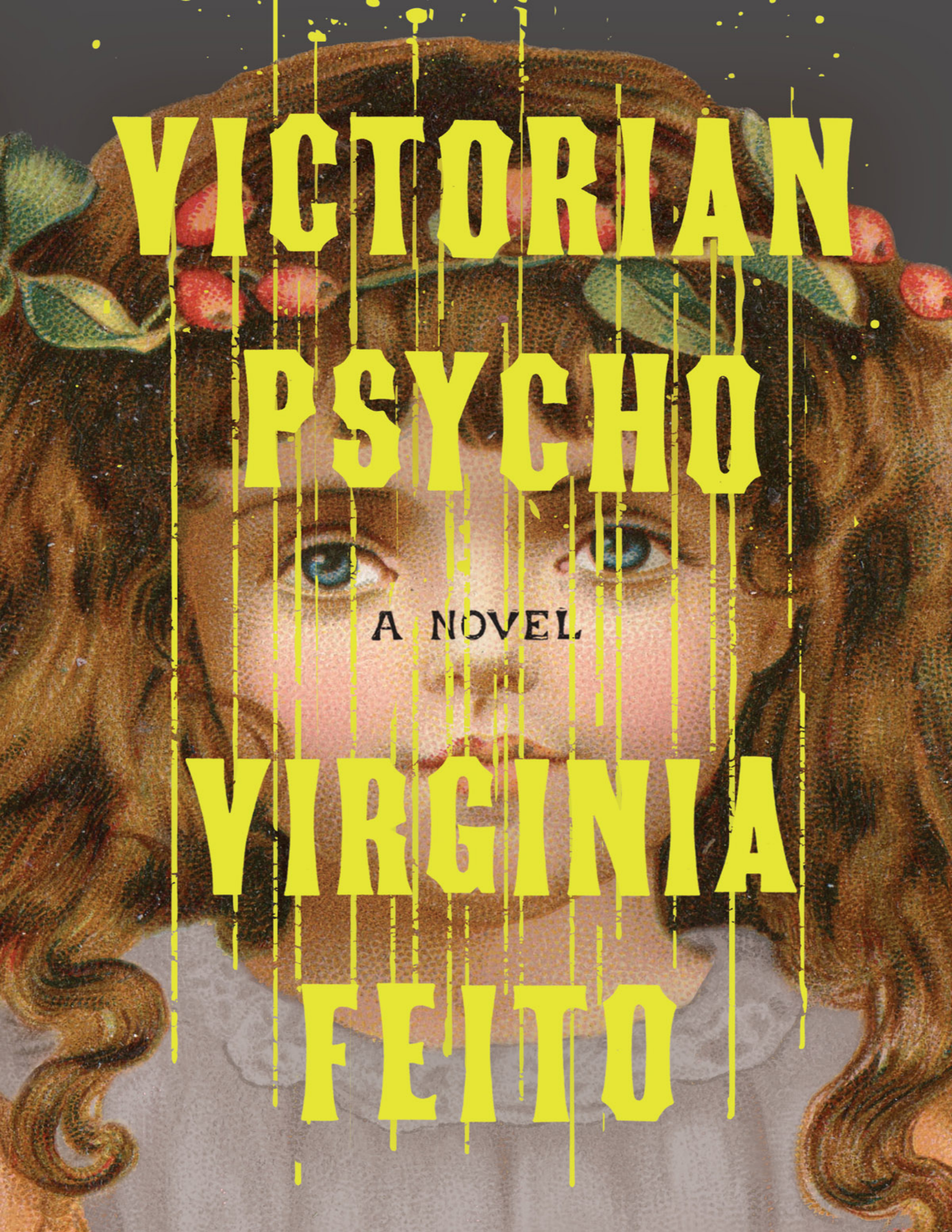
VICTORIAN
PSYCHO
A NOVEL
VIRGINIA
FEITO

VICTORIAN PSYCHO

A NOVEL

Virginia Feito

Liveright Publishing Corporation

A Division of W. W. Norton & Company
Independent Publishers Since 1923

For Lucas, who puts up with my darkness every day

Every thing is in flames.

