



GENEVIEVE MORRISSEY

**MARRIAGE
AND HANGING**



A NOVEL

Copyright © 2024 by Genevieve Morrissey.

The right of Genevieve Morrissey to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted.

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise) without the prior written permission of the author, except in cases of brief quotations embodied in reviews or articles. It may not be edited, amended, lent, resold, hired out, distributed or otherwise circulated, without the publisher's written permission.

Permission can be obtained from www.antlands.com

This book is a work of fiction. Except in the case of historical fact, names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Published by Genevieve Morrissey.

ISBN: 978-1-7351096-8-8

Cover design and interior formatting: Mark Thomas / Coverness.com

PREFACE

Marriage and Hanging was inspired by, and very loosely based upon, the 1832 murder of Maria Cornell near Fall River, Massachusetts—a crime resulting in what was referred to in the popular press of the day as “the trial of the century.” Sixty years later, the title was passed to the prosecution of the axe-murders of Lizzie Borden’s father and stepmother, also committed in Fall River, Massachusetts.



MILLTOWN, 1832

Marriage and hanging go by destiny; matches are made in heaven.

— *Robert Burton, The Anatomy of Melancholy*

The mill for which the town had been named was a small New England sawmill, its great heavy wheel constructed on the spot by men who celebrated the first log cut there with a toast to King George, far away in England. The site was a good one for the purpose: the wooded hills all around provided the lumber, and the river that powered the wheel flowed briskly toward a fall a mile downstream and was not prone to flooding. The sawmill's owner prospered, and soon other sawmills were built nearby. When the sawmills had sawn enough of the trees, farms were established in the clearings with a small town amidst them, its straggling street of houses and shops built of boards locally cut.

The proudest work of the sawmills was a small fortress erected at the crest of a low hill overlooking the road running north of the town. Built in haste, it was intended as a deterrent to any British army that might otherwise have considered passing that way. A different

George—General Washington this time—was the toast of the fort’s proud and weary builders, and when they had finished the work, they laid down their tools, took up their muskets, and manned it. As the fort had no cannon, when a British army did try to pass a few months later, its defenders found it more convenient to confront their enemy on the road itself. Nevertheless, when after three day’s contention the British withdrew, the citizen-soldiers were proud enough of their redoubt to debate for some days whether the town should not be renamed “Fort Independence” in its honor. Eventually the idea was dropped, and the place remained simply, Milltown.

The question of a name-change was raised again early in the next century, when reference to mills began to seem an anachronism. Although the town had (modestly) prospered, it was now largely a farming village. The native forests had by then been cleared, and the crumbling remains of the last sawmill were swept away by the river when the water rose in the spring of 1799.

But the place was still a good one for a wheel, and the boats which loaded the farmers’ wheat and corn at the dock at the end of the town’s main street could as easily carry other cargo. In 1815, a new kind of mill was built in Milltown—one for spinning cotton thread. The farmers stayed on, of course, but with increasing irrelevance to the town’s economy and by 1825, Milltown was no longer a village.

In 1832 there were six mills in Milltown, all making cotton thread or cotton cloth. When a shift at Number Four Mill let out on a frosty day in January, a hundred young ladies streamed forth, heading to the row of boardinghouses nearby, where, if they had no family in town, they were required to live. The women were as young as fifteen years old, and few were more than thirty. Their ambition was to acquire in the mills a little money, clothes, and experience of the world before

returning to the farms from which, overwhelmingly, they had come. Most would afterwards marry a young man from a neighboring farm who had probably spent a few years at sea for the same purpose.

Among the young ladies who had a shift at Number Four this day was a small, dark-haired girl whose pleasantly rounded form was at a variance with her thin, sharp-chinned face. Not many passers-by would have had a chance to see that face, for she wore a calash bonnet pulled well forward, but her tidy little figure, cloak pulled tight around it, as well as the bird-like grace with which she darted through the crowds in the street attracted a few admiring glances. The girl was evidently used to such attentions, and paid them no heed.

