



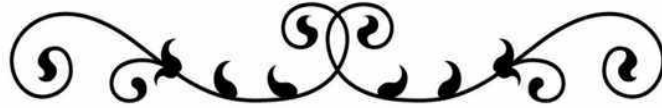
*a
most
Agreeable
Murder*
A NOVEL



JULIA SEALES

A NOVEL

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A Most
**AGREEABLE
MURDER**



RANDOM HOUSE NEW YORK



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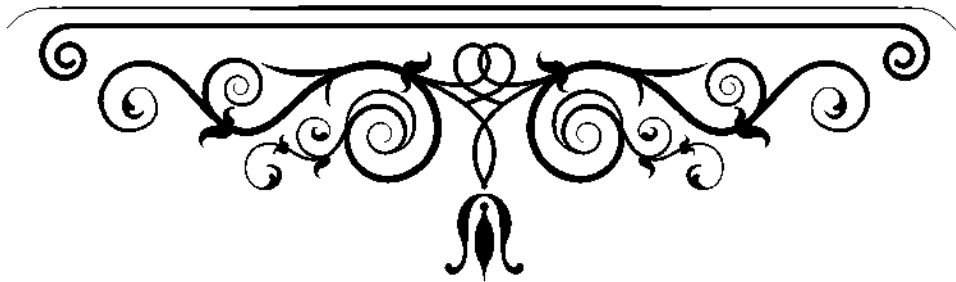
[*About the Author*](#)

9001707

Miss Arabella Ashbrook presents

THE ANNUAL AUTUMNAL BALL

Mr. and Mrs. Stephen Steele and their daughters, Beatrice, Louisa, and
Mary, are requested
to attend the ball at Stabmort Park on Tuesday next at six P.M.
And not a second before!
We await your confirmation of attendance, and any song requests.





GUEST LIST

Mr. Hugh Ashbrook, 66, patriarch of Stabmort Park

Mr. Daniel Ashbrook, 32, son, heir to Stabmort Park

Miss Arabella Ashbrook, 22, daughter

Mr. Stephen Steele, 50, patriarch of Marsh House

Mrs. Susan Steele, 48, his wife

Miss Beatrice Steele, 25, eldest daughter

Miss Louisa Steele, 21, middle daughter

Miss Mary Steele, 18, youngest daughter

Mr. Martin Grub, age unknown, cousin to Mr. Stephen Steele and heir to Marsh House

Captain Philip Peña, 33, naval captain

Mr. Frank Fàn, 26, gentleman

Miss Helen Bolton, 53, matriarch of Fauna Manor

Miss Caroline Wynn, 24, orphan and socialite

Mr. Edmund Croaksworth, 32, wealthy gentleman

Guest of Mr. Croaksworth, 29, information on situation unknown



CHAPTER 1

Introductions

In the English countryside there was a small township called Swampshire, comprised of several lovely mansions and one disgusting swamp. This was the home—one of the mansions, not the swamp—of Beatrice Steele. The swamp was inhabited by an overpopulation of luminescent frogs. The visual effect at night was arresting, though the incessant croaking deterred some who might have otherwise chosen to settle the charming village.

Beatrice Steele was plump, with a cheerful gap in her front teeth and a white streak in her black curls, gained during a particularly competitive round of whist. She had a passionate disposition and a lively wit, which endeared her to friends and family—most of the time. For Beatrice was curious by nature, and therefore noticed too much, felt too much, and wondered too much about life outside her village. Others considered this behavior an unnecessary to-do, as Beatrice would surely settle down with one of the young men of Swampshire in a mansion that hadn't been overtaken by frogs, start a family, and live happily from then on.

This was the expected path of a lady, for there were strict rules of decorum in Swampshire. Years ago, the town's founding father, Baron Fitzwilliam Ashbrook, had fled the raucous city of London for the countryside in search of a place he could shape on principles of perfect etiquette. In a matter of mere months, he penned a pamphlet professing these principles: *The Guide to Swampshire*. Believing that women were particularly prone to temptation, he wrote the accompanying books *The Lady's Guide to Swampshire, Volumes I and II*. He also wrote *The Lady's*

Guide to Swampshire (Travel Edition), lest a woman find herself in an indecorous situation while on the go. These books became the foundation of the Swampshire social scene.

