

Prelude

Helford Passage, Cornwall. September 8, 1866.

THE TIMES, Thursday, September 6, 1866.

MURDER AT HYDE PARK.

ON the morning of Tuesday, 7th August, the body of Edward Scales (38), late of Helford, Cornwall, was discovered at his Hyde Park residence in London. During the inquest held on the body by Horatio Moreton Esq., Coroner, and attended by Dr Jacobs of the London Hospital, it was made known that the body of the deceased bore the marks of ligatures to the neck, and that the contents of the stomach of the deceased had been found to be largely full of brandy. After lengthy examinations of witnesses, a Mrs G. Pemberton (26) of Richmond, Surrey, was later charged with the Murder of Mr Scales and committed for trial at the Central Criminal Court.

Never is a newspaper read more intently than when it is about to be put to some other use. Their names came in and out of focus. For a few blessed moments her mind was utterly quiet, and she waited for the shaking to subside before tucking the slip of newsprint away. She ripped the next square from the string, and the next and the next until she was done. Outside the privy she leaned on the closed door and breathed the damp morning air. There was just a hint of rotten autumn settling in but nothing very definite.

As she went back to the house she tried to remember what she had been doing on that Monday a month before. She tried to remember, because she didn't want to let her mind gallop around, gathering thoughts about how many people in the country over the past two days had already seen the information hiding up her left sleeve. People on trains and at news-stands. At breakfast. On park benches, and waiting on street corners.

She was standing now in front of the bureau in the study. For such an imposing piece of furniture, its lock was a pitifully small mechanism. With the need for an actual key now positively redundant, she took up the poker from its place by the empty grate. It was simply a matter of precision and determination. The bevelled point of the poker slipped the first time and gouged a scrape through the walnut. On the fifth attempt she was able to force the poker into the space between the locked-up lid and the body of the bureau. She levered her weight onto the poker. The crack of splintering wood and the lock giving way brought Susan to the room.

“Ma'am?”

“That's quite all right,” she said. “I shan't require any assistance. Except, of course, that I shall be going to London today and will need to pack.” Then she turned her attention again to the bureau and set about finding the name and address of the late Edward Osbert Scales' solicitor.

SEVEN YEARS EARLIER

Chapter I

Helford Passage, Cornwall. April 1859.

The sun lay heavy on his clothes making him tired, and he had to stop for a while and rest against the rocks. They were thrust up on the beach, it seemed to Edward Scales, like wrecked ships. Hulls keeled over, encased in barnacles. A seam of white crystal pressed between layers of dark grey was caulk jammed between planks. He didn't see the rearing layers, contorted, extreme pressure distorting and forcing the horizontal to the diagonal and vertical. Only ships. He knew that they were not, could not ever have been ships, but his mind rested on that thought because anything else was too immense to confront.

The succession of small beaches on the Helford were each enclosed by high cliffs, pocked with shallow caves. Strewn with sharp, jagged rocks, the ground in between was made up of grey, white and ochre pebbles from fist-sized lumps down to number eight shot. At low tide on the Helford the bladderwrack clung to the rocks, and draped like crowns of slick hair. Not an easy terrain to walk over. He could have come by boat, but he hadn't thought of that. And he could have stayed there, too, in the shade of this wrecked ship turned to stone, to take the boots off his aching feet. And if he had done this, he might not have bothered going further. But Edward Scales moved on between the broken ribs to the other side, and stepped into her view.

Gwen Carrick was almost ready to go back up to the house when she saw him. She recognised the profile, the gait. She'd seen this man on a couple of occasions earlier that month, but he had

always been in the distance, retreating, scrambling between the rocks. Now she stood up and had a better look at him. His boots were new: stout, nailed things and uncomfortable-looking; and she noticed that his calves were wrapped with gaiters.

When Edward turned again he saw the young woman standing, shielding her eyes against the steady pulsing light on the brackish water of the Helford. And he saw that this was to get a better look at him. His hat was buckled to the side of his knapsack so he could not raise it to her. Instead, he lifted his hand in a half wave. She mirrored his action, and did not move. A good sign. As he clambered up the steep shelf of shingle on the little beach, Edward wondered what he might say to her. When he stumbled near the level part of the beach she came forward still shielding her face, bunching up her skirts with her free hand. Her strides were big, confident. He saw that her hands were tanned against her pale skirt. She had the unconstricted movement of a woman not wearing a corset, though she held herself straight inside her riding jacket. Her waist was tiny over an ample—he tried not to think of what lay under her skirts. They met with a yard of pebbles between them. She was tall enough to meet his gaze without having to tilt her chin. She was bareheaded. Edward calculated the length of her hair from the size of the neat coil piled up.