Though sawmills no longer lined the river's edge, there was still a woodyard in Milltown, with a sawpit enclosed in a shed where some lumber for the town's immediate needs was still produced. It was to this place the young lady was heading, and she walked quickly because the woodyard was more than a mile from Number Four mill and night was falling fast. Her name was Mary Hale, and she had no need of lumber. She was going to the woodyard because, when the men who worked there had gone for the day, it was a secluded place where people could meet and talk who did not necessarily wish to be seen together. The only thing overlooking the woodyard, in fact, was Battle Hill, where the Revolutionary War fort had once stood, but the fort, like the sawmills, had largely crumbled away, and few people bothered to climb the hill now.

One who did was Josiah Woodley. He climbed because he was proud his grandfather had fought at the fort, long ago, and also because it was a lonely spot, which suited his present mood.

Josiah was the youngest and least tried of the three ministers who saw to the spiritual needs of the congregation of the largest church in

Milltown. There were those who questioned his fitness for the position. The Reverend Woodley's previous experience consisted of a single year pastoring at a small country church. But the church deacons assured doubters that, though generally quiet, Josiah was well-spoken, well-educated, and doctrinally sound, and therefore certain to do well once he had acquired a more confident air. The deacons were quick to add that furthermore, as the Woodleys were mourning the death of a baby daughter the year before, to offer them a change of scene was an act of simple Christian charity.

What the deacons did *not* mention—though everybody knew it—was that though the mill girls were required by the terms of their employment contracts to attend church regularly, the denomination in which Josiah had been ordained was losing its younger members to the Methodists and Baptists at an alarming rate. In fact, in what the deacons felt was a most un-Christian spirit of rivalry, the Methodists and Baptists offered a livelier sort of Sunday service on purpose to attract them. The deacons had some hope a younger face—handsome, but not dangerously so—and new ideas in the pulpit might counteract to some extent the enticements of Young People's Picnics, and competitive "Bible Bees."

From the hill, Josiah saw Mary Hale as she slipped in at the woodyard gate, but he gave the event little thought. His mind was on his marriage, in which something had somehow gone terribly wrong, and he had no interest in what business a mill girl had going into a deserted woodyard at such an hour.

Josiah's wife, Rachel, was at home, of course—the only fit place for a woman to be. Her company there was the "help," a farmer's daughter called Kitty, whose single qualification for a position as maid-of-all-work was that, since her father did not want her to go into the mill,

she was willing to take the job. Rachel would rather have had no help at all. She was a competent cook and housekeeper, and there were—sadly—only herself and Josiah to look after. But it would have been unsuitable for her to have been alone all day and having Kitty in the house forestalled gossip. This evening, when Rachel had seen to it the preparation of supper was progressing smoothly, she sat in the gloomy front parlor, silently knitting a stocking while the last rays of day faded from the room.

Josiah had no idea how he and his wife had grown so apart from one another, but Rachel knew. She knew it was simply and completely that he had failed her, both as a husband and as a minister of God. Their baby girl, born in pain as babies are, lived only long enough to learn what it was to suffer, and her death had left Josiah as broken as Rachel, and at a loss for fit words to strengthen and reassure her. There were a great many comforts Rachel needed to hear—as that little Lucy was safe in the bosom of her God, where they would all one day be happily reunited; and perhaps—putting God aside for a moment—that time was a better medicine for a heart broken as hers was than any the doctor could bring in his bag. Josiah might have been stern and warned her God was assaying their faith, and it must not be found wanting, even in the face of so crushing a blow as they had suffered. All these were things which, though Rachel knew them already, she needed to be reminded of again and again.

But instead, when she cried, he had cried with her, as hurt and lost as she was, and scarcely able to murmur so much as, “Thy will be done, O Lord” by way of a prayer. Instead of reminding her of her duty, as the weaker vessel of Grace, to submit humbly to the inscrutable ordinances of heaven, he seemed to wonder at them himself.

