



# These Shallow Graves

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Charles Montfort, newspaper owner and partner in the powerful Van Houten Shipping Company, is found in his study in his elegant home in New York's Gramercy Square with a bullet through his head and a gun in his hand. His daughter Jo receives the news in the common room of Miss Sparkwell's School for Young Ladies in Connecticut where she is busy editing the school newspaper. Once home, Jo soon questions the accepted view that her father has taken his own life.

So begins a deftly plotted trail of mysterious deaths, which leads Jo into the seediest shadows of the underworld, as well as the drawing rooms and offices of the city's richest families. One by one, the wealthy partners of Van Houten's pillars of an elite Society which guards its frontiers jealously are murdered. The motto of the Montforts is *Fac quod faciendum est* - *Do what must be done* and Jo soon discovers that she is moving in worlds, high and low, where that dictum is ruthlessly implemented, if necessary at the cost of life itself.

In one sense, Jo is an innocent abroad, her education and home life equipping her with little knowledge of life outside her social circle. However, her natural curiosity is coupled with a fearless courage to get at the truth. In this, she is helped by her meeting with Eddie Gallagher, a young and ambitious reporter at the *Standard*, her father's paper. What's more, Jo is disconcerted to find that there's an immediate electricity between herself and Eddie, with a physical charge she has never known before. That is troubling enough, but she also has to reckon with the assumption of the elder Montforts that she is to marry her lifelong friend, Bram Aldritch, New York's most eligible bachelor and the sooner, the better. With Eddie, she follows a dangerous trail which takes her to the morgue, where she meets Eddie's friend Oscar Rubin, a forerunner of those engaging forensic pathologists who, in TV *policiers*, often get the best comic lines. Then it's on to brothels, an academy for pickpockets whose master the sinister Tailor acknowledges Fagin as his inspiration, a bleak lunatic asylum where the sane might be incarcerated by their enemies, and a warren of grimy alleyways peopled by scar-faced men with knives. There is even a moonlit excavation of a shallow grave to exhume a corpse decorated with tattoos with their own secrets to tell.

Readers familiar with crime in print or on screen will probably guess the identity of the killer very early on. The herrings get redder, the hints heavier throughout the story, but our interest may well be not in the whodunit, so much as how Jo will resolve her relationships and her future. Without giving too much away, it can be said the Epilogue leaves the door well ajar for Jo's further adventures.

The narrative wisely stays close to Jo's perception of things throughout the 100 chapters, so that on such a long and winding road confusion is avoided, without condescension to the reader. Thus we experience Jo's critical recognition ? as she pities the girls she meets trapped in an inevitable graduation from pickpocketing to prostitution ? that she herself is trapped on a parallel journey from her restricted upbringing to an arranged marriage with no escape, into a life she shapes for herself. Excitement is relentlessly maintained, not only through cliff-hangers, the threat of violence and coincidences enough to satisfy any Victorian reader, but also through relationships snared in a web of social hierarchies and prejudice. Readers of Donnelly's 2003 Carnegie-winning [A Gathering Light](#) [4] will not be surprised to find a strong sense of place; the streets of New York, rich and poor, become characters in themselves, one of several features which invite comparison with Philip Pullman's distinguished **Sally Lockhart** novels, set a few years earlier in London's underworld.

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