— CHARLES DARWIN, LETTER

TO J. S. HENSLOW,

1832

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Acknowledgements

VICTORIAN PSYCHO

PROLOGUE

Death everywhere. Death in the river, in the corpses floating upstream and down, in the bellies of the things feasting upon them. Death in the drinking water, pooling into wells and unspooling within villagers as typhoid and cholera and diphtheria. Death on display for an extra sixpence at the wax museum. In the wigs of the living made from the hair of the not, shorn by enterprising undertakers from corpses sealed in caskets. Death melting in a dyed Christmas candle. Death in babies, oh so many babies – the unbaptised slipped into other corpses' coffins in a cheating bid for a grave and a funeral, stillborn pillows for the dead. Death in the rat pits in pub basements as dogs mangle hundreds to the cheers of their gambling masters.

It's crushed in paint.

It's papered on the walls.

Everywhere, death.

Mr Pounds is a mystery I am intent on solving.

PART I.

THREE MONTHS TILL CHRISTMAS.

CHAPTER I.

IN WHICH I ARRIVE AT ENSOR HOUSE.

Ensor House sits on a stretch of moorland, all raised brows and double chin, like a clasp-handed banker about to deliver terrible news.

I meet its mullioned eyes from the open phaeton, rolling across the moor to my destiny, my breasts jiggling in my corset.

'That there's Ensor House, there,' says the driver beside me, jabbing his jaw at it. He is one of Mr Pounds' servants, dispatched to Grim Wolds Station to transport the new governess to the house.

My gaze falls to the horse's velvet haunches before me, then to the driver, his cheeks pitted with smallpox scars, his large drooping nose bulging like a goitre. We've only just met, but I can already sense a decadently slow mind behind his vacant eyes. His mouth hangs half-open, housing a single protruding tooth.

'Do you know the masters well?' I venture to ask him.

'Eh.'

I am unsure of what this means, so I press on. 'What are they like?'

He says, simply: 'I've 'ad worse.'

It is a promising start. The muscles behind my face move furiously as I examine the bleak landscape. The day is setting, the clouds flickering as if candles were burning within them. There is an edge of sleet to the air – tiny hands holding tiny knives that slice at one's fingers and cheekbones. The phaeton trundles over uneven ground, its disproportionately large wheels

tilting its two passengers dramatically starboard so that I slide into the driver. He pats my thigh with one chilblained hand as the other grips the cracked leather reins.

My new employers, I suspect, would have considered sending a larger, closed carriage an extravagance – too indulgent a conveyance for my first day of employ. They wouldn't want me entertaining any fanciful ideas.

I glance down at my lap. The driver's hand still rests there. I look back at my trunk, which rattles against the luggage rack, my gilded initials fading from the worn hide.

The horse stops at the gateway and hangs its head in what could be construed as a sign of defeat, and the decrepit driver hops down with surprising deftness to unhook the latch and drag the iron gates open across the gravel. We continue past a pair of crumbling stone pillars and ascend the drive.

The servant brings the carriage to a halt a short distance from the house, saying nothing. I understand I am to exit the carriage, and with that I slide off, my dress riding up my thighs. My boots land in mud with the squelch of viscera squeezed in a fist.

A crooked tree bows before me, the very points of its leaves a vibrant red. Smears of ivy frame an upstairs window, through which a stern-faced woman looks down at me.

The main entrance to the house beckons across a field of snowdrops that call to mind a group of women whose heads droop under their bonnets in deference. I approach the studded wooden doors, my skirts sweeping through the flowers with scythe-like gusto.

It is early fall, the cold is beginning to descend, and in three months everyone in this house will be dead.

THE HOUSEKEEPER, MRS ABLE, greets me in the hall, her foot tapping on the flagstone. Mrs Able is not, of course, married, her title merely a formality of

her post. Her left eye wanders, and I wish I were possessed of a compass to determine to which cardinal direction the eye points most often.

She clears her throat. ‘I expect you had a fair journey. It is cold, but it shall get colder,’ she says, or something like it. She speaks in an excruciatingly low monotone. I lean forward in order to discern her words, mumbled from her mouth as if still tethered to it.

‘I can bear the cold,’ I say.

One of her eyes settles upon my frock. I suppose it is a rather dispiriting frock, because her mouth thins. ‘I shall show you to your room,’ she says, and together we plunge into the house.

It is rich with dark oak and thick Turkey carpets and shadows of the deepest black. I can barely see my hand on the banister as we ascend a grand staircase and turn into a long gallery lined with closed bed-room doors.

‘Ensor House was once a medieval house,’ Mrs Able explains, her mumble imbued with pride. ‘It has been built out through the centuries to accommodate each new generation.’

