Murdering Stepmothers
The Execution of Martha Rendell

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For Ruth
The Photographer
There was a disorientating hush as the judge finished reading out the sentence. We all turned to look at the condemned woman in the dock. She was slumped forward against the rails as if she were about to fall. No one moved to help her. Seeing I was unobserved, I quickly leaned over my camera and checked the flash. Then I framed her face and pressed the shutter. A flash of light and the acrid smell of burning magnesium filled the room. Pandemonium broke out. Respectable ladies jostled each other to get a better view and gentlemen clambered up onto the court benches. Raucous cheers and shrill cries of ‘Hanging’s too good for her’ drowned out the wild pounding of the judge’s gavel and his shouts for ‘Order, order’. I pushed my way through the rabble to the exit. Darting into the grey chill of the late afternoon I took flight, running at full pelt until I was back in the safety of my East Perth studio.

I was impatient to see what I knew would be my best photograph yet. Shrouded in the reddish glow of the darkroom I gently drew the glass plate from the camera and began the alchemy of my craft. With tender care I applied the
heady metallic washes that coax images out of the plate’s dark void and dried its wetness before the soft yellow flame of a spirit lamp. Then I waited for that miraculous moment when shifting shades of light and dark finally settle and a human face stares out at you.

My anticipation was such that I could barely breathe. Suddenly, in a sea of blurred shapes, she appeared, her mouth frozen in a voiceless cry, her eyes wild with fear. Reflected in them were the furies of hatred that swirled around her and the crowd’s ravenous hunger for her death. I had captured this woman’s soul on the brink of its descent into hell.

The photograph was indeed my crowning glory. Yet I never showed it to anyone. In a night of whisky-induced remorse I smashed the glass plate into a myriad of fragments, gathered all the prints together and, with a burning match and a whoosh of kerosene, destroyed the lot. But this pyrrhic sacrifice brought me no peace.

In 1909, the year of Martha Rendell’s execution, I was working as a photographer and reporter for Perth’s Truth newspaper. My reward for drumming up snippets of gossip and hearsay early on in the case was that I was then sent to cover the coronial inquiry and the trial. This story had it all – a broken family, immorality, a mysterious stepmother, three dead children and rumours of poisoning. It was a true city sensation.

The Truth was one of three rival newspapers set up in Perth with money from the 1890s gold rushes. We were mainly newcomers to the state, an eclectic mix of men with views forged by hard times of drought and depression and workers’ movements back home. We were keen readers
of books on socialism that we found on the shelves of our local Workers’ Union library. Our radical views clashed with the conservative parochialism of our new home. Such was the tone of the principal organ of local reporting, the *West Australian* newspaper, whose readers languished in a torpor of nostalgia for the good old days when Perth was a little country town of comfortable gentlemen and obedient, uncomplaining servants.

Our newspaper delighted in scurrilous exposés of local frauds and scandals but our forte was sensational reports on the notorious and the famous, of rowdy entertainments and wild stunts, shocking murders and riveting courtroom dramas. Our trump card was the novelty of our thrilling photographs. We were known in the city as Kodakers, men who hung around the streets with cameras poised, ready to strike. We enjoyed this notoriety. Why would readers buy the *West Australian* with its endless dull columns when they could bury themselves in our picture-festooned pages? In London the *Daily Mirror*’s photographs of disasters, wars, official events, executions and famous people made it the city’s best-selling daily. In Perth we held the same ambitions for the *Truth*.

The Rendell trial was a windfall for the newspaper and for my career. Murders were a particular favourite with our readers, who were especially mesmerised by those rare cases where evil women poisoned those entrusted to their care. The presence of a vicious stepmother added that extra frisson. We willingly embroidered the facts with our florid writing, thrilling headlines and dramatic photographs. Our sensational accounts of the Rendell murders whipped Perth readers into a frenzy and found their way into newspapers around the nation.
Murdering Stepmothers

Martha Rendell was always the focus of our reports. Our mostly male readership was not interested in stories that painted her paramour and alleged accomplice, Thomas Nicholls Morris, as a guilty collaborator. There was far more to be gained from writing about the woman as a wicked murderess acting alone. Indeed, husbands seemed to find consolation in discussing her diabolical deeds with their dear wives before they kissed them goodbye at the front door and set off to work, confident in the belief that their homes were sanctuaries. It was not my place to disillusion them by pointing out that Morris had once felt the same confidence in his helpmate. And, of course, Martha Rendell invited our attention by remaining silent and withdrawn. She was like a photographic plate where we could develop all our imaginings of bad mothers, female criminals and wicked stepmothers. For our readers, who believed that such women were hard and unfeeling and would never confess to their crimes, her lack of emotion and claims of innocence only confirmed her guilt. This woman was perfect copy for the Truth.