“Are you lost?” she said. She could see that his jacket, a hairy tweed, was new and probably still in its first season.

It was not what he expected. He answered her slowly, “No, I don’t believe so.”

“Sometimes people get lost.” The Cornish swirl embedded in her vowels, curling on the edge of her consonants, was very slight.

The air was still between them, and he caught a scent of her, the curious effect of sunlight on skin and hair. She smelled of herself. Not masked by soap or perfume. It was neither sweet nor stale. She was waiting for him to speak.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, Miss Carrick."

"You have the advantage, sir; have we met before?"

"Edward Scales." He bowed very slightly.

"Should I remember you, Edward Scales?"

"It is neither here nor there."

She nodded at this, and Edward felt relieved. She said, "Do you live near by, or—" She waited for him to fill in the gap.

"I have rooms in Falmouth. I have been walking."

She raised her eyebrows. "Really? All the way? You must be exhausted."

Edward caught something in her expression which looked like amusement. Was she flirting? "The distance is not so far."

An ornament in her hair flashed in the sun. She saw him looking and she pulled out a thin stick. "My paintbrush."

Edward was unsure of how to answer; she seemed to be challenging him. He said, "I've kept you from your painting. I am getting in your way."

"You're entitled to rest after your walk," she said. "But I would like to finish my picture. If you go and stand where you were by those rocks I'll put you in."

Edward relaxed. "How long shall I stand?"

She was already gathering her skirts in her hands. "Give me a quarter of an hour," she said. "No, twenty minutes."

As she made her way back to her things she turned her head, smiling, tugging her bottom lip in with her upper left canine.

Edward saw in that gesture of hers a childish glee and a suggestion of self-containment. He couldn't help being stirred by it. Neither could he help being confused by her. But, of course, she had been making things easy for both of them by pretending not to know him. Her poise had been immaculate when she had refused to acknowledge that she already knew his name. Yet there was something in the way she had spoken. The frankness of her. Almost

as if she were a different person entirely. Edward retraced his path down to the rocks by the tide line marked out by a thick rope of seaweed. Taking out his pocket watch he leaned back against the rock. It dug into his shoulder.

Gwen sketched the figure of Edward Scales into her painting. She wanted to put him in the picture, it seemed to her an absolute necessity, to paint him into her watercolour landscape. Not just for the sake of its composition. It gave her a space to think without him searching her face. Because the painting was already finished, his figure on the paper became a dark shape, without features. Yet, his awkward posture was recognisably his, and this pleased her. Whilst they had stood opposite each other like that she had wanted to evade his look, which seemed to seek some sort of confirmation from her. He would not get it.

Sometimes people get lost. She'd said it for something to fill the surprise of seeing him. But it hadn't been the best thing to say. Now it was there again, going around in her head as she mixed the darkest shade of Payne's grey. The argument was two years old, but it was as raw as ever in her mind.

"People don't get lost here," she'd almost shouted at her sister Euphemia. "The sea is on one side and the land is on the other. There is a path, you walk along it."

Euphemia's expression had been blank, her voice very calm. "Mother got lost."

"She can't have, Effie, she can't have."

And then Effie's voices had started. Mrs Fernly, their aunt, had tolerated the voices for as long as she could. It was never said out loud. It was never mentioned in a very direct way, but Mrs Fernly, it was widely known, couldn't abide young creatures who made deliberate exhibitions of themselves. But much more than that, and

more importantly, Mrs Fernly had no time under any circumstances, for the jingling bells and rattling tables or anything else in a Spiritualist's parlour, least of all the Spiritualist herself and most especially if the Spiritualist began to talk in voices in Mrs Fernly's own parlour without prior warning.