Mrs Able is turned slightly away, as if reluctant to fully expose her back to me. An engorged vein circles her throat and descends into her collar. ‘I’ve had a smaller apartment in the back prepared for you,’ she says. ‘I expected you would disapprove of the unnecessary finery of the large front chambers.’

‘Of course,’ I hurry to say. The enjoyment of luxury and indulgence denotes a certain kind of moral degradation most unbefitting of a governess.

We pass said front chambers and turn sharply into a poky, stone-floor passage off the main gallery, where Mrs Able opens a short, solitary door. She gestures to it. As I walk inside, the skirt of my dress brushes her limp hand, which she withdraws instantly. Mrs Able, I muse, is a woman who has never held a penis.

‘You are expected presently downstairs in the dining-room, to meet your employers, and mine,’ she says from the doorway.

I recall, briefly, my past employers. Their sullen glances. Their clean fingernails. Their secrets, wrapped in silk handkerchiefs or secreted under velvet-collared frock coats or behind Tyrian-dyed curtains.

‘Mr Pounds,’ I say, removing my plaid cloak. ‘Is he . . . gracious?’

‘He is a good master,’ Mrs Able says, though do I detect the slightest pause in speech, the softest of hesitations in her gaze, lowered almost imperceptibly from mine?

She retires after entreating me, once more, to descend promptly for dinner. I fasten the door, then turn to survey the bed-room. It consists of more dark oak and heavy drapes and appears all in all harder to set on fire than my previous lodgings.

I make my way to the window and take in the north-east garden, currently illuminated by what little twilight remains. Surely the ugliest of all of Ensor House’s gardens, yet vastly more agreeable than the view from my childhood bed-room, which showed me the churchyard. The churchyard, brown and rotted and crooked, like the inside of an old man’s mouth.

Sensing eyes on me I turn, anticipatory smile in place. I am met by my own reflection in the oval mirror of the wash-stand. Her frozen smile beams back at me, but I can see she doesn’t mean it. Her eyes are two bullet holes.

I bend over and lift the lid from the chamber pot, expecting to be greeted by my predecessor’s slops, but the bowl is clean.

My trunk has yet to be brought up. I lick the palm of my hand, and with it flatten my windswept hair and wipe a smudge from my cheek. This is as great an effort as I can expend on my appearance at present. I am ready to meet my employers.

CHAPTER II.

IN WHICH I MEET MY EMPLOYERS AND AM NOT TERRIBLY IMPRESSED.

The dining-room boasts an ornate, coffered walnut ceiling, and hanging above a sideboard a massive Rembrandt depicts a flayed carcass – *Slaughtered Ox*, most likely a copy by one of his pupils.

Mr and Mrs Pounds are seated at one end of the dining-table, which is longer than a whale, while I am exiled at the opposite end, setting us at an absurd, almost comical distance. As they peer at me through silver candlesticks, I wriggle in my chair in a feigned attempt to make myself more visible while accomplishing the opposite.

Mr Pounds looks to Mrs Pounds for instruction. Upon the raising of her eyebrows he appears to decide, at last, to hurl himself into the abyss of conversation. 'I trust your journey was a pleasant one?'

'No,' I say, so cheerful and beaming that Mr Pounds simply nods and says, 'Good.'

The seal broken, Mrs Pounds speaks up. 'Your advertisement mentioned that your father is a clergyman?'

'Yes,' I say. The Reverend is not, so to speak, my father – more of a replacement – but after so many years I have learned to refer to him as such. 'He is curate of our local parish.'

'And your mother?'

‘Ten years dead,’ I reply. I picture Mother’s teeth, smiling at me from her bed.

‘That is a pity,’ says Mrs Pounds with disappointment. ‘A mother’s presence in a home is vital. Otherwise, who will instil in the children a sense of morality and tenderness?’

I cudgel my brains for an appropriate response.

‘Well, the governess, for one, I would expect,’ Mr Pounds says, a sardonic chuckle caught in his throat, ‘as that is what I’m paying her for.’

‘Yes. We do expect that you will be of better character than our previous governess,’ says Mrs Pounds, her grey eyes marbled with streaks of candlelight. ‘Most ungrateful, that one. Disappeared without a trace.’

‘Enough with the previous governess, I tire of speaking of her,’ says Mr Pounds. A hush descends upon the table as he reaches for a grey beefsteak. The clinging of cutlery on china builds in the silence. ‘And so. Miss Notty. Here you are,’ he says, nestling into the reassurance of fact.

