational, to think through the events in a logical order. Last night, she had gone out to post a letter. She said to me she would be back soon, and she would make me some gruel. I was feverish, thick with it, not concentrating. She told me to get back into bed, to try to rest. She said she would not be long.

I must have fallen asleep, then, for I woke and the room was cold, the candle burned low. And she was not there. I was dazed. I was shivering with the fever. I got out of bed and searched, in case she had returned and left me a note, telling me she had gone out again.

But there was no note.

I tried to sleep some more. I was not worried, not then; so many things might have happened whilst I slept. She might have been called away. She would not have woken me to tell me that, and perhaps she had not had time to leave a note. She might have expected to be back again before I woke. She might just have stepped outside for a moment, to speak to someone.

But by then it was four o'clock. Too late to be out, too early to be out. It was dark night outside, still.

In the end, I went back to bed and lay there, listening for her tread on the step outside, listening for conversation out there in the night, but all was quiet.

And then, eventually, the message to Farwig, to Harriet's mother, and the reply, and she was missing. Who would take my place at the school? Harriet had promised to do it. She said she would take the girls' lessons until I felt better, until I could manage to speak without coughing.

I sent the boy to the schoolhouse, to warn Mr Campling that my deputy was missed; I told him the pupil teachers would have to manage for today.

Oh, I went through all possible emotions, that morning. I was curious, I was vexed; I was fearful for her. Exhausted from another wakeful night, I knew my thoughts were not rational. *Think, think*, I told myself. *You must know where she has gone. She must have said something, last night, something you missed. That she was going to visit someone else*; but there was nothing like that. She went to post a letter. She said she would come back, to make some gruel. She said she would not be long.

And then my thoughts turned to him, to Tom Churcher; outside, on the step, asking for her. I told him: *Harriet has gone to post a letter*. He wanted to wait. I told him he could not. I told him he should talk to her in the morning, and, in the end, he left.

Perhaps he had seen her? Perhaps they had met, in the street? Perhaps an accident had taken place, somewhere; she had fallen, in the dark, injured herself and lain in a ditch, insensible, unable to cry for help?

You think so many things. You try to find the right solution, to a mystery, and you can never quite confront what must be the truth. You veer away from it, because facing it is too terrible.

Reverend George Verrall

I was in my study working on the series of lectures I have been delivering on the subject of the Lord's Last Supper, when through the blanket of my fierce concentration I heard the knock upon the door.

Now when the even was come, he sat down with the twelve. And as they did eat, he said, Verily I say unto you, that one of you shall betray me. And they were exceeding sorrowful, and began every one of them to say unto him, Lord, is it I? And he answered and said, He that dippeth his hand with me in the dish, the same shall betray me. The Son of man goeth as it is written of him: but woe unto that man by whom the Son of man is betrayed! it had been good for that man if he had not been born. Then Judas, which betrayed him, answered and said, Master, is it I? He said unto him, Thou hast said.

Thou hast said.

It is you. It is you.

And then, my wife at the door.

'What is it? I asked not to be disturbed.'

'Mary Ann Monckton. She insists upon seeing you.'

I turned from my desk. 'Well, show her in.'

Sarah paused, then returned to the hallway. I heard Mary Ann's voice insisting that she would not stay, and then she was shown into my study. I bade her sit beside the fire.

'Sorry for disturbing you, sir,' she said, refusing the seat. 'I am looking for my sister.'

'Harriet?'

Afterwards I thought it a mistake to utter that name. Mary Ann had three sisters; that I knew Harriet more intimately than any of them was not something that should be brought to attention under any circumstances, least of all these.

*Sarah Dorset, born Monckton, and Elizabeth who is now
Elizabeth Carpenter, and Mary Ann
and then Harriet last of all
best of all*

‘Yes, Harriet. She was to have stayed with Miss Williams last night, and yet she did not. Miss Williams thought she must have come home, but she did not.’ The young woman appeared in some distress, struggling to offer even these few words.

‘Perhaps she has gone to some other friend?’