I felt destined to cover the story. I was a loner and outsider with no loyalties to Perth or its citizens and a confirmed bachelor with no axe to grind about the virtues of wives or mothers. I had my finger on the pulse of the town. I knew its bars and backstreets intimately so could easily pick up rumours and leads. And, as it turned out, I had met and photographed Martha Rendell in my East Perth studio several years before she began to weave her web of deceit and murder. I also knew from my own experience that she was not an exception in wanting to be rid of unwanted children.
I was only six years old when my mother dragged me from our squalid lodgings in East London to the steps of an austere grey building where she pushed me into the skirts of a grim-looking woman and then scurried away. There I stood with my face clenched to hold back the tears and only a small coin in my hand to console me. The woman prodded me along into the hallway while she prised my fist open and extracted my penny. Then, to my surprise, she rubbed dirt into my face and jacket, clamped me into a strange metal frame and left me standing for a seeming eternity in front of a man bent over an odd-looking box on stilts. When he called out that he was done she pushed me into a room full of children and shouted at me over the din, ‘You are now a Doctor Barnardo orphan. Live up to this honour.’

I soon found out what this honour meant – endless days of hunger, unexplained punishments, filth and contagion, and bullying by the bigger boys. At night I sobbed into my pillow. During the day I survived by watching the faces of my masters and peers for signs of what harm they might be planning to do to me next. This skill stood by me over the years. I later took the first steps towards my life’s mission when I was assigned to work in the Photographic Department of Stepney Boys’ Home with its strange-smelling chemicals, fragile glass plates, wardrobes of ragged clothes, and metal frames for immobilising children while their portraits were taken. Before long, I learned the reason for the department and its curious assortment of props. Dr Barnardo was a rare man of charity who understood the lure of photographs to spread his message and raise funds for his cause. For many years he conducted a lucrative crusade by demonstrating the redemptive power of his mission in thousands of images of
Barnardo children. With sentimental titles like ‘Once a little vagrant’, they sold at five shillings for packs of twenty or sixpence apiece. The fact that we were deliberately scuffed up for them was finally exposed in court and Dr Barnardo was found guilty of ‘artistic fiction’.

My life changed dramatically in 1890 when, at the age of fourteen, I was transported with several other Barnardo boys across the far reaches of the British Empire to Adelaide in South Australia. My fate was sealed when I was apprenticed to a professional photographer with a studio in the city and a van that took his business out into the country towns around Adelaide. I endured five long years with him before I decided to head west. While the rest of the country languished in drought and hardship, gold fever was luring thousands of men to try their luck in the wilds of Western Australia. When my boss happened to mention that a colleague was leaving in a travelling van I promptly ran off to join him.

Our jangling studio of props, cameras and emulsions was a welcome sight on the fields. Diggers thronged around to have their portraits captured in the harsh desert light. Here I found my gift for creating illusions to give comfort where it was sorely needed. The men who stared into our camera were reaching out across the miles to their loved ones to reignite memories of happier days and to prove that their rash gamble had paid off. But the Arcadian scene behind them of verdant woodland vistas framed by gracious Grecian columns was merely a painted studio backdrop, and their fine clothes were borrowed from our trunks. What I saw through my camera lens were broken men framed by a rectangle of green against a searing vision of heat, red sand, piercing blue sky, and endless horizon.
I struck gold in the dusty gambling tents of Kalgoorlie. A run of luck at cards and my boss’s quick decision to drag me away from the table saw me heading for Perth at first light with a pouch of gold tucked in my overcoat pocket. Lady Luck stayed with me and I had sufficient means to purchase a small photographic studio in East Perth with modest living quarters attached. This was a suburb of cheap boarding houses and cramped dingy cottages set in narrow streets filled with all manner of rubbish and vermin. The derelict slum stood in stark contrast to the nearby modern centre of Perth with its newly paved streets, gas-lit walkways and stores packed with every convenience and luxury.

