

WILLIAM J PERRING

THE SEDUCTION  
OF  
MARY KELLY



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This novel is a work of fiction. The murdered women: Emma Smith; Martha Tabram; Polly Nichols; Annie Chapman; Liz Stride; Katherine Eddowes, and Mary Jane Kelly are real people, as are Michael Kidney; Lizzie Albrook; Joe and Danny Barnett; John McCarthy; 'Indian' Harry Bowyer; Walter Ringer; Caroline Maxwell; George Hutchinson;

Dr George Bagster Phillips, and Dr Bond. However, except for a few instances of documented speech, their characters are invented and should under no circumstances be considered true and faithful representations of their real-life personae.

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*Kelly did not originally belong to the 'gutter' class. She was a woman of respectable parentage and superior breeding, who had gradually sunk into the state of degradation in which she was existing when she met her terrible death.*

*The Graphic 17th November 1888*

*What we know, or think we know, of Mary Kelly comes almost entirely from the accounts of her life she gave to friends and acquaintances. All, or none, could be true.*

## PROLOGUE

### *California 1968*

The television picture was grainy and indistinct, but still the image of jar upon jar of severed body parts made Beth Williams shiver. ‘Did they really need to show that?’ she murmured half to herself.

The scene changed to an outside shot of a handcuffed young man, his head lowered, almost shyly, as he walked between the two police officers, the camera following them to the waiting squad car, lingering on it until it drove off and disappeared from view.

‘But thank God they’ve caught him at last.’ She turned toward the bed. ‘They’re already talking about him going down in history as the most famous serial killer since Jack the Ripper.’

‘Famous?’ The old man lay motionless against the hospital pillow. For days he had been drifting in and out of consciousness, barely clinging to life, but now a little of his old spark seemed to return. ‘That’s an odd choice of word.’

‘Serial killers are big news these days, Jimmy.’

James *Jimmy* Hawkins looked up at the TV screen. ‘They always were,’ he said as the presenter’s face was replaced by a series of black and white photographs showing Victorian London; the streets and alleyways of Whitechapel finally dissolving to show a close-up of a dead woman’s face, taken from the foot of the plain wooden coffin in which she lay.

Beth followed his gaze. ‘I guess so. It’s strange – I’ve always thought the world was a nicer, safer place back in your day.’

The photograph of the dead woman gave way to another, her rounded features relaxed in death, then another, and still another, this one more horrific, the naked body hanging from mortuary hooks in the same way that dead gunslingers had once been displayed, the savage mutilations to the woman’s face and torso clearly visible. Then, lastly, a photograph showing the interior of a room. It wasn’t a good photograph, too much contrast made it hard to discern the true subject, so it was several seconds

before Beth realised she was looking at the grotesquely mutilated body of a young woman. She wanted to look away, but there was something so horribly compelling about the image that she reached for the volume control instead.

‘... *And culminating in the murder of Mary Jane Kelly in the early hours of November ninth, 1888.*’ The presenter reappeared, looking stern as he stared out of the screen. ‘*Despite killing five women, Jack the Ripper was never caught – and to this day his identity remains one of the greatest unsolved mysteries. Thankfully, following today’s arrest, the same will not be said about ...*’

Beth lowered the volume again and crossed to the bed, looking down at her patient. His eyes were closed once more, and he lay so still that she instinctively felt for his pulse. It was weak, but it was there, and she felt a wave of relief.

For two weeks the old actor had clung on, and in that time she had grown closer to him than she should have allowed. It was unprofessional and she knew it – but in a city where yesterday was ancient history, who else would spare the time for a forgotten old man whose hey-day had been in the silent era. ‘Sleep well, Jimmy,’ she said.

The television news programme had begun showing photographs of the shy-looking young man’s victims: colour snapshots of smiling faces, a chilling twenty-seven in total. Beth shook her head. ‘I think the world was a safer place back in your day, Jimmy,’ she sighed. ‘Even the *infamous* Jack the Ripper only killed five.’

In the stillness of the room, the murmured reply was barely audible. ‘*Three*,’ he said, before slipping into unconsciousness once more.

\*

Frankie Stoweski was mopping the floor in the hospital reception area as Beth came on duty the following morning. ‘Hi, Frankie,’ she smiled. ‘How’s it going?’