Failure to adhere to these rules could tarnish a woman's reputation beyond repair. According to *The Lady's Guide*, a disgraced woman was forbidden to call upon friends, entertain suitors, or even remain close to her family, lest she corrupt them by association. No self-respecting lady would speak to her, and no gentleman of honor would make her an offer of marriage. She could not even patronize local dress shops or ribbon stores.

Friendless, single, and dressed in last season's garb, a fallen woman would therefore be forced to leave the village. Only a morally corrupt city would accept her, and once she made it to Paris, she would surely be robbed by a mime and left for dead. But she might not even get that far. Bedtime stories in Swampshire told of women who, while attempting to flee, were swallowed up by one of the region's infamous "squelch holes," never to be seen again. Therefore, women were reassured that commitment to etiquette was for their own good. Rule-breakers could not be permitted to corrupt this safe, orderly, idyllic world.

But despite growing up with these values, despite these rules having been ingrained in her mind since childhood, Beatrice Steele harbored a dark secret: She was obsessed with murder. Not the act of *committing* it, but the act of *solving* it. She loved nothing more than to consider the intricacies of a suspect's motivations, determine the killer, and then watch this killer be brought to justice.

Her particular fascination with crime began with a plan to peruse her father's imported London paper. She intended to read the social column, "Who Is More Respectable Than Who," but could not get past the grammatically incorrect title and instead turned her attention to a different article: "Gentleman Detective Sir Huxley (and Assistant) Takes the Case." It did not befit a young lady to look at such things, but before she could stop herself, she had devoured it.

The article detailed the circumstances of the grisly murder of a man named Viscount Dudley DeBurbie. It told of his young beloved, Verity Swan; his immense collection of jewels, which had gone missing; his suspicious butler; and the dashing detective who accepted the case—Sir

Huxley. Huxley's motto was *Super omnia decorum*: "Decorum above all." He believed that solving cases would reinstate the social order, which was the most respectable thing one could do. Nothing was more important than propriety.

Beatrice was transfixed. She had never considered that a genteel person might solve crimes as a hobby. She herself found no satisfaction in the approved hobbies for young women outlined in *The Lady's Guide to Swampshire*. She was terrible at needlework, had no musical ability, and was banned from drawing because her artwork was so bad that it frightened people. Conversely, she found the hunt for murderers captivating. It granted her a sense of fulfillment, a sense that she was making the world a better place by (vicariously) pursuing justice.

And perhaps deep down she reasoned that if she knew what evil lurked in the world, she might be prepared to face it.

Before long Beatrice was obsessively collecting papers, desperate for news on the hunt for the killer. Her family thought it strange that Beatrice, once so social, began to forgo their evening card game to lock herself upstairs. Beatrice, enthused by her newfound passion, dropped hints that she was in love. She knew this was the only way to pacify her mother and guarantee hours left alone for her to "swoon and fantasize"—or whatever it was women did in these situations. Her mother happily accepted this excuse.

In a way, Beatrice was in love. She was gripped by the potential motive for the murder, the clues indicating that the killer may have known the victim, the way every detail surrounding the case had potential significance. It also didn't hurt that Sir Huxley was devastatingly handsome. In his newspaper etching he was strong-jawed, with an asp-topped cane and a pristine top hat. His assistant was a man named Inspector Vivek Drake, a man with a scarred face and eye patch. Drake's newspaper etching was far less flattering; he was always pictured with a scowl. Therefore, Beatrice was not surprised when the unseemly Drake pointed the finger at the young lady, Verity Swan. Sir Huxley admirably defended her honor and innocence, ever the true gentleman.

Ultimately in the DeBurbie case, the butler was charged and Huxley hailed a hero. He fired his scowling assistant, Drake, and opened a

luxurious office near the West End. Thereafter, the crime column transitioned into an account of Huxley's day-to-day as a private investigator. Beatrice followed it with relish, imagining herself next to Huxley, peeking into alleys or discussing theories in his mahogany study. She underlined intriguing details with flowing lines and doodled "Huxley and Steele" in each article's margins. She even attempted to stitch a cameo of the gentleman. Her lack of skill at needlework ensured her interest would remain undetected, as everyone thought she had embroidered a potato.