It was no coincidence that Martha Rendell chose this forsaken part of Perth for her masquerade as the wife of Thomas Morris and the mother of his children. This place was home to battlers and losers escaping from their past. Here no one asked where you were from for fear they would be asked the same question, but the gnawing anxiety remained that someone who knew your secrets would call you out. Some of the diggers I met on the fields were now drunks holed up in Tent City near the East Perth mulberry plantation, itself the site of a failed dream to produce silk. The lucky ones visited my studio from their new farms down south with families in tow, flush with respectability and righteous condemnation of the others. I had my own dark secret. I was a slave to gambling. That was why I was working at the Truth and why I was so determined to make my name with the Rendell case – to pay off all my debts.

It was in 1903 that I first met Martha Rendell, although that was not the name she gave me. To the accompaniment of the tinkling bell above my door, a woman in her early
thirties, well proportioned and confident in bearing, entered my premises seeking a studio portrait. She introduced herself as Mrs Martha Moreton of St George’s Terrace in the city, where she was in service to a retired Italian colonel. The portrait, she said, was for a very dear friend. The way she said ‘dear’ and the sparkle in her eyes prompted me to ask mischievously, ‘Not Mr Moreton?’ to which she responded with an enigmatic smile and seemly blush.

After these few brief pleasantries we settled down to the business of negotiating the sitting. Some clients consumed endless amounts of my time discussing minutiae like the tilt of a head or the placement of a hand but this woman was quite certain about what she wanted. She had no interest in the usual vanities suggesting wealth and beauty: heavy drapes, props of furniture and columns, dramatic poses of popular actresses or backdrops of exotic landscapes she could never hope to visit. She wanted two portraits: one full face and the other slightly to the side, both with a plain dark background. Whether this simplicity reflected a pragmatic nature or was to minimise the cost, I couldn’t say. Perhaps the singular focus on her face was a sign of vanity on her part. Certainly the resulting portrait projected the very essence of womanly respectability.

I can still picture her sitting there, straight-backed and self-assured, her eyes looking just past the camera. Her hands are tucked away to hide the rough marks left by the toils of her work. Her thick brown hair is pinned in rolls across her head creating a magnificent frame for her face. Her skin shows few signs of ageing, her brows are shapely, and her eyes are of a light colour. On her lips plays that same enigmatic smile. Her bosom is full and round and her waist
is surprisingly slender. She wears a short dark jacket over a lace blouse with its collar pinned together by a small brooch and, above it, a black velvet ribbon. This, she told me in a confidential tone, was a gift from her dear friend. Looking at the portraits in the days before her hanging, it seemed that this simple love token grew tighter and tighter around her neck and that the shimmer of light in the dark behind her glowed ever-brighter like a spectral wraith from the dead.

Back then Rendell hadn’t begun to present herself as the respectable Mrs Thomas Morris and mother of five from 23 Robinson Street, East Perth. Nor had I begun my campaign to expose to the people of Perth her wickedness. So it was a strange irony that these two portraits, created in the intimacy of my private studio sitting, should end up as public images of a condemned woman. On the weekend following her trial they appeared on the front page of the *Sunday Times* above the captions ‘Mrs Rendell, Full Face’ and ‘Mrs Rendell, Side Face’. These tender gifts of love had been transformed into prison mug shots of an evil murderess.

Over the years I have captured them all with my camera – the dour faces of respectable country folk dressed in their shabby Sunday best; dead children with peaceful faces, testimony to their mother’s love; grotesque grimaces of corpses in the morgue; belles at lavish society parties; families of picnickers relaxing in the cool shade beside a river; and nervous young newlyweds. They peer at me out of the gloom, shadowy presences imprinted on my memory. Yet after all this time I remain perplexed by the secrets hidden in their faces. Some say that the inclinations of the heart and soul are proclaimed there for all to see; others, that faces are blank slates that we
fill with our own imaginings and desires. I often discussed this with my colleagues on the police rounds. We all had strong opinions born from a lifetime of reading the faces of strangers.