He grinned. ‘Bad. Real, real bad. It’s going to end in bloodshed.’

‘Doesn’t it always?’

‘Not *always* – but this guy Nero is really asking for it.’ He pulled a heavy book from the cleaning cart and handed it to her. ‘Did you know he used to go out at night, dressed as an ordinary Joe, and attack people – just for the heck of it. Wouldn’t surprise me if he hadn’t killed even more people than this guy they’ve just arrested.’

Beth looked at the book. ‘The Roman Empire?’ she said, handing it back to him. ‘I thought you were still working through the civil war?’

‘No, finished that last week.’

She laughed. ‘How on earth do you remember all this stuff you read?’

‘Don’t know. Just got that kind of brain, I guess.’ He shrugged, put the

book back on the cart, and picked up the mop. ‘So how’s it going with that new boyfriend? What was his name? Richard? Still certain he’s the one?’

‘Uh-uhhh,’ she grinned. ‘He just needs a little more convincing that *I’m* the one.’ She made to leave – then paused. ‘Frankie? You ever read anything about Jack the Ripper?’

‘Sure. Why?’

‘Oh, nothing, really. I was just wondering ... do you happen to know how many people he killed?’

‘Good question,’ he said, looking thoughtful. ‘Most people say it was five. The first was a woman called Polly Nichols.’ He began counting them off on his fingers. ‘Then ... let me see ... Annie Chapman, Elizabeth Stride, Katherine Eddowes, and Mary Jane Kelly. I’m pretty sure that’s the right order.’

‘But you say that only *most people* think it was five – so it might have been fewer?’

Frankie looked surprised. ‘Fewer? No, I’ve never heard that. There are some who think it could have been more. There were two other women murdered that same year – a woman called Smith, can’t remember her first name, and another called Martha Tabram – but the murder weapon was different in both cases, and they aren’t generally considered as Ripper killings. There were also a few women killed in the area a year or two after Mary Kelly’s murder, but most people don’t connect them. Five is pretty much the accepted number. Why do you ask?’

‘Just curious. There was mention of Jack the Ripper on the television yesterday. I was talking to Jimmy about it – and I thought I heard him say there were only three.’

Frankie shook his head. ‘No – definitely five.’

\*

‘So, I suppose you’re going to tell me you knew Jack the Ripper?’ she smiled as she straightened his pillow.

Jimmy’s eyelids fluttered open. ‘And why would you suppose that, my dear?’

‘Just something you said yesterday.’

‘Oh, you shouldn’t go taking any notice of me. Nothing more than an old man’s ramblings.’ For an instant his eyes held a look of secret amusement – the passing ghost of the expression that had once been his trademark. ‘Just like when I told you about the film I made with Fairbanks, and he cut me open with his ...’ He began to cough, deep wracking coughs, and she held his hand, gently stroking the papyrus skin, trying to soothe him.

‘Well, how about I read to you?’ she asked, once the attack had passed.

Too weak to answer immediately, he lay staring up at the ceiling, until

with great effort he said, 'You know I'd love you to – but you shouldn't spend so much time in here with me. You'll lose your job.'

Beth glanced at her watch. 'I've been off duty these last ten minutes – so I guess I can choose for myself who I spend time with, huh?' She settled herself on to the chair by his bed. 'So? What shall it be? The book?'

He gave a tremulous smile. 'How many times have you read that to me, now?'

'This will be the third,' she grinned. 'But it's okay. I know how much you love that story – and I'm getting to like it pretty well myself. Besides, on my salary, I don't get to read too many classics in first edition.'

His hand found hers. 'How old are you, Beth? Nineteen? Twenty?'

'Twenty-five, you old flatterer.'

'Too young to waste your life watching an old man ride off into the sunset. This movie has gone on a reel too long as it is.'

She made to protest, but the words would not pass the sudden constriction in her throat. 'Well,' she said at last, almost achieving a lighter note, 'I was always the type to stay put all through the end credits.'

Barely possessing the strength to smile, he watched her pick up the book. 'Then – if you really don't mind reading to me ...' He hesitated. 'There's ... there's another story I should like to hear for one last time.'