Even when the room was completely dark, Rachel sat on in the

parlor, needles clicking softly, lips moving faintly as she counted her stitches, struggling against acknowledging a secret wish that instead of her husband, someone very *like* Josiah, only strong and confident in himself and with strong and confident comforts to offer her, would come in at the door wanting supper.

Someone like the Reverend Dr. Conrad, perhaps.

Dr. Conrad, the oldest of the three ministers of the Milltown church, was reading to his wife. He had intended to go out for a walk, but when Mrs. Conrad, seeing him putting on his coat, expressed a wish that he read her letters for her instead, he had immediately put aside all other considerations and done so. He was devoted to his wife, who was an invalid.

Sophronia Conrad's health had been ruined in the bearing and rearing of six children, two of whom died before they learned to walk. The four remaining children grew up with the idea their frail mother might at any time be taken from them, but Sophronia, though a humble and patient sufferer, was a determined woman. She had lived in spite of all, and three of her children were now well started in life. Even her last son was nearly grown and, to her joy, spoke of entering at the seminary where his father had once studied. Sophronia was devout and never questioned God's will, but had she done so, Rachel was certain Dr. Conrad would have, lovingly but firmly, applied the necessary correction.

An hour passed, and whomever Mary Hale had gone to the woodyard to meet had failed her. It was dark when she left there, walking back toward the mills and her boarding house, where she was sure of a scolding for staying out late. Though she had been in Milltown for nearly six months, she had no friends yet upon whom she could depend to cover for her. She showed less haste going back

than she had in coming, and pushed back her bonnet as if to tell the world she did not care who saw her now.

Josiah, meanwhile, had also started home. The church where he preached lay on his way, and he stopped by his study there to add a few lines that had come to him for the sermon on which he had been working in the afternoon. As he came down the church steps, Mary Hale passed by. He did not connect her with the dark figure at the woodyard, but he knew who she was, and started at recognizing her. When he saw she knew him as well, he flushed and turned away, and rather than falling in with her, started off in another direction.

Avoiding Mary made him late for supper, but Rachel did not ask for any explanation. The two of them spoke pleasantly to each other over the meal, and Josiah was particularly pleased at one point to make his wife laugh. Except for the hurt look in Rachel's eyes, grown habitual over the preceding months, anyone might have imagined all was well between them.

Sophronia Conrad kept early hours, and by the time the letters were read and talked over, it was time for her supper to be brought on a tray so she could be put to bed. It was also too late for Dr. Conrad to go out, as he acknowledged to himself after a discreet check of his watch. Instead, he sat reading until the clock struck ten, and then, after writing a few brief notes and tucking them into his coat pocket, he went to his own room, which was far enough from his wife's that he need not fear to disturb her.

By eleven o'clock, the town was quiet. All the farmers and most of the town's citizens were asleep. The few workers at Number Four in the late hours were not girls, but men, whose job it was to see that the machinery was serviced and ready to go again in the morning. Number Four mill was still powered by a vertical shaft rather than,

as in the most up-to-date mills, having belt-driven machinery, and as the gears could not be precisely made, they wore quickly and needed almost daily maintenance. The mill girls themselves were clever at repairing their spinning machines on the fly—they were paid by the number of spindles of thread they produced, and a broken spinner brought them nothing at all—but the mechanics saw to it as many as possible were serviceable when the first shift arrived in the early morning.

Mary Hale, in the bed she shared at her boardinghouse, lay awake, staring blindly into the dark, surrounded by the deep and peaceful breathing of girls who worked hard and slept well.

The Woodleys lay as far apart as their narrow bed permitted, with Rachel turned on her side, her back to her husband. Josiah made tentative overtures to his wife, shyly suggesting if she were cold, she could lie nearer him and be warmed, but Rachel responded that she didn't feel cold, and suggested an extra blanket for him if he did. Then she waited for him to say—half-hoped he would say—that the situation was one in which, as duly married persons, he had a right and she had a Duty.