My colleagues sincerely believed that the tools of science could unlock the deepest secrets of human nature. They were fascinated by scientists’ studies of people who were deemed mad, criminal, immoral, poverty-stricken or just plain ordinary. How they painstakingly measured, photographed and named distinguishing features and gathered their findings together to create great classes of degenerates and deviants, then how reformers, armed with this information, labelled the unfortunates and subjected them to regimes of incarceration and punishment for their redemption. They avidly read books on the science of craniometry whose practitioners transformed measurements of skulls and brains into grand evolutionary ladders of humankind ascending from savages to civilised man. They pored over popular accounts of physiognomy that promised to teach them how to read a stranger’s soul from facial signs, like an unusually shaped eye or twist of the lips, and the works of phrenologists who purported to tell a man’s inner secrets from the bumps on his head.

As crime reporters, what intrigued them most were claims that there was a grammar of the criminal face that could be measured and documented for the world to see. In England, Francis Galton painstakingly layered exposures of prisoners’ faces onto single photographic plates in his quest to capture the essence of different criminal types, and created some beautiful, haunting images in the process. In Italy, Cesare Lombroso laboured for decades with camera and callipers to create vast compilations of the ‘stigmata of degeneration’ that
branded men irrevocably as criminals. The huge jaws, heavy foreheads, prominent orbital arches, large fleshy ears and moral deformities expressed in indolence, sensual indulgence, and a craving for every sort of evil. These men were throwbacks from a savage past, like the primitive tribes that still roamed the world.

I thought it contradictory that, despite his damning views, Lombroso remained opposed to capital punishment and believed that prisoners should be treated humanely. Perhaps this was because, like wild animals, they were driven by instincts over which they had no control. In my opinion there was as much truth in Lombroso’s theories as there was in the faked photographs of spirits of the dead that charlatans fabricated for gullible widows. The truth is that the human face contains unfathomable secrets. How can any simple ready reckoner or pocket measuring stick expose the animating selves that shape us?

When it came to identifying criminals I endorsed the views of Monsieur Alphonse Bertillon, Director of the Photographic Service of the Préfecture de Paris. M. Bertillon followed in the footsteps of his father who measured skeletons to create theories of race and evolution. He was influenced by ideas of physiognomic expression, but did not endorse Lombroso’s sweeping claims. A true heir of the French Revolution, he believed that men were created equal and they forged their own destinies. A facial blemish could thrust one man down and cause him to lose heart, take to bad ways, and join the criminal ranks. The circumstances of another with the same affliction could lead him to live a normal law-abiding life.

Rather than making predestiny and prejudice the foundation of his work, M. Bertillon developed practical
procedures and systems to identify and document individual criminals. Bertillonage, as it was called, used standardised instructions for taking key body measurements, describing facial characteristics and photographing criminals. These were carefully annotated and archived to provide accurate identification at a later date. M. Bertillon’s influence made it all the way from nineteenth-century France to the hellhole of Fremantle Prison, where Martha Rendell spent her final days. There, in keeping with Bertillonage principles, photographs were taken of each prisoner and mounted on cards with sections to enter their personal details, physical measurements and characteristics. Compared to Lombroso’s hysterical witch-hunts, M. Bertillon had created a scientific and just approach for detecting the criminals in our midst.

But it took a principled man to turn his back on Lombroso’s theory when it came to the Rendell case. The excited talk turned my colleagues to consider the nature of evil in women. We envisaged an unbridgeable chasm between the good and the bad; they were like separate species. The former were devoted wives and mothers who gladly performed their duties of creating comfortable homes and respectable families. It was a paradox that while women were physically, emotionally, morally and intellectually weaker than men, their inner strength kept both family and nation moral and upright. By contrast, bad women were innately immoral, deceitful, devoid of feeling, cruel and prone to violence to the point of murder. Their faces were coarse and brutal and devoid of womanly emotions. Morbid activity in their brains magnified their evil tendencies so they became monstrously vengeful, jealous, intensely erotic and superior in their capacity to conceive and execute evil, in ways more terrible than any
man. According to Lombroso they were rare and monstrous. Indeed they were doubly so, since few women broke the law and criminals were exceptions in a civilised world.