‘We cannot think of anywhere else she could have gone. We have enquired of everyone; no one has seen her.’

I offered her a smile. ‘As you can see, she is not here.’

My mind was still upon the word of the Lord. *One of you shall betray me... Master, is it I?*

Mary Ann stiffened at my humour. ‘That’s what Mrs Verrall just said. If you don’t mind me saying so, sir, it isn’t very kind. I fear something terrible has befallen my sister, and, sir, if you’re not able to offer me any assistance in locating her, I should be grateful if you could remember Harriet in your prayers.’ She headed for the door.

‘Wait, please.’

And she did not turn. She could not bring herself to look at me. It brought back a sudden memory of Harriet doing the same thing; late summer, the heat of it, stifling. Looking at the back of her neck, the whiteness of the skin, and the sheen of perspiration upon it.

‘I’ll see what I can do. To help with the search.’

one of you shall betray me

Thomas Churcher

I was working in my father’s shop. I saw Mary Ann Monckton come through the door, her face pale, shawl clutched tight about her.

‘Have you seen Harriet?’ she asked.

‘No,’ I said.

It was not yet nine o’clock, and I was the only one present. Father was gone to the tanner’s.

‘Is she not at the school?’ I asked, because that was where she was most likely to be. ‘She is helping Miss Williams.’

‘I’m aware of that, Tom Churcher,’ she said, in that cold way she has. She thinks herself so fine, Harriet’s sister. She thinks ill of men like me. ‘She is not at the school.’

‘Well, she is not here.’

‘But you do not know where she is?’

‘No.’

‘And Clara?’

‘She is not here either.’

And she tilted her head to one side and spoke to me as if to an imbecile.

‘I can see that for myself. Perhaps Clara has seen Harriet. Where is she?’

‘At home.’

‘Very well,’ she said, and made to leave the shop.

I stared after her, thinking of Miss Williams, and that thing she said. They all believe me to be a fool. I am not clever like some of them. I am good at music and I am good at making and mending boots, and I am good at listening.

Neither Harriet nor Clara paid it any mind, but I took it into my heart and I have thought about it much since then. *You shan’t go to Arundel, Harriet. I won’t let you leave me.* She said it lightly, with a smile, but her hand on Harriet’s arm was gripping.

Mary Ann should have asked me for help, I thought. Had she asked me to come and search for Harriet I should gladly have done so. After all, I know Harriet. I know the places she likes to go, her secret places. I know her secrets. But her sister thinks me a fool, and for that reason I stayed where I was and waited for my father.

Reverend George Verrall

There being no sign of the girl, at half-past one o'clock I went to the police station and spoke to the officer behind the counter, a young man with sparse pale whiskers on his long chin.

'Help you, sir?'

'I understand a search is being made for a member of my congregation,' I said, 'a Miss Monckton.'

'Yes, sir.'

A thought crossed my mind that this youth could, should he be so inclined, clap me in irons and throw me into a cell. He was scarcely older than my eldest boy. I licked my lips. 'And there has been no news?'

'Not so far, sir.'

'I am very concerned about it,' I continued. 'Her state of mind, in particular. I fear something terrible must have befallen her. Poor child.'

'What makes you say that, sir?'

It was said with nothing more than an idle curiosity, vague interest, but my senses were brought alert. 'Just that – a young woman, alone ... and she has been somewhat ... how to say it ... a little troubled, perhaps.'

stop fumbling over it, man

say what you mean... Harriet is lost, entirely lost

Satan has found her and taken her for his own, and she must be found

none of that

it won't do

it won't do at all

'Troubled, sir?'

'It would be as well to consider that the Bishop's Pond should be dragged. I wonder if that has been thought of? Perhaps I could speak with the inspector?'

'He's very busy, sir.'

'Or the sergeant?'

'Out on enquiries, sir.'

'Quite, quite.'

'I'm happy to note down your concerns, sir, or perhaps you should like to leave a note for the sergeant when he comes in?'

don't overdo it, George

just a hint

just a suggestion

you don't want them thinking this is all a bit suspicious

I waited.