When he did not, however, she decided that it was better so. She wanted no more little Lucys to break her heart again. Both Woodleys then lay still, pretending to be asleep, until they were asleep in fact.



CHAPTER ONE

“I believe there is nothing in the world so quickly undone as a woman’s work,” Mrs. Tudge murmured, breaking in on Rachel’s thoughts next evening. “You probably spent half the day ordering the parlor and arranging the tea tray, and within five minutes the men have pulled the chairs about, slopped the cloth, smeared the cups and spoons, and left nothing of all your bread and butter but greasy crumbs, which they will now proceed to tread into the carpet. I dread these Sunday teas, don’t you?”

Rachel managed a smile, although she did not like the suggestion her parlor required half a day’s labor before it was fit for guests to see. “Preaching is hungry work, I suppose,” she answered instead, with false cheer. “The men must be fed somehow. But if you dislike this way so much, we could find another, I suppose.”

Replied Mrs. Tudge quickly, “Oh, no. How could we? Tea before evening service has been the custom here since—*forever*, I think. And men are like children and hate for anything to change, particularly with regard to their food. Just look at them! The reverend gentlemen have their *spiritual* eyes fixed on heaven, of course; but their fleshy ones have fastened on that cake.”

Mrs. Tudge’s tendency to disparage all males was one of the things

Rachel liked least about her. She found it difficult enough to keep it continually in mind that even a man like the Reverend Mr. Tudge was her spiritual better without being continually reminded by his wife that he was also selfish and a bore.

“How are your little boys, Mrs. Tudge?” she asked politely.

Mrs. Tudge was not ready to change the topic. “You baked it yourself, didn’t you? The cake, I mean,” she continued, eyeing the tea-board in a way that seemed to imply it looked wrong. “I’m sure that gawky girl in the kitchen can’t be trusted so far. I know her family, you know. They take their meat on their knives—yes, they do!—and think cake is effete. It’s always pie with them—morn, midday, and night. Buy cake of the baker’s instead. It’s nearly as cheap, and men don’t care what they eat so long as it’s plenty.”

“Kitty is coming along well,” Rachel said. “I did make the cake, but I think another time I would trust Kitty to do it.”

“Oh, as you have no children to look after, I suppose you have plenty of time to bake. Oh, I’m terribly sorry! How very thoughtless of me to say that! We are all so very sorry for your loss.”

Rachel could not immediately answer. After a minute, she asked again, “Your boys are well, I hope?”

“Oh, perfectly; thank you for asking. And you’ll soon have a little Comforter sent you, God willing, for them to play with.”

Rachel cast about for something else to say, lest silence tempt Mrs. Tudge to offer further consolation.

“Cake, Deacon Birdwell?” she offered—and then had to look away to avoid seeing Mrs. Tudge’s arch smile when the men all surged at once toward the table.

Through talking with Mrs. Tudge and loading the gentlemen’s plates (Mrs. Tudge did not take cake), Rachel missed some of the

men's conversation, but had no trouble picking up the thread of it again. Since the Reverend Mr. Tudge was holding forth on a topic about which he felt deeply enough to make his pronouncements in his ringing "pulpit voice," she could easily guess the subject was either the Frailty of Women, or the Methodists, both of which notably annoyed Mr. Tudge.

"Perhaps the Methodists are sent by God as a spur to our efforts," Dr. Conrad said smiling, "lest we become flabby in His service, and make a poor sermon one Sunday."

Rachel was pleased that Josiah laughed at this sally.

Mr. Tudge, on the other hand, frowned. "Any man who would flag in his efforts though every last citizen of this Republic were in his proper pew on every Sabbath of the year ought to be a farmer, instead," he declared. "We stand, every one of us, AT THE EDGE OF THE ABYSS. HELL yawns before us, and if I can frame a sermon to make a sinner see that sitting in church is not enough, but he must put out his hand and seize the LIFELINE OF GRACE and be drawn back from the brink, I must do it."