She squeezed his hand. 'Of course. Is it here?'

'In a box ... in my valise.'

He heard her cross to the cupboard and take out the old-fashioned travelling bag – but he could no longer see her. Despite the sunlight that filled the room, his vision had been growing increasingly dark – now it had faded to black.

'It's a diary – or some kind of journal,' she said in surprise. 'Is this the book?'

'Yes.'

She flicked through the pages. 'Such beautiful handwriting.'

'I want you to have it ... I want you to have all my books, but ... *this one is just for you.*'

'I couldn't, Jimmy. It's wonderfully kind of you, but it's against all the rules.'

'Then ... just look after it for me ... until I ask for it back?'

She brushed at her eyes. 'We'll see,' she said, coming back to sit by him, squaring her shoulders, hiding behind the caricature of starchy professionalism. 'Now, are we going to read this or not?'

'Yes ... please.'

Beth opened the book on her lap.

Beyond the window, the distant hills shimmered in the heat; across town, in a small, run-down movie theatre, a handful of people sat in the dark, watching a young and athletic Jimmy Hawkins battle his way

through a horde of costumed extras – and in the quiet of the hospital room, Beth began to read.

*There was a hill, just outside our village, where we would play in those distant, happier days – before my father’s illness. In fine weather the climb was manageable for a young girl’s sturdy legs, and we would clamber to the top, dancing with joy, and feeling such mastery over this part of our world.*

*But then the rain would come, making the steep sides slippery so that my small feet would slide, unable to gain a purchase on the muddy earth. The older boys and girls, or even my brother Henry, would pull me up, encouraging me to try harder, but no sooner would they let go my hand than I’d lose my footing, sometimes falling so badly that I would slide past my original clinging spot.*

*Time and time again I would try, determined to join them, only to slip down and out of their reach until, finally, I could fall no further.*

*I think of this hill often when I look back over my life. My name is Mary Jane Kelly and I was born in 1863 ...*

BOOK 1



**WALES 1876**

## Chapter One



‘In Ireland? You are a liar, Mary Kelly. A damnable liar!’

Sitting primly at her desk, Mary’s cheeks flushed as the neatly written pages of her essay were hurled into the air – falling like large white leaves amongst her giggling classmates.

‘Well?’ Mr Griffiths’s face was darkly crimson, his breath snorting, bull-like as he loomed over her. ‘What do you have to say for yourself?’

‘They ... they aren’t lies, sir, they’re ...’

‘Aren’t lies? – *Aren’t lies?*’ His voice climbed an octave before slipping into menacing sarcasm. ‘Born in Ireland? In Limerick, is it? In the family castle, I suppose, eh? Well, you *would* need a castle wouldn’t you? With all those brothers and sisters. Six, was it?’

Mary stared into her lap as howls of merriment rang out from a class grateful for the interruption. Behind her, Davy Briggs, a scruffy, gangly boy, leaned forward and gave her a sharp poke in the back, but Griffiths chose to ignore it, unwilling to be distracted from the matter at hand.

‘Lot of servants, were there, hmmm? Maids and butlers, no doubt – and surely a governess? Oh yes – but, you know, I’m surprised she didn’t explain to you the difference between fact and fiction!’ His patronising tone became one of irritation. ‘Well, we’ll have to remedy that, won’t we!’

Seated next to Mary, Gwyneth Davies stiffened, her hand creeping beneath the desk to find Mary’s as Griffiths strode to the front of the class to pick up the cane.

‘Come out here, girl!’

Frightened, Mary kept a firm grip on Gwyneth, but then a look of defiance crossed her face, and she let go, making her way to the front, her attention fixed on Griffiths’s gold watch chain to avoid meeting his eyes or seeing the long stick in his hand.

‘I had the misfortune to be teaching your idiot of a brother on the very day you were born – right here in Wales.’ Griffiths flexed the cane. ‘That’s

a *fact*, Mary Kelly – and that’s what you need in this world! Facts and only facts! Not damn fairytales! Now, put out your ...!’

Without waiting Mary raised her left hand, holding it in front of her, palm upwards.

Griffiths noted the small act of defiance and gave another snort. ‘Were you born in Ireland?’