Such theories achieved popular acclaim around the world. In Perth I drew upon them to inflame public opinion, despite my doubts and criticisms. I convinced my readers that the proof of this woman’s wickedness was engraved on her face, yet when I first met her I detected nothing sinister. I was as great a liar as she. It may have been a fitting coincidence that Lombroso died suddenly just ten days after Martha Rendell’s execution. But this did not relieve my shame.

It was on the first of May in 1909 that I again crossed paths with Martha Rendell, although I did not know this at the time. I was reporting on a custody case before Police Magistrate Augustus Sanford Roe that was brought against Thomas Morris by his estranged wife, Sarah. She was seeking custody of their fourteen-year-old son, George, who had run away from his father’s home and refused to return. I had no inkling then that Thomas Morris was the ‘dear friend’ that Mrs Martha Moreton had spoken of, nor that she was the other woman in a troubled triangle involving this couple.

Still, as I listened to the case my instincts told me that here was a story waiting to be revealed. Three years earlier, when the marriage broke down, Police Magistrate Roe had granted Morris custody of his five children. This was not unusual since the law generally favoured the rights of fathers over mothers who were considered unfit to care for children on their own. Indeed, their precarious economic circumstances made this a difficult undertaking. Morris had also accused his wife of drunkenness and adultery. From that time Sarah Morris had
virtually no contact with her children. Yet now Magistrate Roe was giving her custody of the boy and advising him to go with her. His added cryptic comment, that he knew more about the situation but could say nothing further at this stage, aroused my curiosity. By referring obliquely to matters that did not bear directly on the case he was overstepping the mark. Why should he take this risk, I wondered? Roe was a crusty police magistrate accustomed to hearing cases of drunkenness, assault, disorderly conduct and vagrancy. He was also from Perth’s revered pioneering stock, the son of the colony’s former Surveyor General, John Septimus Roe, and an arch conservative known for his arrogant ways. It was not like him to be concerned about the fate of an errant working class mother and her son.

I immediately checked with my police contacts, who told me a shocking story. Over a period of sixteen months between July 1907 and October 1908, three children had died at the Morris cottage in East Perth and the boy, George, had run away fearing he would be next. I rushed back to my desk and dashed off a story hinting that Magistrate Roe’s decision was due to suspicions surrounding the children’s deaths. I finished with a flurry of questions. What secrets were the authorities withholding from the public? Were we on the eve of terrible disclosures? Were George’s fears real or mere boyish hallucinations? My reporting set the cat among the pigeons and, I’m convinced, galvanised the police into action.

The wheels of the law grind slowly and it was another three months before the exhumation of the children’s remains was announced. It was then that I could begin to put our stamp on the story. I outlandishly predicted that the post-mortem
would confirm that the children had been deliberately poisoned but that the family doctor would be absolved of any guilt. In my coverage of the exhumation I set out to lay a trail of suspicion that lead straight to the cottage in East Perth. I encouraged mistrust with related stories and photographs carefully placed around my brief article. There was a doctor’s florid account of the *modus operandi* of poisoners who went quietly about their evil business of procuring poisons, which they incorporated in minute doses into food, drink and even medicines to create a constant decline in their victim’s health. Meanwhile they courted the full cooperation of medical men called in to diagnose the cause of the patient’s sustained wasting away. It was no coincidence that this account closely resembled rumours circulating in Perth that Morris’s housekeeper, as she was politely called, had poisoned the children in her care. I wagered that now our readers would look twice at the food on their plates and the women – wives, mothers or sisters – who served it to them.

