

THE CHILD CEPHALINA

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Chapter One

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THE CHILD CEPHALINA

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CHAPTER ONE

Up until the day the child Cephalina came into our lives, Mrs Tetty Brandling was a happy, sloppy woman who snuffled and wheezed her way through the day's business with good grace. The change in her was at first subtle, but I am certain a shadow fell across her soul at the appearance of Cephalina and my dogged insistence on helping that child.

I had not always been careful about Tetty's feelings and I rue that fact mightily. It is as if our life together in Judd Street was an old shoe so worn down and collapsed from working that no matter how much it is strengthened to give it new life, it merely returns once more to its original shape and we can do nothing to change the fact, no matter how diligent we are in the attempt. Habits, you see—hers and mine grown together in the same way as is more commonly seen in men and women who have been married for a long time. Although I should say that in our case, we did not speak for each other in that comical fashion often taken up between husband and wife as if it were a game that others might enjoy also, but rarely do.

For twelve years, we lived in Judd Street, close to Russell Square, in a handsome house with an arched doorway and large windows to the front. It belongs to my brother, Gerald, but he has no need of it himself. Although the cellar was damper than it should have been, the four upper storeys were in good order and served us very well.

Until I struck a bargain with Tetty, she had the two attic rooms, one in which she slept and the other in which she did her plain sewing and fancy needlework and kept her small porcelain

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ornaments. I lived on the floor below, my bedchamber being at the back of the house where it was quieter, and my study room to the front where more light penetrated on those days when there *was* light in London. I believe that even in the summer when there are no fires burning in the grates, the London air is yet heavy with invisible fog through which the sun's rays struggle to penetrate. I had thought quite seriously from time to time about joining my brother and his family in Margate where the air is fresh, and had I gone there, I feel I would have been able to make progress with the small book of poetry I had been attempting to write for so long.

But while my work with the children of the streets was ongoing, I was not in a position to move from London to a quieter place. I had been interviewing them since 1848 for which they received a meal and sometimes a bath or some clothing—I recorded a great many aspects of their lives, and came to understand, and I say unashamedly, admire, the courage and ingenuity it takes to be a poor child in London Town.

In particular, my interest was in the jobs the youngsters forged for themselves. Of each new child who appeared in our kitchen, I asked the question: and what is it, young sir or little maid, that you do to enable yourself to eat? We knew that a great many of them were snotters, snakes-men, or pickpockets from necessity, but they hesitated to confess it for fear that Tetty and I would put them in the hands of a policeman. Therefore it took twice as long to interview a criminal child as it did a match seller or chickweed hawker, as they had to be certain that I was only interested in recording the *facts* of their poor lives and not tricking them in some manner.

They came on Sunday afternoons and I do not mind confessing that Tetty and I deliberately operated our humble charity on that day so that our neighbours assumed we were engaged in instructing the little creatures in matters of religion. And if you have even the slightest knowledge about London's poor, you will suppose we should have been overrun with children looking

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for food to eat and warmth for their pitiful bodies, but we had enlisted the help of Martin Ebast, a knowing young shaver of around fourteen years, and himself a street child who had had many jobs from Waterman to Crossing Sweeper. He was a real hobbledehoy, but it was he who found and escorted new children to our house, so that my research could continue in its true spirit. There were times when Tetty and I thought we recognised a child from a previous visit, but in general, Ebast brought us only strangers, or those I did not have time to interview on a previous occasion. They came from hellish places like the Old Nichol or The Rookery, and you might well ask why we did not look to Agar Town close by Judd Street for our children, but I believe that had we done so, the hungry little souls would have easily found their way back to us and we would not have been able to feed them a second time.

I have not yet told you about our struggles with money, and deliberately so, as I could talk upon that subject until Kingdom Come and wander far off the track were you to imagine this tale as a forest through which I am attempting to guide you. I cannot vouchsafe that I might not yet burden you with that irksome and oppressive aspect of our lives then—but all this is to say that our project with the children relied on the charity of our neighbours, wealthy people—vicars, surgeons, barristers and their families, and a couple of sea captains. They were happy to send their servants to our door with handsome fare such as rotten oranges, cheese rinds, mouldy bread and beans amongst which weevils had made their homes, and these we supplemented with cheap food from the Sunday market in Suffolk Street. In addition, we sometimes found bundles of old clothes left on our doorstep, and with a little washing and mending, Tetty was able to dress some of our more shabby and stinking youngsters.