Gwen and her sister had been moved back into the empty Carrick House only three months after their mother's funeral. It was fair, thought Gwen, that it should have been decided—unilaterally, by Mrs Fernly, that it was time for Gwen and Effie to cut short their stay at the Fernly's and manage at their own house. There were after all two of them and they would have the maid, as well. Gwen had felt nothing but relief. She could put a door between herself and Effie at last. And not only at night. Gwen spent most daylight hours out of doors, away from her sister. Euphemia did not exert herself at all during the day; she stayed inside the house, to preserve her complexion. If Euphemia wanted to look at a view for a moment, she made sure that it was through a north-facing window. They embarrassed each other with their habits, but there existed between them a delicately preserved understanding.

Painting in the figure of Edward took much less time than she had asked for. When the time was up he picked up his stick and bag. His second approach was much more sure-footed. He came deliberately, slowly. When he was a few feet away, she patted the shingle beside her and he sat down.

"I'm glad we have met like this," she said. "Being outside makes you much freer. Here, I have your image immortalised on paper." She handed him her sketchbook, and watched his face as he looked at her work on his knee. "Would some Power the gift to give us to see ourselves as others see us."

He smiled. "You know Burns, then."

“Burns? No, it’s just something, a saying. I didn’t know it was a quote.”

“It’s from the end of a poem: ‘O wad some Power the giftie gie us, To see oursels as others see us! It wad frae monie a blunder free us—’”

She laughed. “I like that. From many a blunder free us. What’s the title of the poem? I shall have to find a copy.”

Edward coughed. “It is called, ‘To a Louse’, and its subtitle is, ‘On Seeing One on a Lady’s Bonnet at Church’.” He looked sideways at her. She was smiling. He said, “I hope I haven’t offended you.”

“You haven’t. I’d like to hear the rest.”

“I’m afraid I don’t know it thoroughly. I wouldn’t want to murder it before you had read it for yourself. You needn’t search though. I’ll send you a copy if you like.”

“That’s too kind of you.”

“It would be my pleasure.” Robert Burns would not have been his first choice of poet to send to a young woman, whether he had only just met her or not. He cringed inwardly at the thought of her reading Burns’ more bawdy efforts.

She cut into his thoughts. “Your accent was very realistic to my untuned ear.”

“I spent a lot of time in Scotland as a boy. It’s not a genuine accent. Only gleaned, borrowed inexpertly from my playmates.” Edward felt suddenly perilously close to the edge of the dark chasm he had so far been successful in avoiding. He studied the young woman’s profile with every bit of concentration he could gather. “To which address should I send the poems?”

“I’ll write it down for you.” She took the sketchbook back from his knee and turned the page over. He watched her write her full name and address in soft pencil. She tore off the page and handed it over. He looked at it. She also noticed that he looked at the paintings revealed by her tearing the top page out. Studies of bright

red Cardinal beetles studded the glaring white of the paper Gwen instinctively held to her chest.

“I will be pleased to send the poems to Miss Gwen Carrick. May I keep this? I shall pay the artist, naturally.”

“No payment is necessary, Mr Scales, you are welcome to it. Well. Now my paints are dry and I’m finished for the afternoon. Will you come up to the house?”

Edward didn’t want to do that, for all kinds of reasons. He asked her if she would like to have a picnic with him. He felt himself becoming very nervous and he worried that she would see how agitated he really was. How disconcerting. The more he worried the more he was certain that she could read his thoughts. But then the sun shone brighter on the water, and she had to shade her eyes as he produced the food, so she probably did not see his reddened face after all.

Edward brought out of his knapsack two bottles of ale, a large piece of cheese wrapped in a cloth, and a small loaf of bread. He took a small knife from his pocket, and began to carve off chunks of bread and cheese. He weighed the bottles against each other and gave Gwen the heaviest, having already begun to drink from the other. “I hope you like ale. It is quite a strong one.”

“It looks like you have enough. At least I shan’t worry about depriving you.”

“I always take more than I think I’m going to need. Once, in Dorset, I met an old vagrant who asked me for something to eat. He looked so wretched, I gave him what I had but he insisted on sharing the beer I had given him. I only had one bottle. I spent the next month convinced I’d contracted something.”

“But you didn’t.”

“No, I did not.”

“Dorset is a long way from here.”