After perhaps ten minutes, the sergeant emerged from the room at the back. Out on enquiries? Or just avoiding me, most likely. Samuel King, once a member of the chapel, but no longer. Full of his own self-importance and much in want of judgement.

'Mr Verrall,' he said, booming. 'How can I help you?'

I told him something of what I knew, and left as soon as I could. Outside, the day was still grey and cloudy. This time last year it was snowing; the beginning of November, and this curious warmth in the air, the smells of the town hanging in it like threadbare laundry, no breeze to disperse it.

Tom Churcher was watching me from the doorway of his father's shop. When I met his glance he gave me a nod. I felt a spike of fury, crossing the road with a purpose, striding fast and only just missing the butcher's cart.

'What are you doing?' I hissed at him.

'Nothing!' he said, alarm written all over his face. 'Nothing. Have they found her?'

'What do you think?'

'I've heard nothing,' he said.

I softened, then. Poor Tom, poor sad boy, had he forgotten already?

'I suggested they should drag the Bishop's Pond.'

'What for?' he asked.

‘For Harriet, of course.’

He looked at me, cow-eyed, blinking. A slick of perspiration on his pale brow.

‘Leave it until it gets dark,’ I said to him. ‘If there is no news by then, take someone with you, to look for her. Someone sensible.’

I thought he was going to protest, but he stopped himself.

‘I will pray for you, Tom. I will pray for all of us.’

That seemed to alleviate some of his distress. I went back to the house for dinner. The house was echoing quiet, and I sat alone in the cold dining room wondering if everyone had left. At length I heard footsteps coming up the corridor and the door opened. Even though her presence was expected, she startled me with it. Sarah came in, and without speaking a word placed a plate upon the table in front of me. A mutton chop, and potatoes. She made to leave the room.

‘Where is Mrs Burton?’

‘Her sister is ill. Again. She has gone to Sydenham; she said she would be back in the morning.’

‘That’s probably for the best. And Ruth?’

‘Visiting Miss Gent. She has another chill.’

‘You’re not eating?’ I asked her.

She paused in the doorway, her back to me. ‘Lost my appetite,’ she said, and left, closing the door behind her. Footsteps retreated back towards the kitchen.

I offered my thanks to the Lord, and, almost as an afterthought, asked Him to bestow His Grace upon Tom. After a moment’s reflection, I prayed for Harriet’s soul. Then I ate the mutton, which had the unusual quality of being both tough and greasy at the same time. The potatoes chased each other around the plate. My breath caught in my chest.

Lord grant me thy peace

why will no one look me in the face any more?

I ate half of the potatoes and the cutlery clattered on to the plate. I wiped the grease from my lips with my hand-

kerchief, folded it and replaced it in my pocket. I took out my watch and observed that it was two o’clock exactly. The watch ticked, hard and fast.

Frances Williams

At two o’clock Thomas Steers came with a note from Mr Campling:

There has been no word from Miss Monckton. Mrs Campling has been kind enough to take the girls this morning, but please ensure that you attend the school tomorrow at the usual hour. I should like to discuss the matter with you before lessons begin. No further absence will be tolerated.

I sent the boy back again with a message to say I had understood. What else should I say? Perhaps the fever would take hold once more; perhaps I would be dead by tomorrow. Perhaps at any moment Harriet would stroll in, smiling, telling me she had gone to this friend, or that friend, and she had told me as much last night, and how very silly I was, for worrying so. I still wanted so very much to believe that all was well.

But the hours continued to pass without her, and the evening grew dark again, and I lit the lamps and told myself that she must, surely, be safe and warm somewhere. There comes a moment when you stop lying to yourself, and you start to think about the secrets you’ve buried, the truths you’ve discovered, the ones you keep close to your heart.

The truth that there was not one Harriet, but two: the Harriet you knew and loved; and the other Harriet, the girl with the secrets, the girl you did not really know at all.