In mid-August the coronial inquiry into the deaths of the Morris children began and we promised our readers startling revelations of diabolical crimes. Our coverage set a feverish tone for evermore shocking disclosures with headlines that brazenly declared ‘**Astounding Allegations of Devilish Deeds. Innocent Little Sufferers Have Their Throats Swabbed With Spirits of Salts**’. The evidence, I wrote, exposed ‘a callous criminality, demonical and diabolical to the utmost degree.’ In my final report I noted the coincidence that my earlier article on the custody hearing, which first called attention to the mysterious deaths, should be the closing item in ‘the history of one of the most sensational and appalling stories which has ever unfolded in an Australian court.’
Despite all my sleuthing, when the coronial inquiry began I still hadn’t deduced that Mrs Moreton and Martha Rendell were the same woman. I could hardly be blamed for not recognising her in court. She was seated at the front with her face hidden behind a heavy black veil. This didn’t stop me from describing for our readers how she ‘smiled in an amused and scornful manner at evidence which, to the other listeners in the court, was fraught with the most sinister suggestiveness and hideous horror.’ Of Morris I wrote simply that he was ‘a man of medium build, with dark hair and moustache tinged with grey, who had a strained and worried look.’ I also concocted a grainy image headlined ‘THOMAS MORRIS AND HIS PARAMOUR MARTHA RENDELL’ that clearly showed his features and bristling moustache, but I was obliged to scratch away her black veil and draw in how I imagined her to be – narrow-eyed, thin-lipped and toothless – the epitome of an evil witch.

It was only when Rendell pulled the veil back from her face on entering the witness box that her true identity was revealed to me. Once I had recovered from the shock of recognition, I immediately saw how plain and ordinary she was. She looked nothing like Lombroso’s monstrous criminals or my imagined hag. Neither of us would have picked her out in the street. Watching as she gave her evidence I understood how her unemotional demeanour could be a public mask to cover her shame and shock. I even felt a pang of sympathy for her plight. But then I recognised something terrifying in her ordinariness: she could be any woman entrusted with our care.

I focussed my considerable powers of observation on her, hoping to catch her in a lie or to ferret out a secret or two.
The formalities of the coronial inquiry suited her cautious, detached demeanour and I watched with some admiration as she maintained her cool composure while denying everything in a low flat voice. I leaned forward intently when she claimed that she had not told the doctors she was the children’s mother, as this contradicted evidence, in particular her written name on the death certificates. This struck me as a monstrous lie tantamount to perjury. Yet she remained perfectly calm; her face did not change and her voice remained carefully modulated.

I knew that skilled liars did not betray themselves with shifty eyes and nervous fidgeting. That was the stuff of music hall vaudeville. Nor did they conjure up wild, exaggerated tales to dupe their listeners. Instead they projected a chilling unnatural calm as they focussed on avoiding any telltale signs in their stories or speech that could give them away. Ironically, it was often the absence of the little cues and irregularities of normal conversation that exposed them as liars to the knowing eye. This was certainly my considered response to Rendell’s unnatural self-control. Her only spontaneous reaction during the entire proceedings was elicited by Morris’s statement, ‘I gave her absolute power over my children.’ Her expression shifted suddenly, lighting up with a defiant look of pride and then crumpling into a shudder of fear as the implications of what he had said sunk in.

My writings in the *Truth* provoked vitriolic hatred for Martha Rendell. The vengeful crowds that gathered outside the court chanted ‘Tear her to pieces!’ and waved makeshift nooses in the air. The good women of Perth swarmed like harpies into the Morris cottage in East Perth when the contents
were auctioned to raise money for the couple’s legal defence. Respectable matrons wearing fashionable hats and coats haggled over mementos. In tugs of war over prized items they exchanged angry words and even a few surreptitious pinches and slaps. Before the first knock of the auctioneer’s gavel rang through the cottage they had stolen all the cups, saucers, plates, spoons, photographs, clothes, small items of furniture and Morris’s tools of trade. Even the auctioneer’s hat had disappeared. Only a few items, mainly plants and the pots of sand they stood in, remained to be auctioned for the princely sum of ten pounds. On leaving the cottage I heard a shrill female voice boasting of her trophies: a photograph of Rendell and a black velvet ribbon. I suddenly realised that I had helped to create this shrewish rabble. Alarm flooded through me, followed closely by remorse.

What could I do to stop the conflagration of hatred and its inevitable conclusion? The die was already cast. Everyone knew that Rendell would be found guilty and that she would be sentenced to death. Now the enormity of this eventuality filled me with a terrible loathing of myself and the gullible people of Perth. From this time I sought to temper my reports but the editor sent them back to be peppered up. He insisted that we continue to use my doctored photograph of the poor woman.