Edward took the smooth pebble he had been carrying in his

knapsack and laid it down by his side. Gwen Carrick did not notice, she was utterly absorbed in cutting more cheese and bread with her own pocket knife. One edge of the grey stone partly revealed the ridged arc of an ammonite. Gwen held her bottle between her feet. Edward saw that she was not wearing the clumpy old boots from the time before but fine brown leather shoes with a low heel and a strap, fastened by one button across the arch of her foot. It made him think of something Charles had once told him. But he could see that the eroticism of the action was entirely unintentional.

“I couldn’t help noticing, Miss Carrick, those red beetles in your sketch book. To my eye, they looked quite delightful.”

“More so than the study I have just given you?”

“I wouldn’t say that. They startled my eye. They interest me in a different way, that is all.”

“When a young woman makes a picture of a pretty red beetle, Mr Scales, it is called ‘Delightful’, put into a frame and a husband is found for the artist. When a young man makes an anatomical study of a Cardinal beetle, he is expected to know that it is the *Pyrochroa serraticornis*, and he is bundled off to university so that he can one day add to the body of scientific knowledge on Coleoptera.”

“I see.”

“Do you though, Mr Scales? I don’t want you to admire my skills for the wrong reasons. My work is not bait; I am looking for the truth. In all things.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t intend to disparage your gift.”

“Gift? My talent is not something handed down from God, Mr Scales. It is hard won.”

“Of course; I can see that you are very dedicated. My words were ill chosen. I meant no offence.”

“But you don’t offend me, Mr Scales. If I were a man, would you apologise, or would you debate the talent of an artist as divine gift, as opposed to something instilled by regular practice?”

“I suppose I would do neither. I would have entered into a conversation about beetles without complimenting the rendition on paper.”

“In which case, I can tell you that I was surprised to find this particular beetle so early in the year, they are usually out in May, June and July. And it does startle the eye, doesn’t it?”

“I’m sorry to have intruded, Miss Carrick. I think I have trespassed into a world in which I have no right to be. When I listen to you I see that my own existence is very dull indeed.”

“I am sure it is not.”

“I can assure you it is.”

“Even though you may wish to see yourself as others do, it can never be done, and so I think that you may as well not try.”

“You seem, despite your talk, very content with your life, Miss Carrick.”

“I am content to be alive, Mr Scales, but I do not possess the quality I think you must see in me. I am quite discontent, in myself. It has been driven into me.”

He caught her gaze and held it for a moment with a question in his own, but Gwen would not elaborate further. “The last time I saw you, Miss Carrick, there was something I had intended to say to you.”

“I beg your pardon? Mr Scales, have you been spying on me?”

“I—I *have* been here before.”

“I must confess I have seen you before as well, Mr Scales. Don’t look so alarmed. I have seen you from afar, out walking once or twice, always walking away from here. I have since then wondered who you were, where you live. I must admit I have wondered what you looked like, too. It struck me you had some kind of important intention to your walking.” She wanted to say that she had thought he looked at first like a tourist who had no idea of where he was, but that after a while, she could see that he did possess some passion

in his stride. That a stranger, seen from a distance, could sometimes make an impression on the mind, and could work away to become something of an obsession; she had wanted to admit this to Mr Scales. There was something about his manner that told her he would understand her meaning. The puzzle of the man had struck her from time to time, and she had wondered if an opportunity to talk to him would ever present itself.

Edward was outdone by her talk. He realised that it was useless to try and broach the subject which could not be touched or coloured by any choice of word. What he had begun was more complicated than he had imagined, and as he listened to Gwen, and saw the uncomplicated manner of her evasion, he thought he understood her more completely than anything he had ever known.

He could see now that Miss Carrick was quite young; how young he couldn't guess. He knew that he must move away, that he must leave her alone. If he felt he had made an indecent intrusion previously, this seemed just as bad. Her tact, and the straightforward approach she seemed to have over something he had been unable to rationalise, made him cringe at his own rough attempts to smooth over his indiscretions. And so he knew also that he would come back, in spite of what he had promised her before, in spite of his own conscience. He'd come back again, and he would not hesitate, in his need to speak of everything, and plainly, to the creature who wished to keep her red beetle studies a secret.