Reverend George Verrall

By half-past five, it was dark. I had been out intermittently, visiting church members, asking after Harriet. The opinions were varied: that she had left the town, for some nefarious reason; that she had gone to Arundel early. Several were of the belief that some ill must have befallen her.

‘We can none of us know the will of the Lord,’ said Samuel Taylor darkly.

indeed

‘I will pray for her, that she is found swiftly,’ said Elspeth Taylor, crossing herself like a Papist. She has never quite got the hang of nonconformism. I let her get away with it, because she is generous with her tithing. Not all of them are.

pray for her, I will pray for her

Echoes throughout the town. No real sense of the urgency, not yet. Missing was just that: missing. She might have changed her plans at the last minute. She might have gone for a walk, lost track of the time...maybe she has turned her ankle, taken shelter in a barn. Fallen asleep.

But, by then, everyone had retreated inside. Fires were lit, although the weather was still mild. Candles flickered in windows as night descended.

I walked the short distance to the Churchers’ workshop. James Churcher was at the counter, noting the day’s business neatly in his ledger. Through the doorway at the back I saw Tom sitting on a bench, his hands hanging between his knees, a cat twisting its skinny body around his ankles.

‘What can I do for you, Reverend?’ said old man Churcher.

not so very old

less than ten years on me, although he looks older

looks worn

‘No word yet on the Monckton girl,’ I said. ‘It’s very perplexing.’

‘She’ll be found in a ditch somewhere,’ he said, adding, ‘God rest her soul,’ as if that made it less blunt.

Tom Churcher stared. ‘Good evening, Tom,’ I said.

He nodded, in response. ‘Perhaps I can help with the search,’ he said. ‘Seeing as I’m done here.’

James Churcher frowned. ‘If you must. Although what you’re going to see in the dark I couldn’t say. Better off waiting for first light, if you ask me.’

Tom took up his hat.

‘Take someone with you,’ I said to him. ‘Take Sweeting. He will be at home, if you go there now.’

As he passed me, he took a deep breath in.

now he is over the worst of it

he is stronger than he looks

he can bear the weight of the world upon his shoulders, that boy

Thomas Churcher

George Sweeting did not want to come with me. His wife was cooking a stew, he said, and his youngest was unwell. He had better things to do.

‘Reverend bade me come,’ I said. ‘He told me you would go with me.’ He pulled a face at me and collected his cap.

I had thought about where to go, in advance. Up Widmore Lane, across the fields towards Farwig and her mother’s house. Then back down past the workhouse and the college, back to the Market Place. It should not appear planned. It should be thorough.

‘Funny business,’ was the first thing he said to me.

I had not trusted myself to speak up to then. What did you talk about, anyway, when you were looking for a girl that had gone missing?

‘Yes it is,’ I said.

'I reckon she's gone to London,' he said, out of breath. We were in the field at this point, Sweeting's lantern swinging shadows across the bare earth, although the moon was full once more and we could see lamplight in the windows of the houses up ahead. He was looking for a body, a collapsed pile of clothing, somewhere in the field. If she had been there, someone would have seen her in daylight. 'Or that mad Williams woman has done something foolish. If you ask me, she don't belong in Bromley. All of this happened since she turned up.'

'All what?'

He ignored my question, and asked me one in its place. 'And she said nothing to you?'

'No,' I said. Then I added, 'Why should she?'

I could hear the smirk in his voice. 'You and her were close. By all accounts.'

I stopped walking then. It took him a moment or two to react, before he stopped too and looked back at me, holding up the lantern.

'I'll not hear you say that,' I said. 'It's untrue, for a start. Such things hurt those I care about.'

'Like who?' he laughed. Then, 'Ah. Yes. Emma. Well, she'll be glad Harriet's gone, if gone she is. They'll not be fighting over you any longer.'

'Nobody's been fighting.'

I heard him chuckle at it. We carried on. There was no point talking to him. He thought himself better than I. Why had the reverend prompted me to bring him, of all people? We had never been friends. Even the reverend knew that ...