Unfortunately in Swampshire all of this made her—one shudders to even say—a morbid creep. There are many types of creeps, of course: the peeping Toms, the lurkers, those who dare to show up at a party twelve minutes earlier than an invitation states—but in Swampshire, creeps of the morbid variety were considered the most unsavory. If anyone found out about Beatrice's secret obsession, she would be publicly disgraced and shunned. Politely, but completely.

Therefore she knew her hobby could not last. A gentleman might have been able to live in both worlds, but not a lady. Certainly not a lady in *Swampshire*. Eventually, Beatrice would have to grow up and become a respectable woman for the sake of herself and her family. This would likely occur next week, she always assured herself. Or, possibly, the week after.

But today, she found herself in the turret of Marsh House, the Steeles' cramped but charming home, trying to fit in an examination of one more article before the evening's ball. She was so absorbed that she barely noticed the muffled sounds of her father tying a bucket of water above a door frame somewhere downstairs.

Mr. Stephen Steele was lanky and bald, with a curled mustache and a penchant for pranks. His collection of fake blood capsules, array of rubber knives, and tendency to hide in dark corners and jump out at his daughters had likely contributed to Beatrice's spirited disposition. She always brought a sharp wit to the table, and he always brought a pooting pillow. (The pooting pillow was Mr. Steele's invention and his most prized possession. It was an inflatable rubber cushion that, when placed on an unsuspecting victim's seat, would create the loud sound of broken wind.)

Nothing thrilled Mr. Steele more than pretending to die into his soup. His commitment to this bit would have been applauded if the joke did not instill such fear in his wife and daughters. The Steele women were not permitted to inherit their estate, as its deed dictated that it could be granted only to a man. The Steeles had no fortune to fall back on; the house was their only asset. Therefore, should Mr. Steele ever fall into his soup and *not* pop up cackling, the mansion would pass to their closest male relative, cousin Martin Grub. If one of the girls could simply marry Mr. Grub, everything would be fine, but he was completely disgusting, so this was unlikely.

Which is why Beatrice's mother had to be the practical one in the marriage. Mrs. Susan Steele was a formidable (albeit short) woman. What she lacked in height she made up for in loudness of voice, confidence of demeanor, and a seven-inch updo. It was from Mrs. Steele that Beatrice inherited her keen understanding of human nature, though Mrs. Steele used this to gain friends and exert influence instead of to analyze criminals. Organized and outgoing, Mrs. Steele knew how to put a plot into action. Her daughters' future marriages were Mrs. Steele's main scheme. If she spoke of anything apart from wedding bells, her family had yet to hear it.

"Beatrice!" As if on cue, Mrs. Steele interrupted Beatrice's concentration with a screech from the base of the turret's staircase. "You should not be hiding out up there! You must use any extra hours in the day to take a turn about the garden in case any gentlemen are watching! A lady is *always* one step ahead."

Beatrice glanced outside. Shadowy swampland surrounded Marsh House, and the deep green of the land blurred with the darkening sky. *A storm is coming*, she thought with a delicious chill. It was hardly time for a walk. But as the eldest daughter who couldn't seem to get her nose out of a book and a ring on her finger, she was used to her mother's persistent pestering.

"What could you possibly be doing that's more important than finding a husband?" Mrs. Steele pressed.

The victims' entrails were ripped from their corpses and arranged in a heart.

“Thinking about my beloved,” Beatrice said cheerfully, and stuffed a moth-eaten shawl under the door to stifle the sound of her mother’s continued protests.

It was risky to read during the day, Beatrice knew; she used to wait until everyone was asleep to analyze the papers. But lately she had become more and more engrossed in seeking clues, scribbling down notes, and developing theories. How could one be content with an afternoon spent playing the pianoforte when a killer was on the loose?

She turned to the paper once more, taking in the words on the page.