For the murder trial our first headline ran ‘Alleged Poisoner and Her Paramour on Trial. Morris Dejected and Downcast – Martha Rendell Alert and Watchful during the Proceedings. Morbid-minded Crowds Flock to the Criminal Court and Listen to Awful Allegations concerning Little Sufferer’s Death’. I added theatrically that our coverage would ‘throw light into dark places to reveal the truth to the
world in its naked horror.’ I wrote that Morris looked greatly affected and care-worn but that she had the cheek to smile at a woman who called out to her, ‘I’d like to have you for half an hour.’ Watching the unfolding courtroom drama exhausted me, and seeing the hordes of curious onlookers descending to catch a glimpse of the pitiful creature turned my stomach. How I rued the day that I agreed to cover the case. In long sleepless nights I berated myself for my overweening ambition and the gambling debts that drove me to accept any work the *Truth* offered me. During the day a numbing sense of dread crept over me.

I was in court when the defence announced that it would present no witnesses and my stomach twisted into an anxious knot. Grasping at straws I wrote about a case in Perth, six years earlier, when three pretty young women were sentenced to death but reprieved at the last moment. However, I knew in my heart that there would be no such ending for Martha Rendell.

A shameful experience from those terrible days demonstrates my desperate turn of mind. One evening I fell in with the plans of a female friend who, like many otherwise sane Perth residents, had fallen prey to the new fad of the ouija board and its promises of ghostly secrets. ‘If anyone can contact those children it is you,’ she explained. Despite my utter cynicism about calling up the dead, I reluctantly stepped into her parlour and sat down at a round table covered with a dusky red velvet cloth. I watched as my friend drew the curtains, lowered the lamp and arranged candles in dishes around the room. A fire burned slowly in the grate. Then she laid out the ouija board with its alphabet letters and numerals and placed the small wooden pointer in my hand. She sat
down and gently put her small plump hand over mine. I noticed her short shell-pink nails and the dark cleft of her breasts as she pressed against me. Suddenly the candles began to sputter and strange shadows danced across the crimson wallpaper. I smelled roses and fancied I saw a bowl of fleshy red blooms on the table where there had been none. Then I felt the force of the pointer pulling our hands around the board, to this letter and that, but there was no sense in it. The thought flew into my mind, ‘They are children and do not know their spelling yet.’ This went on for some time until I felt a gentle breath against my ear and a child’s soft voice hissing, ‘Kill her, kill her, kill her for she has killed us.’ I pressed my hands over my ears and leapt to my feet. In my haste to escape these unholy sounds I sent the board flying across the room and my chair fell in a crash behind me. I rushed out the front door followed by my friend’s mocking laughter and the growing certainty that I had been a gullible fool.

Given my part in paving Martha Rendell’s path to the gallows it seemed a terrible irony that I should be called to Fremantle Prison to take two final photographs of this sorry woman. As I set up my equipment I recalled the respectable Mrs Moreton who came to my East Perth studio. I tried to imagine her going through the formalities that would turn her into a prisoner of the Crown. The guards would be checking that her documents were in order and a wardress would help her to undress and don her prison uniform. Her old clothes would be packed away in a bag marked Property of the prisoner – to be returned on the prisoner’s release, although release was not likely to occur in her case.
Pondering this it occurred to me that my task was useless since she would soon be dead. Mug shots were taken to keep tabs on criminals during their term in prison and, if they were unlucky, on their return on a further sentence. Martha Rendell had no future.

My morbid thoughts were interrupted by a burly guard who pushed the woman into the room and ordered her to be seated. The belle of the studio she was no more. I saw before me a broken soul. After a few uncomfortable moments I began the usual patter that precedes the taking of studio portraits but she seemed not to know I was there. I let out a sigh of relief as I had feared she might recognise me from the court. When I asked her to turn for the profile shot she slouched forward in utter dejection. Her shoulders drooped and her gingham uniform flattened her breasts. Her head hung heavy on her short neck as she peered out into nothingness. The frontal shot was even more devastating. At the last minute she raised herself and looked directly into the camera with an expression of utter hopelessness. Her face, formerly smooth and plump, was lined and wrinkled. A deep indentation between her brows indicated extreme anguish and concentrated worry. Her lips were set in a chilling line of pain. I could not take my eyes from her neck. The neat collar of the prison uniform, held together by a single small button. The fabric was turned back slightly to show the plain reverse, giving the impression of a thin white cord encircling her neck. She sat against a plain dark background full of foreboding.