I stopped walking again. *That* was why he had told me to bring Sweeting. Had I taken a friend, I should perhaps have found myself with someone to confide in. There was no way on God's green earth I would share what I knew with this man.

'Hurry up, man,' Sweeting said. 'What you dawdling for?'

At last we came back down the High Street and into the Market Place. Still busy, people everywhere. And the White Hart with the late coach outside it, the light above the door showing the steaming horses and the people stepping down, the smell of warm bodies and beer, laughter because there were still people who were happy, even if I was not.

'Well, that's that,' Sweeting said, looking at the pub. 'We've done our bit. No sign of her. Now you can go 'ome, and so can I.'

'We should look in the chapel,' someone said. Perhaps it was me. It sounded like my voice. 'The Lord Himself knows she spent enough time there.'

'The gate'll be locked,' Sweeting said. 'She can't have got in.'

Despite his objection we walked down through the Market Place and turned left into Widmore Lane, back to where we had started. In front of us stood the brick building that housed the parish fire engine, and beyond it the Cage, now defunct. It would have been a good place to hide a body: two cells, opposite each other, dank and cold and open to the elements. It had not been used since the police station had opened in the Market Place, a couple of years ago.

Sweeting shone his lantern inside: it was empty, of course.

The chapel came into view, pale in the moonlight, ghostly, hiding behind the beech tree and the horse-chestnut in the churchyard, both of them almost bare of leaves.

The gate was not locked. I pushed at it, and it swung open.

'Who was last in there and didn't lock it?' Sweeting said. 'We should make enquiries. Beezley will know.'

'Mr Beezley isn't the only one with a key,' I said.

'You mean the reverend? He is most meticulous about locking up, and I should know; you remember last summer when I was clearing up the books, and he locked me in? Four hours I was in there, till Eliza went to enquire of me at the Manse.'

Sweeting handed me the lantern and tried the main door of the chapel, but that was locked. I thought he would give it up at that point, turn back to the road, but then, without my even having to prompt him, he led the way up the path to the side of the chapel.

Back here, in the shadow of the chapel, it was properly dark. I kept behind him and tried to use the light from the lantern to pick my steps carefully between the potholes and uneven slabs.

He was at the back door, then, twisting at the handle. He banged it with the flat of his hand. 'See? Proper locked, both doors. Nobody in there.'

'Perhaps I should go and get the key,' I said. 'She might have gone in to pray, got locked in as you did. Perhaps she fell asleep.'

Sweeting guffawed at this. To make a point, he knocked again. 'Harriet!' he called. 'Harriet Monckton, are you there?'

No reply, of course, although from the road outside the Three Compasses I heard a woman laugh and a man pass some comment.

'Check round the back,' someone said, with my voice. 'Now we are here.'

And so I let him take the lead once more, towards the privy, knowing what lay there, waiting for us. For a moment I believed my own lies. I thought perhaps we should open the privy door and find nothing. That perhaps she was not dead at all, but in a faint; that she had recovered and wandered off somewhere, or got on the coach to London; nothing to worry about, nothing of any consequence. Harriet was alive and well, just somewhere else. Somewhere far from Bromley. Maybe she had never existed at all.

But then Sweeting pushed open the door, and I heard him shout, 'Hi, what's this?' or something like that, and then he screamed like a girl and I knew it was true and she was really dead and nothing would ever be the same again.

Reverend George Verrall

Churcher came to the Manse, out of breath.

'Harriet's been found,' he said. Wild-eyed. 'In the privy, at the chapel.'

'Lord have mercy,' I said.

'Sweeting has gone for the surgeon.'

'Have you told the police?'

'No,' he said.

fool, you should have gone there first

'I will go with you,' I said. 'Sarah! My coat, my hat.'

She was there anyway, listening in the hallway, standing motionless, frowning.