LONDON MENACE STILL AT LARGE

Sir Huxley vows to apprehend the so-called London Menace, even as the killer’s body count rises. On Friday, just steps from Huxley’s London office, three bodies were found slashed at the neck, a bloody knife left nearby. There was a message left on Huxley’s window, written in blood: “Ha-ha-ha. You cannot catch me.”

Beatrice set down the newspaper, deep in thought. “A message specific to Huxley...this suggests that the killer knows him,” she murmured. “Usage of the word ‘cannot’ as opposed to ‘could not’ suggests the killer will murder again. Adding a dash between the ‘ha’s tells me that the killer is not educated on proper punctuation.” She examined the sketch, trying to get a proper look at the wounds on the drawing of the bodies. “The question is: Why do the wounds not match the blade of the knife?” Mulling this over, she took a piece of letter-writing paper from the windowsill next to her ink pot, picked up her quill, and began to scribble.

Dear Sir Huxley,

Greetings again from your most devoted reader.

Beatrice knew that an unmarried lady writing to an unmarried gentleman was wildly lewd, but she allowed herself to maintain the correspondence for two reasons: One, Sir Huxley did not *know* she was a

lady, as she signed the letters with only her initials, “BS.” Two, it could not technically be considered a full correspondence, as he had never replied.

She was just finishing her letter when she was interrupted again, this time by an ear-shattering scream. Startled, Beatrice looked out the turret window for the source of the noise.

In the distance she could just make out her sister Louisa, sprinting across the swampy field. With relief Beatrice realized that Louisa was screaming in excitement, not fear; her run was joyful. Louisa’s hair looked like a streak of fire as she moved, dress rippling and arms pumping powerfully. She expertly launched herself over a cluster of glowing frogs, landed softly on a tuft of moss, performed a somersault, and continued running without missing a beat.

Stunningly beautiful and sweet, the Steeles’ middle daughter, Louisa, was the golden child who was sure to save them all with an advantageous marriage. Though Beatrice’s mother wanted *all* her daughters to marry well, the entire family agreed that Louisa was the most attractive, the most accomplished, and therefore the most likely to make a moneyed match. She had thick red curls, a pleasing smatter of freckles across her delicate nose, and well-defined muscles thanks to a passion for sport. She liked to jump headfirst into life, literally: Louisa was active and graceful, good at everything from dancing to skeet shooting. Though fiercely competitive, Louisa had a talent for making all feel welcome. She could convince even the stuffiest old man to join a game of ninepins, and then would happily trounce him. She was the complete package, and the Steeles were proud (and protective) of their family gem.

Though Beatrice had spent her youth being bested by Louisa in everything from cricket to curtsying, she was never jealous. She tried to teach Louisa everything she knew and to guide her life in the right direction, and was truly proud of how accomplished her sister had become.

As she watched Louisa cross the moor alone, Beatrice felt a pang of guilt. Normally, the sisters walked to town together on the morning before a ball. They would purchase new ribbons, gossip, and imagine which gentlemen might ask for a spot on their dance cards that evening. But

Beatrice had forgone that morning's stroll in order to spend more time with her current case.

The front door banged as Louisa rushed inside.

"News from town!" Louisa cried. "Everyone come to the parlor at once!"

Beatrice felt certain that the news could not be so earth-shattering. Nothing exciting ever happened in Swampshire. Still, she accepted the summons and began to hide the evidence of her unseemly hobby. She pried open the turret's window seat, inside of which was a thick stack of yellowing papers, letters, and notes. She placed the latest paper on the top of the stack and then pushed the seat closed. She replaced a small pillow atop the window seat—a gift from her dear friend Daniel Ashbrook, embroidered with a quote he said had reminded him of Beatrice: *A lady's nook is incomplete without a book.*

With another pang of guilt, Beatrice averted her eyes from the quote as she scrawled her initials at the bottom of the letter to Huxley. Other than Louisa, Daniel was Beatrice's closest friend, but he knew nothing of her secret hobby. True, he encouraged Beatrice to borrow any books she wanted from his personal library, though he believed that she was perusing classics and not crime, due to some stealthy book cover swapping. Still, he was the one person in Swampshire who shared her sense of curiosity about the world. Since childhood, they had eagerly passed books back and forth and exchanged fascinating revelations about their findings. Mrs. Steele naturally assumed that Daniel was the man over whom Beatrice was lovesick. Beatrice did not deny this assumption, as it allowed her to read for hours uninterrupted. And in any case, she found Daniel perfectly agreeable—though their friendship had never progressed beyond an amiable rapport.