Gwen came to a halt at the south wall of the kitchen garden. A bonfire had been lit and its smoke curled over the wall. She'd smelled it on her way back up from the beach. It had none of the earth or wood tones of a garden fire. Now that she was very close, she could see flakes of black drifting in the air and coming back down, too heavy to be carried far. She walked quickly now under the wall

following it around the corner until she came to the gate. No one was there to watch over the fire. It hadn't been banked down; flames leapt from the heap and parts of its bulk fell away. Its position was odd; she couldn't think why Murray would have told the lad to make a fire right under the south wall where the fruit trees were trained into their tortured forms. While she was thinking about this, another part of the fire fell off the heap and her attention shot to it. Now that she could see how the fire had been constructed she lunged towards it. Sandwiched in the middle of garden prunings were books; her father's library. She saw her old friends, Bell's *Anatomy*, Duncan's *Beetles*, Mrs Mantell's engravings of Strata and Fossils, all turning back into their base element. She spun about looking for something to help her. A large spade had been left against the north wall. Gwen ran to it, not caring to stay on the paths. She felt her chest tighten with anxiety and purpose as she hauled her skirts in her arms and made her loping strides more efficient.

She attacked the heap, letting out a yell, beating the burning books with the heavy spade, her striking unwieldy and misdirected. Pages and half-scorched volumes tumbled onto the soil and continued to smoke as she turned to retrieve everything she could manage and then hurl clods of earth at the rest of the fire, still beating and yelling in between shovelling.

"What the bloody hell?"

Gwen didn't stop when she heard Murray. He took the spade from her hands mid-swing and finished the job. "Well, you've put that one out, miss. You can have a rest."

"Murray—" She had to bend over and cough.

"I'll have to have words with the lad. I thought he was a good choice, but I was wrong." Murray nudged the remains of a burned cover with his toe.

"It wasn't his fault." Gwen gasped, retching, and grabbed at Murray's sleeve. "He wouldn't know."

“He’s a ruddy, half-witted goose is what he is, miss. You may as well take that as given.”

“It’s done, Murray. At least I found it.”

“You did. What’ll you want done with it?”

Gwen picked up one of the less charred volumes. The spine curved the wrong way and the now partially browned pages spewed forward and then curled in on themselves, as if they had known themselves fey and beyond saving. The leather on the spine was brittle and had bubbled in places to form strange scabs; the gold leaf had burned away in places making the title illegible, but Gwen knew the book by heart. The irreparable damage was sickening to see. She’d spent hours in the company of Lyell’s four volumes, poring over his maps and folding them carefully back into place as she’d moved through his *Principles of Geology*.

“I don’t know.”

Gwen surveyed the mess across the earth and saw two of the other three Lyell volumes. She picked them out and tried to brush off the dirt and still smouldering remnants of other books and garden clippings. They made an awkward stack in her arms as she walked slowly back towards the house, the stink of bonfire clinging inside her nostrils, catching the back of her throat. Instead of going in by the kitchen, she took the long way round and let herself in through the front door.

The library door was closed but not fast. Gwen kicked it with the flat of her shoe and stood in the doorway hugging the charred books to her body. She supposed she must have looked deranged. She regarded her sister; so immaculately dressed, so tightly laced, gathering books with delicate soft hands off the shelves into a wheelbarrow.

She wanted to move into the room but felt herself stuck there. Euphemia in turn stopped. Neither of them said anything for a moment. Euphemia paled. Gwen heard her mother’s voice very

clearly in her head then. It was not, as some said of the recently dead, as if the person whispered into her ear, or stood at her shoulder. It was more a feeling that her mother was in the middle of Gwen's brain, and that the voice she heard was simply her mother's thoughts.

"Of course, I know what he says, darling Gwen. But why should I let him know? After all, he would only do himself an injury. There are some things it is better we keep to ourselves."

Gwen straightened her back and continued to stare at Euphemia who had been about to place into the wheelbarrow another book, but now she took the smallest breath and turned around, and put the book back on the shelf. One by one she placed the other books back on the shelves and never met her sister's eye. Gwen settled into her heels, and as her sister reshelved books she simply watched and waited until the last book was back in its place. Only then did Gwen move into the room. She placed the ruined three volumes of Lyell's *Principles* on the wide empty shelf they had come from. She poured herself a glass of water from the carafe on the desk and then taking up the wheelbarrow handles trundled it out of the room.

At the door, Gwen said, "Have you any idea what I am thinking?"

"No, because it is impossible to tell what a traitor thinks or feels."