I went to the police station and raised the alarm. Together we walked quickly back to the chapel with the benefit of the sergeant's bull's-eye lantern to light our way. The surgeon was already there and the narrow path running beside the chapel was crammed full of people. Sweeting was there, and George Butler too for some reason, and another figure, and Jasper Tarbutt the drayman, Jenner, Alfred Garn, and then all of us besides. I could not see her, just glimpses through the dark mass of bodies. Her boot, beside the door, a tiny snail clinging to the edge of it. The corner of her dress.

the blood all black in her mouth

dear God

And all the while my heart hammering as if it should burst from my chest, muttering prayers and not even aware of what I was saying.

dear God have mercy

'Someone get me a light, for God's sake!'

The sergeant pushed forward and illuminated the scene for the benefit of the surgeon, who was crouched over. I saw her bonnet, pushed down over her face. Perhaps it was a good thing, for her face was obscured. It might be a pile of rags, a boot, propped up as a facsimile of a human being.

‘What’s that, in her hand?’

‘How did she fall, thus? Did she strike her head?’

‘In the privy, of all places...’

And one of them was sobbing. Girlish gasps, shudders. I could not see which of them it was but at least it was not Tom Churcher, who was beside me, tall and still, the side of his face lit by the moon, carved from marble.

get a grip, man

whoever you are

The surgeon stood up. ‘I shall need a strong man – Jasper, you’ll do. And the sergeant. The rest of you should go home.’

Nobody moved for a moment, but then Tom turned and walked back down the path, and Sweeting followed and then Butler and the others and then it was just the few of us remaining.

‘Reverend,’ the surgeon said, noticing me at last. ‘A terrible thing to happen here.’

‘A terrible thing to happen anywhere at all,’ I said. ‘I should like to go to her mother.’

‘Of course, of course. We need to move the body to allow a proper examination. You are willing to inform her family, then?’

‘I am willing. A sorry business, but I am the man for it.’

They agreed to follow at a slower pace, once a blanket had been obtained to cover the body. I set off across the fields for Farwig, thinking of the words I should use to break the sad tidings. I had done this before, of course, many times. Informing people of a death in the family is a sorrowful duty to have as a pastor but I relish it, for it is a privilege, seeing people at their most raw. Fathers who have lost sons; children killed, illnesses, accidents. Mothers, howling at their loss.

I did not know Harriet’s mother well. She did not attend chapel, and rarely came to the town. What would be her reaction? Harriet was fond of her as a dutiful daughter should

be, but she was a little afraid of her. Her father had died two years ago, and since then her mother had hardened.

And this, the worst of all news to bring to a family home. It was right and just that I should be the one to bring it.

‘Mrs Monckton,’ I said, as soon as I had been granted entry. ‘I am most sorry to inform you that your daughter is found, but the Spirit has fled.’

They both stared at me; the mother and the daughter, dark-eyed like Harriet. Not as pretty.

‘What?’ said the girl, rudely. ‘What are you talking about?’

I addressed the older lady, sitting still beside the fire. Had she even heard me? ‘My sincerest condolences, madam. They are bearing her home to you as I speak.’

‘She’s dead?’ the girl asked.

‘She will be here presently,’ I said.

‘But she’s dead?’

‘Yes, I am afraid so.’

‘How? How did she die?’

‘The surgeon should be able to inform us, once he has had a chance to examine her more closely.’

‘Was it an accident?’

is this girl stupid?

‘I’m afraid it’s impossible to say.’

‘Where was she found?’

I coughed. ‘Outside the chapel,’ I said.

‘Outside? But how was she not seen? We’ve all been looking, all day. Someone looked at the chapel. Someone would have seen her.’

dear God grant me patience

‘She was – forgive me – somewhat concealed from view.’

That shut her up. Something about the word ‘concealed’, it implied a third party. Dangerous. Her mouth shut tightly; she would say nothing else. Nothing at all. She did not trust me.

And then, the knock at the door, the sound of shuffling and breathing from outside, and from the girl a wail like an injured beast; and Harriet came home.