Gritting her teeth, Mary gave a small nod, and immediately the thin brown cane sang through the air, searing her palm. It was a harsh stroke that stung her to tears, but she kept her hand outstretched.

‘Where?’

‘Limerick, sir – in Ireland.’

Griffiths brought the cane down again.

From behind her Mary heard Gwyneth start to cry, and determinedly she forced open her fingers where the stroke had curled them into a fist.

‘Where?’ Griffiths’s voice was loud in her ear, and she could feel his breath against her cheek.

‘Lim ... Lim ...’ The sobs she had been trying to suppress burst out, preventing her from speaking, but Griffiths had heard enough. He whipped the stick across her reddened palm yet again. This time the pain was too much, and she snatched her hand away, wedging it under her arm as great tears ran down her cheeks. ‘Wales ... I ... I was born in ... in Nant-y-Pridd, in Wales.’

Griffiths gave a snort of satisfaction, and put down the cane. ‘Return to your desk. You will re-write the essay and deliver it to me first thing tomorrow morning. And this time I expect it to contain the truth!’

\*

It was only the first week of the Michaelmas term, and the early autumn sun was still warm as the two girls started for home, walking in silence for a good part of the way.

At a point where the road curved to skirt the hills, a footpath followed a more direct route along the side of the river, and they took it, walking by the slow moving water and pausing to watch a dragonfly skimming over the surface.

‘Do you ever think of doing things, Gwyn?’

‘Doing things? Like what?’

‘I don’t know ...’ Mary closed her eyes and tilted her face to catch the sun. ‘Just something *different*. Maybe even something – *shocking*.’

‘No – and you shouldn’t be doing *that*,’ said Gwyneth, moving into the shade of a tree. ‘You’ll get all brown, like a gypsy, then no one will want to marry you.’

‘Who says I want to get married? And besides, I should like to be a gypsy.’

‘Stop being silly.’

‘What’s silly about it? There has to be more to life than getting married. Just think – roaming all over the world in a caravan. Wouldn’t you like that? I think it would be *so* romantic!’

‘I don’t think it would be romantic at all. Very uncomfortable and smelly I shouldn’t wonder – probably dangerous, too!’

‘Oh, Gwyn!’ A desperation filled Mary’s voice. ‘I just want ... Oh, I don’t *know* what I want, but ...’ She looked down at the water, a mischievous glint coming to her eye. ‘Actually – *I do!* I want to swim, naked, in this river! Right now!’

Gwyneth’s eyes widened. ‘You wouldn’t?’ Then, with an anxious note, ‘*Would you?*’

‘I will if you will.’

‘I would *never!*’

For a moment, Mary remained staring at the river, feeling the warmth of the sun on her skin, then with a forlorn sigh she turned back toward the path. ‘Come on,’ she said with a sad smile. ‘Let’s go home.’

The Davies’ house was one of a row of colliery cottages that lay on the outskirts of the village, and Gwyneth’s mother was standing in the doorway as the two girls arrived. ‘I’m afraid you can’t come in, Mary. The boys are just back from their shift, and our Thomas is in the bath. But if you’d like a bite of something to eat before you go, I can bring it out to you?’

‘That’s very kind of you, Mrs Davies, but I can’t stay. Mother’s waiting for me, I expect.’

Meg Davies struggled to maintain her smile. ‘Oh, yes – I expect she is. Well, just wait you there a minute. I’ll be right back.’ She disappeared into the house, and her place in the doorway was taken by Gwyneth’s second brother, Alan, still black with coal-dust.

‘I hear you got a proper whacking today.’

Gwyneth shot him a harsh look. ‘You just leave her alone. And how do you know, anyway?’

‘Oh, news travels fast enough, specially when it’s on them skinny little legs o’ Davy Briggs!’ He laughed, giving Mary a wink. ‘Old Griffiths was it? By, but he’s a mean old bugger! You just say the word, Mary, and I’ll go up there, and give him a taste of his own medicine.’

Thomas, the eldest of the Davies’ offspring, appeared in the doorway, still buttoning his shirt, his wet hair glistening. ‘You’ll do no such thing, and stop embarrassing the girl.’