These last two photographs had their own special place, not in a lover’s frame or cherished family album, but pasted on card number F511 in the Register of Local Prisoners, Gaols
Department, Western Australia. Below the photographs were listed her personal details, physical features, measurements and the final chilling entry: ‘Executed at Fremantle Prison 6th October 1909.’

In the days following the trial I lost all heart for the Rendell story. I locked myself in my studio. I read with some hope the articles in the Sunday Times calling for a reprieve and decrying the hanging of a woman. But then I was thrown into despair by a letter to the West Australian claiming that the charge against Rendell was absurd and that the monstrous verdict and public frenzy were the direct consequence of the Truth’s sensational reporting. One of my colleagues soon came banging on the door to tell me that I was to cover the execution. I was aghast and only reluctantly consented to pick up my pen after the editor agreed that I could write a couple of stories critical of the hanging. I explained that it was our manifest duty to ensure that every avenue was pursued to extend leniency to this poor woman. He looked up at me in surprise so I added, ‘It is not for us weak mortals to claim the prerogatives of the Mighty One.’ He was thinking that a new angle on the controversy would sell more papers. I harboured the desperate hope that my words could somehow help to avert her terrible end.

Meanwhile my colleagues were railing against the government’s surprise announcement that, for the first time, reporters would not be allowed into the gallows to witness the execution. I silently thanked the man who made the decision, but they were furious over this departure from convention. Eyewitness accounts of hangings were good copy. They sold papers and filled reporters’ pockets and
beer glasses. Executions could bring last-minute confessions, heart-rending scenes of prayer and farewell, expressions of terror, and belligerent attacks on the courts. One reporter told me the ghastly tale of a horrific triple hanging he witnessed at Fremantle Prison that earned him a front-page story and free drinks for months for the retelling. First up on the scaffold was a Norwegian prisoner who stood for fifteen minutes with the noose around his neck while he protested his innocence and berated the very same detective who led the Rendell investigation for working up a false case against him. He also blamed his solicitor for failing to call witnesses who could have testified to his innocence. Then two Manila men were brought in and the truly shocking part of the proceedings began. Standing next to each other on the scaffolding, with nooses around their necks and calico hoods pulled down over their faces, they began a fierce argument in their own language, which no one else understood. One cried out to have the hood lifted and when this was done he tried to grab at the noose with his manacled hands, seeking to free himself. Whether this was to save his life or to give him rein to attack the other man no one knew. Finally, in all the confusion, the gallows trapdoor was suddenly released and, to everyone’s horror, the two Manila men fell through taking with them the Chief Warder who landed on his head and suffered a serious wound to his scalp. Needless to say, this was the last multiple hanging ever held at Fremantle Prison.

I stood waiting at the front of the prison on the morning of the execution. When the clock chimed eight the main gates flew open and two sobbing women rushed out, followed shortly after by two officials who announced that Martha
Rendell was dead. I was scribbling down some ideas for my story but when I heard their words my body convulsed into shuddering sobs and I had to rush off to hide my anguish. My head filled with horrible images as I stumbled away from the prison. I saw Martha standing on the scaffold. The calico hood over her face moved in and out with her breath, getting faster with each second. The rope had scratched red into the soft white skin of her neck. Suddenly there was a loud clang and a thud and I saw her head tilt slightly. Then, with a rush of air, she was gone and there was silence.

Further calamity awaited me at Fremantle Railway Station. Because I was chatting quietly to the Deputy Sheriff of Prisons with my large black camera bag at my side, the crowd waiting on the platform decided that I must be the hangman. Suddenly a throng of curious onlookers was pointing at me and calling out excitedly, ‘That’s him, the clean-shaven chap in the dark overcoat.’ When the burly executioner finally arrived with his mistress on one arm and a parcel of fish and chips under the other the crowd took no notice of him. They were still talking about the hangman and how they had seen him boarding the train for Perth with the bulky black case containing his diabolical tools of trade.