Cephalina first appeared in Judd Street early in January of 1851. It was obvious to us that she was unlike the others in both her manner and the quality of her clothing. I imagined that she must have stood in line as Tetty ladled out the soup, and she,

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not watching, handed down a bowl to the girl who walked to our kitchen table, placed the bowl upon it, and bent her face to the spoon as the others were doing.

I had come down from my study early, as it was particularly chilly that afternoon, and my fingers had started to become numb as I worked. In the normal course of events, I would wait until Tetty summoned me with the kitchen bell to appear. From time to time a child was so filthy or lousy that she would put the little mite into the tub for a wash while the others ate, and there apply vinegar to its tatty head. On those occasions, she would not ring the bell until the child was clothed once more and at the table with the others.

On the day Cephalina first placed her little foot into our hall, our kitchen, our lives—I had called out from beyond the door, saying, ‘Tetty, is all in order; may I enter. My fire upstairs is drawing very badly and I am chilled all the way through.’

‘Come along in, Mr Groves. We have sixteen nippers today, puckered up with the cold too, but all well behaved.’

It was within seconds only that I spotted Cephalina in her black wool coat, and turning my eyes to Tetty, discovered her bent upon her task of placing more chunks of bread into the soup, and I guessed she had not even glanced at our visitors that morning. I supposed that on hearing the first rapping at the front door; she opened it, turned back towards the kitchen with the children following her, Cephalina amongst them, and began the process of feeding them. We relied upon Ebast to instruct the new ones in how to behave in the house: they were to line up quietly to the left of Tetty and wait their turn to receive whatever it might be that we were feeding them on that particular day—and Ebast *was* present on the day Cephalina first appeared. He was standing at the table on the other side of her, gazing unashamedly at her hair and her face, his own face pink, his mouth ajar, and I could not blame him.

‘Ebast,’ I said, ‘who is that?’

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The boy pulled himself back and looked over at me. 'Not with me,' he whispered, 'I didn't bring her. Sorry, Mr Groves, don't know how she got in.'

Tetty turned her great square head on hearing Ebast's voice and gazed at us. 'What's afoot, Mr Groves?'

'Will you turn to look at the table, please?' I replied.

And so she did, her face at first impassive until her eyes alighted upon Cephalina, at the sight of whom she flushed crimson and then as white as wax. 'It is none of my purvension, Robert,' she murmured. 'Martin, who is that?'

'Don't know, Mrs Brandling. I ain't brought her here.'

I took a step forward, and some of the youngsters looked up at me and nodded in that curt and unpleasant adult manner used by street children. And I must say it was a manner that used to make my heart sink each time I saw it because I was reminded that poverty had robbed those little ones of the sense of wonder that they should have had in order to grow into good and strong adults. Cephalina finished her soup and placed her spoon carefully beside the bowl, and then turned her head slowly in my direction.

I tell you, I was startled, but there was no time to dwell upon my own emotions at the sight of her, as Tetty had become visibly agitated. 'You should not be here!' she told the girl, 'we only feed chicks whose lives are abusive.'

'What is your name?' I asked.

She frowned and pulled at her upper lip with her glistening little teeth and in the process whitened further a curious scar at the corner of her mouth. Then she shook her head as if she could not recall her name.

'Where have you sprung from?' Tetty asked, moving around the side of the table so that she could inspect the child, who turned her dark eyes upon me as if for protection.

'London,' she answered, and some of the older children sniggered.

'Ebast, you say you did not bring the girl?'

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Ebast studied her carefully once more, and in his face I saw pass a curious wave of trepidation. 'No, Mr Groves. Ain't laid eyes on her never before,' he whispered.

'Any of you others know her?' Tetty asked.

All fifteen of our young shook their heads and muttered to each other, turning their eyes away from the child's face and towards the great cast iron pot on the range that they hoped was not yet empty.