"You admit, then, that I have feelings."

"And you admit it, finally. That is what you are, you can't escape it."

Gwen went out of the house and back to the kitchen garden. As she bumped the wheelbarrow down the steps, along the paths, pushed it past unclipped bushes, her anger at herself made her clumsy. She should never have allowed Euphemia to draw her into the old argument again, but the previous evening over dinner she had been unable to contain her contempt for her sister's dogged

belief that the fossils in their father's collection were all remnants of the Great Flood. She had stormed out of the dining room and fetched *Strata Identified by Organised Fossils*, by William Smith. The book had landed on the table next to Euphemia with an almighty thump and had sent an empty wine glass to the floor where it had smashed. Gwen blamed herself now for having been influenced by the wine. The glow it had given her sense of righteous certainty over Euphemia's stupidity had given Gwen's tongue free licence to vent her derision. She opened the book at the place where it was marked and pushed it under Euphemia's nose.

"Are you really too stupid to understand what the words say? Yes? I'll read them to you." Gwen recited a passage, barely needing to look at the page. The words had danced in triumph—now where were they? Euphemia had tried to burn them out of existence. But they clung to Gwen, and she to them: ". . . organic remains peculiar to each stratum . . ." She pushed away the memory of her jubilation at having committed those words to memory for her father. Of having found herself standing at his desk, trying to talk to him the way she imagined he would have allowed had she been born a boy. It didn't matter. The knowledge was not his alone to keep.

Gwen rounded the last corner and stopped the barrow next to Murray. "We have miscalled the lad, Murray. This was nothing to do with him."

Murray turned and looked into her eyes, and she returned his hard stare. His eyes flickered as she saw him understand her meaning. Together they set about pulling the books from the dirt. Some were not very badly damaged on the inside and could be saved. But Smith's volume had received special attention from Euphemia, and Gwen began to find small fragments of the pages torn by hand from their binding and ripped bit by bit beyond repair. Here was a corner bearing the partial remains of an intricate illustration of an ammonite. Every book in the bonfire had been part of Gwen's

armoury, as she had come to think of it, against the blinkered and determined stupidity of people like the vicar who had the intelligence to recognise the truth but turned his eye from it, and Euphemia's gaggle of black-clad visitors who shunned the truth completely in favour of spirits and their messages from the other side. Euphemia called her a traitor. A traitor to their mother and her faith. Gwen knelt down and let the pain of her grief enter her body; she let it snake through her, probing its tongue into each dark crevice.

She told herself after some minutes that it didn't really matter that the books had been burned. They were, in theory, replaceable, and the truth of what had been contained in them, the spirit of them, still lived in her head and in the heads of others. What mattered was the vicious nature of Euphemia's spite. Gwen chided herself for bringing Euphemia's desire to take possession of the house to the fore, to eradicate every memory of their blasphemous father who had detained Reverend Sparsholt in loud debate on the steps of Helford Church on the day of their mother's funeral. "She had her time in Heaven while she was alive." Gwen remembered the passionate grief in her father's voice. "Now her flesh will rot under the soil," he said, "And that is *all*, Sparsholt. That. Is. All." And so every trace of his sinful library was to be purged from the house, in order that Euphemia could fully dedicate and fashion the place to the memory of their mother. Gwen saw now that Euphemia was also attempting to annihilate Gwen's sense of herself, and her right to belong to the place. Euphemia wanted, she could see, to deny the house and its contents any hold on Gwen.

There was one thing she had now though, which Euphemia did not have, and did not know about: her new friend, Mr Scales. Gwen recalled the fossil in his hand as they had spoken that afternoon. She went over and over their conversation. Parts of it had become lost, but most of it she could remember, and its urgency.

The intensity of the conversation had soon eradicated all the usual formality and convention. They had not made polite enquiries about each other's history; they had existed fully in the moment with no regard for the past or the future.

Gwen tidied herself up, smacking dirt and ash from her clothes while Murray pushed the barrow of books to one of the potting sheds and she followed behind. Murray left her to it, and Gwen began the ordeal of assessing the damage in detail. As she examined each part of Euphemia's essay on destruction, Gwen knew that she would never mention Euphemia's existence to Mr Scales. There would be no poisoning the air with the mention of her, of what she had done, of the way she had made Gwen feel.