But what would Daniel, her trusted confidant, think of her if he knew what she was hiding? If he found out the object of her true passion? Despite all they shared, she knew he would never approve.

She folded the pages and tucked the letter into her bodice. The post-boy would come by soon to collect their letters, and she could send it off with him while her family was distracted with ball preparations. She then pulled on gloves to conceal her fingers, which were ink-stained from the

newspaper, and made her way to the parlor downstairs, where the rest of her family was gathered.

Mrs. Steele and Louisa stood inside by the fireplace, both practically jumping up and down in excitement.

Beatrice's other sister, Mary, sat at the pianoforte, making little notes on a sheet of music titled "Ode to the Moon." The youngest of the Steele family, Mary was very private. Though sound traveled easily through the thin walls of Marsh House, Mary somehow roamed undetected, often appearing abruptly when no one had heard her approach.^[*] Indeed, Mr. Steele did not seem to realize she was in the room. He sat in an armchair engrossed in a book of picto-funnies, then dropped it, startled, when Mary plinked out a jarring chord.

"Finally," Mrs. Steele exclaimed as Beatrice entered the room, "you've emerged from pining for your beau!"

Beatrice tried to affect a lovesick expression, moving past her mother to avoid any follow-up questions. She dodged a splash of water from the bucket her father had fixed above the parlor door, and moved to take a seat next to him. She paused by a rumpled cushion and then lifted it to find Mr. Steele's rubber pooting pillow.

"However did that get there?" her father asked innocently as Beatrice handed it to him. Mrs. Steele intercepted it and threw it out an open window.

"Now that no one is *distracted*," she said pointedly, "Louisa may tell us her news."

She took Louisa's hands and the two sank to a seat on a tufted settee.

"I heard it from Arabella Ashbrook just now," Louisa said, "during our trip into town."

"You went with Arabella?" Beatrice asked in surprise.

"She was available," Louisa said, shifting uncomfortably on the settee. "I did call up to you before I left, in case you wanted to come, but you didn't answer. I'm sorry," she added, her wide eyes now shining with remorse.

"Oh...no. It's fine," Beatrice said quickly, trying to reassure her. "Not to worry."

Arabella Ashbrook, Daniel's younger sister, was the hostess of the evening's festivities. Arabella and Louisa had been spending an increasing amount of time together, much to Beatrice's chagrin. She found Arabella self-important and snobbish. But Beatrice had been so engrossed with her reading—could she really blame Louisa for finding a friend who was far more *available*?

Louisa continued, glossing over the awkward moment. "It is about the ball this evening—"

"Is it canceled?" Mr. Steele interrupted. "That would be happy news indeed."

"That would be *terrible*," Mrs. Steele cried.

Beatrice thought fleetingly that if something terrible *did* happen, at least it would be something new. Immediately, her throat tightened with guilt. She did not *want* something bad to occur. Boredom was preferable to distress.

Wasn't it?

"Anyhow," Louisa said loudly, "my news."

Everyone looked at her, finally quiet.

"The guest of honor tonight," Louisa said in a passionate whisper, "will be *Mr. Edmund Croaksworth*."

Mrs. Steele shrieked and fell back on the settee in a faint. Louisa grabbed Beatrice's hands and pulled her into a happy jig. Though Beatrice wasn't quite sure what was happening, she felt a rush of excitement as she twirled, gazing at her sister's shining, eager face. Even Mr. Steele lowered his book of picto-funnies, intrigued, and didn't notice as the frog in his pocket made a break for it.

Mary, however, stared at them all in confusion. "Who is Mr. Edmund Croaksworth?"

As usual, they ignored her.

[SKIP NOTES](#)

* Mary was withdrawn, reticent, and overall mysterious. What most knew about Mary was that she had mousy hair and appreciated walks in nature. What most did not know could fill several tomes.