'Well, today,' I announced, 'I will first interview this girl, and then you may bring others up to me, Ebast, when I ring down.'

Tetty frowned at me hard. 'Do not count her in for form's sake, Mr Groves. Have you disremembered that you have an appointment in the early evening and no time to waste today? Three to six children will be your limit I bluv. You know how slow they are at telling all.'

'But I am intrigued, Tetty. I would like to talk to her.'

'I dare say you would, but you have only to look at the hands to know she is not from the street. Hold up your hands for Mr Groves, child.'

The girl obeyed and a few of the younger children, not knowing if the command included them, did likewise, which set the older ones to laughing and jigging about in the nervous way we noticed street children—or chicks as Tetty insisted on calling them—tended to do.

The girl's hands were slender and white, and delicately formed, and all of us must have marvelled at them. Tetty was, of course, correct in her assumption that she was not from the streets, but I was, nonetheless, extremely curious about her. I imagined she was around eleven and I looked again and again at her corn-coloured hair pulled into neat plaits and wonderfully clean.

As if she had read my thoughts, Tetty said, 'And see that pretty hair; it has been washed and tended to with a deal of love, I would say.'

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‘Is it your mother who washes your hair, child, or a maid?’ I asked.

‘Mrs Clutcher gets a maid to do it,’ she answered.

‘And who would Mrs Clutcher be?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Don’t be silly, child!’ Tetty said. ‘You called the lady by name, so you must know who she is.’

‘Where is your mother?’ I whispered very quietly so as not to alarm her further as she had stepped away from the table and the other children, and was looking at Tetty and me very gravely.

‘I don’t know, but I think she is no longer living as she has never come to fetch me since I walked into that big house.’

‘The house where you live?’

‘Yes, where I am a lodger.’

‘So you lodge with Mrs Clutcher?’ I asked. The child nodded and looked down at her neat black boots. ‘Well it seems to me that you are very well cared for, and really I must agree with Mrs Brandling here, that you have no need to come to our house. How did you find us?’

‘I was walking round and round and then I came to your street. I saw children waiting outside your door, so I went to wait too.’

‘But you didn’t know why they were waiting, did you?’

‘No.’

‘Where do you live?’ Tetty asked again, ‘and do not tell us London. What is your area? All the other chicks can say where they come from. They can tell me Seven Dials, Stepney, Bethnal Green, the Old Nichol, or The Rookery. I reckon from your face that you are a clever young maid, so do not be contrary, but answer me directly.’

By this time, the other children were as curious as Tetty and myself; they gazed at the strange girl in silence, and the only noise in the kitchen was the hissing of the giant kettle and the

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dull, dry coughing of five children we had quickly realised were consumptive.

‘That’s not fair!’ Ebast said. ‘Not fair to arst her that; she might have gone mad and forgotten. People go a bit barmy in the crumpet sometimes in London because of the fog.’

‘Quieten down, Ebast,’ I said.

‘Hackney,’ the child answered suddenly.

‘Well, how the Pest did you get here?’ Tetty asked. ‘You come quite a way for one so small and dential.’

‘I have been walking about since it got light this morning. I wandered here.’

‘Tetty, give the others the rest of the soup and I will talk to the girl in my study. We will need to return her to her guardians, so I must press for more information.’

‘Go with Mr Groves,’ Tetty said, flinging up a dismissive hand.

On that first interview, the only useful information I could find out was her name. I sat in the big cane chair and she stood before me trembling, glancing sometimes at my face and sometimes away into the darkened corner of the room.

‘Do not stare at me like that,’ she whispered, ‘for I cannot bear to always have eyes upon me.’

‘Are you afraid?’ I asked.

The question startled her. ‘Of *you*?’ she replied.

‘Yes. Is it I who makes you tremble so? I will not harm you; you have nothing to fear. But Mrs Brandling and I don’t know what to do with you.’

‘I will not harm you, either. I want to stay here. Why can I not stay?’