"It's interesting to hear you put it like that," Dr. Conrad replied, after brief consideration. "I believe you were with me last July when Mr. Henry said much the same thing."

Mr. Henry was one of the Methodist clergy. Rachel stifled a smile.

"Did he?" Mr. Tudge asked, eyes wide. "I don't recall it. After two hours of listening to that mush of bad grammar and doctrinal error I put my thoughts elsewhere. I'm surprised you could stomach it."

"What is this?" Josiah cried, interest piqued. "Am I to understand you go on reconnaissance behind Methodist lines, Mr. Tudge?"

"One of their camp meetings," the Reverend Tudge said, his upper lip curling. "I let Dr. Conrad persuade me once to go, but never again,

I promise you! Sleep half the day, if one can; preach half the night, if the torch-smoke doesn't choke one; and every meal a squalid affair termed a Love-Feast, at which (since all provisions are placed on the tables in common—an unspeakable practice—) one is privileged to watch as the nicest bits make their way round and round the gaping maw of the dirty fellow opposite. Meanwhile, one tries to wash down enough of something which may or may not be wheat bread—sour, and half cinders—with dirty river water to keep up one's strength sufficient to last the next round of sleeping, preaching, and 'feasting.' Mrs. Tudge sent me off with a nice roast chicken for my part, and I didn't get a taste of it."

His wife allowed Rachel to observe the meaning smile she hid behind her hand.

"I've never seen a camp meeting. Are they common here?" Josiah asked. Dr. Conrad would clearly have little trouble persuading him, if he next invited Josiah to go.

"Once a year," Dr. Conrad told him. "There's a place across the river where they're usually held, not too near any town. They frequently draw very large crowds—five or six thousand or more. Mr. Tudge doesn't approve, but we don't discourage members of our congregation from attending, if anyone wants to go. Grace is occasionally stumbled upon in unlikely places."

"Grace is the thing you are least likely to meet with at a camp meeting," said Mr. Tudge. "But if you are looking for the Tempter and all his SORDID HOST, you need only walk five steps beyond the fire's light where the Jezebels of six towns keep up a regular trade, and you will surely find him there."

Mrs. Tudge asked sharply, "Did *you* meet the Tempter, Mr. Tudge? You didn't mention it."

“I did not, Mrs. Tudge,” he assured her.

“Then that’s a pity,” Dr. Conrad said cheerfully. “For God has said, ‘Blessed is the man that endureth temptation: For when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life.’ But you may go again next summer, if you like, and hope to get your crown then.”

Mr. Tudge stared as though he did not entirely understand the remarks, before proceeding to share at length his thoughts on the subject of the Crown of Life.

Dr. Conrad frequently found, or made, opportunities to speak aside to Rachel, a habit that touched her heart, since she would otherwise have no one to speak to but Mrs. Tudge. Now he took the opportunity to say quietly, “You and Mr. Woodley seem to have settled in well. You have made this room quite comfortable. How long have you been here? Let’s see... This is January. It must be three or four months now, mustn’t it?”

“Three months, yes.”

“And are you quite recovered?” He must have seen Rachel hesitate, for he explained gently, “I was referring to your bodily health. It will take longer for your heart to mend, I know.”

The state of Rachel’s heart was expressed in her dress of unrelieved black. Black did not suit her russet hair or pale complexion, but Rachel would wear nothing else. “My health is good,” she said. “And Josiah has gotten past being uncomfortable at preaching to so large a congregation and enjoys the variety of life here.”

“Do you?”

As he said this, Dr. Conrad laid his hand gently upon Rachel’s.

Rachel experienced no urge to reject the comforting touch. “I don’t see so much of it, I suppose. There’s more to buy here, certainly. But home matters are the same, and though I see more faces on the streets,