Thomas Churcher

My mind was empty. I poured it out like milk, all those thoughts, the picture in my mind of Harriet lying there. I poured it all out into the gutter and walked home with a mind clear and dry like a washed pot.

They all looked at me as I came through the door and something broke; perhaps I had not poured it all out as well as I thought I had because it was all there again, and I could smell her dress and her hair, how it felt damp in my hand and how her eyes had looked at me in the chapel those times when she was supposed to be praying but her eyes were open all the same.

‘Thomas,’ my father said.

And I could hear her calling me that, *Thomas, Thomas*, and laughing with her small white teeth and the dimples in her cheeks that you only saw when she smiled.

‘Thomas,’ he said again. ‘Take off your coat, lad.’

I could still move; I could still hear them. But in my head it all swam together like mud in a puddle, swirling and mixing. Harriet at Miss Williams’s room, looking at me while she was drinking tea and listening to me – not like they do, properly *listening* to what I told her like I was teaching her something, and not the other way around; and Harriet with her smile at the tail end of the summer in the fields, the smell of the harvest and the turned earth, and then we went by the river and into the shade, and the pine needles underneath us warm and springy and smelling like a perfume.

‘She’s dead,’ I said.

And then Harriet lying on the flagstones in a bad way with her eyes open but not seeing, her bonnet tied under her neck but hanging off, her fingers curled, and how heavy she was to lift, and I’ve lifted her before but she felt heavier, she felt *dead* like an animal, not like Harriet at all. A snail worked its way along the edge of her boot, and I wanted to brush it gently away, as she would have done herself if she had still been breathing.

‘Something’s wrong with him,’ my brother James said.

‘Tom, sit down.’

And Clara, coming into the parlour from the kitchen. ‘What’s happened? What’s wrong with Tom?’

‘They found the Monckton girl,’ my father said. ‘Dead.’

‘Harriet?’ Her hand, over her mouth. ‘Dead? Oh, no, no. Please, dear God no.’

I went through to the parlour and hung my hat and coat up and went to sit down on the chair but instead I sat down on the floor and curled tight because then I might disappear. I did not know what to do, how to be. I curled up and I didn’t cry because I am a man and men don’t cry, even when bad, bad things happen. But then not crying made my stomach turn and I uncurled and went on to my hands and knees and was sick on to the floor.

They were all watching me.

Reverend George Verrall

Sarah had locked the door, which meant she had gone to bed. She had left a candle lighted on the hall stand, and I carried it upstairs. From the boys’ room, all was quiet.

other men come home drunk and insensible

for my abstinence you should consider yourself fortunate, wife

But she was not asleep. I took off my clothes and laid them carefully upon the chair. She stirred as I pulled the

nightshirt over my head, and as I turned to the bed she sat up and looked at me.

'I went to the Moncktons,' I said, although she had not asked. 'Poor, poor woman, her mother. She has barely recovered from the death of her husband.'

'I wasn't aware you knew the family so well,' she said.

'I don't, to be truthful with you.'

'Just Harriet,' said Sarah. There was an edge to it.

'And no longer Harriet,' I said. 'The poor girl is gone to be with the Lord.'

'You think that's where she's gone?'

'Sarah, please. Be kind.'

'And she was in the privy?'

'Yes.'

I made myself comfortable and blew out the candle. After a moment my eyes became accustomed to the dark, and the light from the moon visible at the edges of the curtains painted the room in a pale grey light.

'How did it appear that she died?' Sarah asked.

'They are not certain.'

We lay side by side in the darkness. In my head the thoughts of Harriet, living and dead, twisting around each other.

*the last time I saw her she was weeping
and then silent, nodding her assent*

'It's still so interminably warm,' I said. 'Surely we shall have winter soon.'

her mouth, dark with blood

'I'll not wish for it,' she murmured.

Her tone had softened, and I thought perhaps she might be willing. Something about the day, the horror of it and yet the constant, constant reminders of Harriet, who she had been, and that I should never see her alive again. If I were a man given to sentimentalities, I should be in need of a wife to give me comfort at such a time of loss. I thought about saying

this to her, but instead I turned in bed and put my arm about her waist. She did not move, but I felt her tense.