‘Yes.’

‘And all the way from Hopefernon.’

‘Yes.’

‘Quite the small village, Hopefernon, is it not?’ he asks. ‘How does one occupy oneself there?’

‘Well, there is rather a lot of dancing,’ I say darkly.

Mr Pounds looks at me sharply, a small furrow in his brow (round, ample brow, I note). ‘Do you jest?’ he asks with a hint of distaste.

‘Yes,’ I say.

‘Isn’t Hopefernon where all those babies were found murdered?’ Mrs Pounds cuts in.

It is not uncommon for those I encounter, when confronted with the topic of Hopefernon, to inquire about the babies. It was in the papers. Awful business. (Five discovered in unmarked graves, one shoved down the privy.)

‘Grim Wolds is a sturdy village,’ Mr Pounds continues before I can answer, slurping at the beef fat on his potatoes. ‘And Ensor House has

presided over Grim Wolds for centuries. It is precisely that sense of strength, of steadfast tradition, we desire for you to instil upon our children.'

'Yes, but we shall not abide any manner of corporal punishment under this roof,' Mrs Pounds hurriedly clarifies.

I nod. It is apparently quite the rage now, not to slap children.

'In fact, we'd rather you not touch the children at all,' Mrs Pounds adds.

'I shan't even look upon them,' I say brightly. My advertisement in the *Times* assured I was "of an amiable disposition".'

'Miss, ah –' Mr Pounds waves his hand in my direction, tutting, as if his forgetting my name is somehow my blunder.

'Winifred Notty,' I say.

I wink at you, dear reader, upon this, our first introduction.

'Miss Notty, you are a studious woman,' says Mr Pounds, who then frowns as if the words have left a bitter aftertaste. 'Or, well. You can read and write.'

I simper amicably in confirmation.

'You perchance are familiar with the theory of phrenology? The "science of the mind"? I must confess I am very much the scholar.'

'My whole life is phrenology now,' Mrs Pounds says bleakly into her teacup.

'For a small fee one can have one's skull measured,' Mr Pounds continues, 'the surest way of establishing one's mental and moral faculties. My own skull was assessed some months ago by the leading practitioner of phrenology, Sir Reginald Batterson –'

'Is not the leading practitioner one Lorenzo Fowler?' asks Mrs Pounds.

'There's something on your face, darling,' Mr Pounds says.

Mrs Pounds pats at her cheeks as Mr Pounds resumes. 'As I was saying, only through this illuminating science may we determine the contents of our minds, of our very *souls* . . .'

I picture my own soul escaping my body, oozing from between my legs in a clotted, barley-coloured sludge. It leaves a viscous stain on the carpet before slithering about the room to examine the porcelain with the hand-

painted boar crest, the ox painting, the sweaty-faced footman who stares straight ahead as if blind. It then slides upward along the wall and presses a featureless face against the window overlooking the copper beech hedges.

'Is that why you refused to welcome my cousin Margaret last spring –'

'Your cousin Margaret possesses a singularly bad head,' snaps Mr Pounds. 'Embarrassingly feeble and moody.'

'Really, John.'

'It is not I; it is the science.'

My soul turns its curdled, stinking head towards us and says, 'I do believe I shall be quite content here.'

Mr Pounds squints at me through the distance. 'Your skull looks to be promising, Miss Notty. The forehead is broad, surely housing prominent organs of Benevolence.'

I nod solemnly. 'Untold benevolences, indeed.'

The flayed ox in the painting hangs by its hind legs from a wooden crossbeam, mottled fat and muscle smeared thick by impasto. Mr Pounds spies me staring, a flicker of pride in his eyes. 'I do hope the work hasn't upset you,' he says in a tone that suggests he, in fact, desires it very much. 'I find the artist's anatomical precision masterful, don't you?'

'Indeed, quite masterful,' I say, and Mrs Pounds' mouth sets.

Mr Pounds grins, a yellowed eye-tooth glinting under the flickering of the candelabra, and says, 'We have no doubt your employment here shall be most fruitful.'

WHEN I RETURN to my chamber, a frugal fire has been lit in the hearth. My trunk has been brought up and rests against a wall, still corded, likely an intentional sign from the servants that it was not tampered with. I unbind it and slip a hand inside, eager to confirm the presence of my most prized belongings: locks of hair from long-gone loved ones, Mother's brooch, Father's letters.