‘We don’t have children living in the house. There is only Mrs Brandling and myself; old Mr Robert Groves, alongside an army of mice, too many spiders, moths, and a thousand black beetles down in the cellar. Oh, and Mrs Brandling once kept a small singing bird in a cage in her room, but alas, the poor creature died. Died of poisoning by fog, I suspect.’

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‘We have spiders in Hackney,’ she replied.

‘Yes, I should say you do. I’ve heard that the Hackney spider likes to live on that big main road there, Mare Street. Is that so?’ I asked, thinking to trick her into telling me where she lived.

‘It does not matter where I live, Mr Groves,’ she said, as if she had read my very thought, ‘I know the way home. I have been walking in London for at least a year. Only, I had never, until today, found this house.’

‘Ah!’ I said, and could think of nothing further to add for a moment. ‘I am glad to hear you say so,’ I told her eventually. ‘And when you have gone, I will remember you as the girl with no name.’

‘I did not tell you my name in front of the others because I feared they would laugh at me because it is a funny name that the Clutchers gave me after I had told them about E.’

‘The Clutchers—the people you lodge with?’

‘Yes, Mr Groves. Brian and Mavis Clutcher.’

‘Your guardians?’

‘The people who own me.’

For a moment, I did not trust that I had heard her correctly, but an instinct halted my inclination to press her further on that particular matter. ‘Did you have a name before the Clutchers gave you one?’ I asked her instead.

‘I think I must have, but I cannot remember it.’

‘And who is E?’

She shrugged a little and squirmed in front of me. ‘My twin.’

‘There are two of you?’ She nodded. ‘And does she live with the Clutchers as well?’

‘Yes, she lives with me very closely.’

‘And how long have you lived with the Clutchers?’

‘It might be six years or seven. I cannot really tell you. But it matters no longer.’ She had taken a step or two away from me, and was fiddling with the oval buttons on her coat. I noticed then how very intriguing her face was—exceedingly beautiful but very puzzling. Her dark eyes shone or became dull and full

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of depth in quick succession so that the beholder could never quite be sure there was readable expression within them. Over all the time yet to come in which I slowly became acquainted with the child, her eyes always unsettled me. It seemed that they held candour and secrecy with equal ease. Her left eye was slightly differently shaped to the perfect other, which meant when hunting her face, you gazed first at the left and then at the right eye and settled there. Her lips were those of a fully-grown woman, but why I say that, I cannot explain. Her nose was not overly-pretty, and yet it was one that caused fondness in the beholder—had you wanting to run your finger lightly down to its tip. Most endearing perhaps was the shape of her face, perfectly oval and angelic. Her skin was fair and subtly freckled giving her the look of a fresh country girl. I have mentioned the scar to you already; the only spoiling element about her face. It went through the corner of her mouth on the right-hand-side upwards into her soft skin to about one quarter of an inch. When she became agitated, she bit into her upper lip causing the scar to whiten and show itself more acutely.

I tried, with all my ability as an interviewer of young people, to find out more, but it was to no avail, and so realising that I had spent far too much time with her, I attempted to bring the matter to a close. 'It is time you went back to Hackney. Surely the Clutchers will be missing you. And as someone who also walks, I calculate that it will take you a good while to arrive home again, unless, or course, you have money about your person and can buy a ticket to take you to the new railway station in Hackney . . . and then easily home, perhaps?'

'It is not home, Mr Groves. I work there.'

I shrugged. I could hear Tetty banging things in the kitchen and if I had interpreted the meaning correctly, she was telling me with her noises that I had been interviewing the girl for long enough, and besides, according to the chimes of the long clock by the drawing room, the other children should, by now, have left. 'Well, nameless child, I estimate with your small frame, that

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it will take close to two hours or perhaps more to walk back to your work place, so you should set off now to arrive while there is still light in the sky.'

I rose to my feet and took the child by the shoulder to guide her from the room; the feeling of her frail bones beneath my fingers had me think of larks in the summer sky in places far off from London Town.

'My name is Cephalina,' she announced as we made our way down the stairs towards the front door.

'Aha! Cephalina . . . a curious name indeed. But, come along, you should hasten now.'

'I want to live here, Mr Groves,' she answered.

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