'Sarah,' I said.

She had but rarely refused me. That, I would say, was to her credit. Men often came to me for advice, when their wives had grown cold towards them. Telling me that they had to be forceful, to push themselves through thighs gripped together, holding their women by the wrists. A symptom of getting older, I would tell them. Of childbirth, of tragedy. And I counselled the men to persist but to be gentler, and I counselled the wives to remember their oaths. But I took it as a sign of a successful marriage and a pure heart, that my own wife did not deny me my conjugal rights.

And yet even before the boys, the three living and the two who have gone to the Lord, all she did was lie there, inert, waiting for me to finish. She could not even bring herself to lift her arms about my neck, lying there with her fists clenched into balls. In the dark I wanted to think that she could be someone else, but the thinness of her, the bones of her hips that dug in, the flat, slack skin of her belly, was too familiar.

*small wonder I sought release elsewhere
how is a man supposed to function
without the relief of it?*

Not a word was spoken. I lay in silence, my breathing slowing, thinking of Harriet.

Frances Williams

It was Beezley who told me the news. In my heart I knew, already, of course. She was nowhere to be found, for a whole night and a whole day, during which I looked out of the window and wished that she had gone to London early, without telling anyone; or perhaps had gone to Hackney to

see Maria Field, or that she had gone already to Arundel. But there was only one possibility.

And outside all day the grey skies and the unseasonably warm temperatures, and the breeze blowing bad news up the lane.

At ten o'clock Tom Churcher had been outside, talking to Mrs Beezley. I saw him look towards my window, and then she turned too. Shortly afterwards he came to my door.

'Mr Beezley says Harriet did not come back last night.'

He did not ask how I was feeling. Perhaps he could tell by the sight of me; he looked pale and ill himself. He said he would make enquiries of her, in the town, and that he would pray. Fine help that would be. By eleven I guessed that half the town would be at prayer, or making a show of doing so at least. Hypocrites. How I despised them! Or, specifically, the adults. Not my girls.

But by noon even I was making an attempt at a prayer, for there was nothing else to be done. *Please let Harriet come home. Please, God, if you can hear me, let her be safe, after all.* But to me it was like speaking underwater: nonsense, breathless, soulless; empty words.

Then, at last: after dark – almost a full twenty-four hours since I had last seen my friend alive – Beezley rapped at my door.

'You heard the news? They found Harriet.'

As if standing where Beezley stood I pictured my own face, like stone. White, still, cold marble. 'Where is she?'

'In the privy at the chapel. Tom Churcher found her. With Sweeting.'

'In the privy!'

'Dead as dead. Poor child.'

My face, like stone. My lips, like marble. Would not move.

He was expecting something else. I tried to sculpt a different expression. Shock. Horror at it. 'Dead?'

'The surgeon has had her taken to her mother's.'

'Poor, poor Mrs Monckton. Poor Harriet. My dear friend. What can have happened to her? She was well enough just yesterday.'

'I reckon you must've been the last person to see her alive, Miss Williams. She was here last evening, was she not?'

Beezley's face, florid in the light of his lantern and leering, inches from my door. His door; he owned it, after all. He missed nothing, between him and his vixen of a wife – good or ill, the business of Bromley town was conducted under their judgemental scrutiny.

'Yes, indeed she was, Mr Beezley. She left to post a letter. When she did not come back, I thought perhaps she had gone back to her mother's.'

'She's a good girl, to tend to a sick friend. Sorry. She *was* a good girl, right enough. God rest her soul.'

'Mr Beezley, if you will excuse me.'

I had been trying to close the door as he spoke, but the excitement of bringing the news had rendered him ruder than usual.

'Of course. Our condolences to you, Miss Williams. I know you and she were very close.'

I closed the door without thanking him. For a moment my visage held its stony composition.

Then it shattered, and I stuffed my fist into my mouth to stop the noise.