RESTORING ORDER WITH HUXLEY

[Excerpt]

A cold wind is blowing through London, and it is not the chill of autumn approaching. There is a killer in our midst.

I know this city. I have lived here all my life; you readers know my passion for order and justice stems from my desire to keep our home safe. To ensure it is the London we have always known it to be. To keep the shadows down dark alleys at bay.

But these shadows are seeping into the streets. Those of you who keep up with my column have heard of the dangers of the London Menace. Last night he killed again. Even as his body count rises, I feel more certain than ever that I will be the one to bring this fiend to justice. Those who know any information which might be of use in the case are advised to contact me at once.

Readers of last week's column will also be happy to know that Mrs. Barker's kitten was under her settee all along, and thus is safe and sound.

CHAPTER 2

Preparations

It is a fact known throughout Swampshire that a rich gentleman is prey hunted by every young woman. From her sister's and mother's excitement, Beatrice gathered that Edmund Croaksworth must be such a quarry.

She knew he was not a Swampshire resident, though she found the name oddly familiar. She sifted through her memory, trying to place it.

"I was helping Arabella Ashbrook pick out new garden shears when she let the news slip," Louisa told Mrs. Steele, who had recovered from her faint and was now fully energized, as one could only be at the prospect of a fine hunk of flesh attending the evening's ball. All four Steele women made their way into the chamber Beatrice shared with Louisa. To his relief, Mr. Steele was left alone in the parlor with his picto-funnies.

The bedroom was divided into halves. Beatrice's corner was an explosion of books, abandoned embroidery projects, and half-drunk cups of tea. Beatrice tried to keep it neat, as a lady should, but it seemed to have a mind of its own.

Louisa's side, on the other hand, was always tidy. This is because Mrs. Steele had taken it upon herself to straighten up each morning, knowing how easily Louisa could get distracted. Racquets for battledore and shuttlecock, skittles pins, and old metal balls for bumble-puppy all had a designated location, thanks to Mrs. Steele.

As Mary followed them inside, she tripped over a pile of Beatrice's books but recovered with doglike agility and landed on her sister's bed.^[*1] Beatrice joined her, taking an absentminded sip of tea from a cup on her bedside table and then spitting it out upon realizing that it had fermented.

“You’ll have to look perfect,” Mrs. Steele said, rifling through Louisa’s scant wardrobe. The family could not afford a luxurious selection, especially since the clothes seemed to always get destroyed: Beatrice’s with ink stains, Louisa’s from various athletic activities, and Mary’s from goodness knew, whatever caused a dress to rip completely in half. But truly, the clothes didn’t matter. They were just a gilded frame around the true masterpiece: Louisa Pamela Steele.

“Perhaps the pink frock?” Louisa suggested.

“You wore that at last month’s ball,” Beatrice reminded her. “And I’ve always thought you look best in green.”

“I prefer pink—” Louisa began, but Mrs. Steele interrupted.

“We should be thinking about what Mr. Croaksworth prefers, dear. Do you think he likes lace? Ribbon? A plunging bodice?”

“Surely he shall be most attracted to her mind and personality,” Beatrice said lightly.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Mrs. Steele said as she rifled through the closet.

“What more *do* you know of Croaksworth, Louisa?” Beatrice asked, turning to her sister. “I know I’ve heard his name before, but I cannot place him. I assume he is wealthy, attractive, and eligible, so you may skip over *those* specifics.”

“Those are hardly facts to skip,” Mrs. Steele said. “The man has eight thousand a year!”

“Eight thousand what?” Mary asked.^[*2]

“He was Daniel Ashbrook’s best friend in school, though Arabella said the two men have not spoken since then,” Louisa explained. “Has Daniel mentioned him to you before, Beatrice?”

“No,” Beatrice murmured. “Why haven’t they spoken? Did something happen?”

“I’m not sure,” Louisa began, but Mrs. Steele interrupted.

“Perhaps you would know, Beatrice, if you and Daniel didn’t discuss just characters from books instead of your lives, or any *plans* for the *future*.” She shot Beatrice a meaningful look.

“Mr. Croaksworth’s parents recently perished, leaving him a great sum of money,” Louisa said hastily, blessedly directing Mrs. Steele away from another lecture.