‘By heck, that’s got to be the fastest I’ve ever seen you out of that bath, boy!’ said Alan. He winked again at Mary. ‘You’ll have to come by more often, my love. Makes a nice change to get the water while it’s still hot!’

‘Get away off with you,’ Thomas growled. ‘And mind my clean shirt while you’re at it!’

‘Don’t worry, I’m going.’ Alan paused, grinning. ‘Here, you’ve gone a bit red in the face you have. Water *too* hot, was it?’

Thomas glared at him, but remained standing awkwardly in the shadows, and when his mother came back moments later carrying a paper-wrapped package, he was almost grateful to be shooed away.

‘I’m sure your mam’s got your tea all ready,’ said Meg, ‘but here’s some bread and cheese, just in case you get hungry on the way, like.’ With some embarrassment she handed over the parcel, hovering uncertainly for a moment. ‘Well, I suppose I should be getting tea ready, myself. Proper gannets my lot are these days.’

Gwyneth waited until her mother had gone, then looked down at Mary’s hand where it hung by her side. ‘Can I look?’ she asked nervously.

‘If you want to.’ Mary held it out for Gwyneth’s examination. ‘It didn’t hurt you know. I just pretended it did.’

A small crease formed between Gwyneth’s eyebrows as she looked at the reddened flesh. ‘Oh, Mary ...’

‘Hey, Kelly! Can I come and stay in your castle?’

The sudden shout startled them both, but Mary quickly recovered, aiming a smack at the boy’s head as he ran past.

‘I’ll do for you at school tomorrow, Davy Briggs, you see if I don’t!’

From a safe distance, Briggs affected a pained expression and shook his hand. ‘Hurt, did it? Never mind, eh. Get the butler to see to it. I would!’ Then, laughing, he turned and disappeared up the road.

Gwyneth watched him go. ‘Why do you do it, Mary? You get yourself into such trouble.’

‘I don’t care. Griffiths doesn’t frighten me – and I’ll be born where I please.’

‘Mary! Listen to me! You’ve got to stop making up these silly stories. Everyone knows about you and your family – and they just laugh at you.’

‘I told you, I don’t care.’

‘But I do! I can’t bear it when ...’ Gwyneth broke off, biting her lip. ‘You don’t need to make up stories for them!’

Resentfully, Mary started away, but after just a few paces she stopped and turned. ‘I don’t do it for *them*,’ she said.

\*

‘Fight. Fight. Fight. Fight. Fight.’

Drawn by the sound of chanting, Nathaniel Abrahams went to his study window and looked beyond the school gates to where a large group of children were gathered around two boys and a girl.

He placed his cup back on to its saucer and took out his watch. Ten minutes to nine; too early to ring the bell. ‘Mr Griffiths,’ he said, turning his head a fraction. ‘There would appear to be several members of your

class involved in a fracas. I think you had better step out and put an end to it.'

Griffiths sauntered over, peering with mild interest at the melee. 'Oh, Briggs, is it? And Kelly, of course – can't quite make out the other one. Ah, Harris! I should have known! Nothing for us to worry about. They'll sort it out amongst themselves.'

Abrahams looked at him. 'Possibly, Mr Griffiths. But I should prefer *you* to sort it out.'

'With respect, Headmaster. When you've been here a few years, well, you'll see the wisdom of turning a blind eye to this kind of thing – the odd scrap, like. They're a rough lot of kids around here, and I've always found it better not to get involved in their high spirits when it's off school property.'

Abrahams gave the man a penetrating look. 'I have been in this profession for over forty years, and in all that time I have never thought of two boys fighting one girl as *high spirits*! I very much doubt my opinion will change during the few years that remain to me.'

'It won't do *her* any harm,' Griffiths snorted. 'Might even take her down a peg or two! And if she's anything like the rest of her family she'll probably flatten the two of them. Her mother's quite a brawler when she's ...'

'Mr Griffiths! I will not have this! You will go down and stop the fight immediately – then bring the three of them to my study. Is that understood?'

Griffiths's nostrils flared, and the broken veins on his cheeks darkened. 'As you wish, Headmaster,' he said.

Like a solid living thing, the tightly packed ring of spectators moved this way and that, following the progress of the fight as Mary wrestled with the two boys, hitting and kicking for all she was worth. 'Leave her alone! You bloody well leave her alone!' she screamed, grabbing Harris by his hair, wrenching him round and slapping at his head, while Briggs tried to pin her arms from behind.

'Break it up!' boomed Griffiths, striding through the gate, the crowd parting to make way for him.

Harris broke free from Mary's grasp to stand wild-eyed and panting, but Davy Briggs kept his arms around Mary, as though he had a tiger by the tail.

'Stop it! The pair of you!' Griffiths prised Briggs off, pushing him back. 'Now, what's all this about?'

'It was Briggs and Harris, sir,' piped up a small girl from the crowd. 'They threw muck all over Gwyneth Davies, sir.'

'Is that so? Where is she?'

The far end of the circle opened to reveal Gwyneth, huddled against the

railings, tears running down her cheeks, and horse dung splattered over her face and clothes.

‘God, will you look at you!’ Griffiths snorted. ‘Making such a fuss! Get inside and clean yourself up, girl!’ He watched her start toward the school, then turned his attention back to the three protagonists, looking at each of them in turn. Harris’s lip was cut, and both Mary and Davy Briggs had blood running from their noses. ‘Right, the Headmaster wants to see you, so you’d better get to his study, sharpish! And he’s a bit hot on fighting, see, so I wouldn’t go expecting anything less than a good thrashing!’

Standing alone in front of the Headmaster’s desk, Mary fretted at her torn cuff. Her face was still flushed from the fight – and the closeness of the room added to her discomfort, for despite the mild autumn weather there was a fire burning in the grate.

‘Is it a little warm for you?’ Mr Abrahams enquired pleasantly, closing the door. ‘I’m afraid that as my years advance so does my susceptibility to the cold.’

‘I’m alright, thank you, sir.’

He crossed the room and seated himself behind the heavy teak desk. ‘Gwyneth Davies is a friend of yours?’

On the scuffed leather desktop lay the cane that had recently been applied to the backsides of Harris and Briggs, six apiece, the sound of the strokes clearly audible to Mary as she’d waited outside. She stole a nervous glance at it. ‘Yes, sir. My best friend, sir.’

‘And you thought to avenge this disgusting attack? You didn’t think it better to come and report it, rather than take on these two boys yourself?’

‘I had to stop them, sir. They were ...’ She paused.

‘They were what?’

‘They were trying to make her eat it.’

A look of horror crossed Abrahams’s face. ‘Surely not! She has said nothing of this to me!’

‘She wouldn’t, sir.’

The fingers of his left hand tapped at the desk. ‘I see,’ he said, then after a few moments, ‘How is your nose? It appears to have stopped bleeding.’

‘It was nothing, sir – just a scratch.’

‘It looks to have been rather more than a scratch from the amount of blood on your pinafore.’

‘I ... I don’t think it’s all mine, sir.’

He resisted the urge to smile. ‘I cannot condone fighting, Mary. I want to make that quite clear to you.’

‘Yes, sir.’

He nodded, then cleared his throat. ‘Now, I see from the punishment

book that you feature quite prominently. Indeed, although he has not seen fit to enter it, I believe Mr Griffiths had cause to cane you only yesterday.’ Some papers lay on the desk, and he picked them up, sifting through the four pages of beautifully executed copperplate. ‘The cause of the trouble was this essay, entitled *My Life*, was it not?’

‘Yes, sir. I was just ...’

Mr Abrahams raised a silencing hand. ‘I can see why Mr Griffiths might take exception to this – but the work is not without merit.’ He read for some moments more, then he asked, ‘And your father, *is* he a painter?’

‘Yes, sir. That is – he *was*. He doesn’t have to work now.’

Abrahams steeped his fingers and looked up at her. ‘I see,’ he said softly. ‘A fortunate man. So there would be someone in the house now?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Well, I am sending Gwyneth Davies home since she is in no fit state to sit in class – and as you are in a somewhat similar condition, I think perhaps you should accompany her.’

Mary brightened. ‘Thank you, sir. We can walk together.’

‘Walk? Goodness, no. That is quite out of the question. I shall take you myself.’

‘Oh,’ said Mary, suddenly anxious. ‘Oh, yes ... I see.’