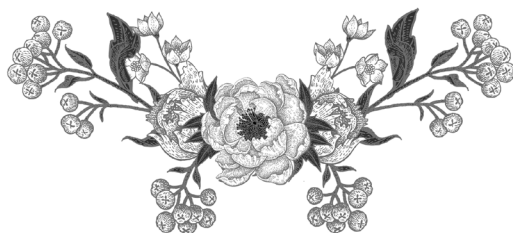


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Laura Carlin



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HODDER &
STOUGHTON

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*For Shirl,
with thanks and love*

WHEN
THE
WICKED
COMETH,
THEN
COMETH
ALSO
CONTEMPT,
AND
WITH
IGNOMINY
REPROACH.

Proverbs XVIII, 3



The Morning Herald

TUESDAY 13 SEPTEMBER 1831

Price One Penny

SUPPOSED DISAPPEARANCE IN THE BELVEDERE ROAD

THIS NEWSPAPER HAS TAKEN NOTE THAT THE PAST MONTH HAS BEEN REMARKABLE FOR THE PREVALENCE OF CASES WHERE MEN, WOMEN AND CHILDREN ARE DECLARED MISSING. SCARCELY A WEEK PASSES WITHOUT THE OCCURRENCE OF AN INCIDENT OF THIS TYPE.

Such fears may indeed be well founded and made but too evident by the following account, the particulars of which we are about to lay before our readers.

We study the tale of an unfortunate, known familiarly by the name Johnnie Hogget.

On Tuesday afternoon of the 6th inst. between five and six o'clock, Johnnie Hogget, fourteen years of age, was making his way from his place of industry at Mr Sturtevant's, the soap boilers.

Master Hogget had been seen for some time loitering in the region of the Belvedere Road and it was in this quarter that the lad was last witnessed and then seen no more. Up to a late hour the

following day, no one could be found who could add anything material to come at a reason for his disappearance.

The lad was in perfect health, of good repute and regular habits, and his respectable but unfortunate parents report that his absence is most out of character.

So, is Master Hogget another name to be added to the growing list of missing persons in the *Police Gazette*, or is his tale one of uncorrupted innocence?

Perhaps it is both erroneous and presumptuous of this journal to call out a parallel between these events. Yet, equally, an increasing degree of discontent prevails in the minds of the public and suspicion arises that a diabolical transaction may have taken place.

We have no intent to alarm our readers and it can only be hoped that Master Hogget, perhaps led astray by the inducement of good fortune or the promise of adventure, will soon be returned to the loving arms of his family.

CHAPTER ONE



Do you think you know London? They say it's the finest city in all of Europe. Perhaps you once stood and marvelled at the dome of St Paul's? Or took a ride on a passenger craft and wove your way past the wherries and steamers as the great Thames carried you to the heart of the city beneath the shadows of Blackfriars Bridge. And then, having paid your half-crown to the driver on the box, did you jounce along in a hackney carriage on your way to Vauxhall, humming a catchy little ditty? Or perhaps took a seat on Shillibeer's omnibus instead? Did you go from Paddington to the Bank, stopping at The Unicorn for beefsteak with oyster sauce?

Because that's all there is to know about London, isn't it? Well, that is what I once thought. No, more than that, it's the London I believed in, and its flavour and spices season my earliest memory.

I am sitting on my mother's lap in the parlour.

'Try not to fall asleep, Hester,' she whispers. 'You're too heavy for that now.' But her voice, with its warmth and softness, only serves to make me sleepier. The next memory is of my eyes snapping open, of my feet hitting cold flagstones as I am jolted awake by the sound of carriage wheels turning, then grinding to a halt outside. The evening air tingles against my skin and the rustle of Mama's skirts fills my ears; Papa has returned from London.

He lifts me off the ground and folds me in his arms. I breathe in the scents that rise from his cape: tobacco from the pipe he would have smoked; the spiced mutton he took for supper; the leather from the carriage seats and the cold night air. His whiskers brush my cheek as he kisses me and he lifts me high, higher. His hands are tucked under my arms as he raises me and swings me round and round, his deep-voiced mirth thrums a melody matched only by Mama's trilling laughter, and the music of their happiness is loud in my ears.

We return to the warmth of the parlour and Papa talks of London; of the great men he has met and the magnificent buildings he has seen. His eyes light up when he tells of the wondrous steamer that glided over the surface of the Thames: no oars, no sails, just the science of steam-power. How fascinated he was by the new exhibition of Greek sculptures at the British Museum. With his words he paints a picture of vitality and excitement and the splashes of colour cover the canvas of my dreams.

At three years old, I truly believed London was the most splendid city in all of Europe and that Mama and Papa's laughter would never be lost to me. But that was then, and fifteen years is a long time. Sometimes in life, incidents arise, quite unlooked for, and before you know it fate has changed the course of your destiny.

It is now the autumn of 1831 and my parents are both dead. Three babes lost at birth over the years: two brothers and a sister who I never held, never played games with. Three souls cut down in the springtime of their lives, to winter beneath the dust forever more. Mama passed away after giving birth to a fourth stillborn child, to be named Thomas, when I was eleven. Papa was taken by typhoid fever six months later. In less than a twelvemonth, death had snuffed out their lives like a wet candlewick, and I was without a family.

I left our parsonage in the Lincolnshire Wolds some six years

ago. As the house was owned by the church, there was nothing to bequeath to me save a handful of mementos. Now I live in London with Papa's gardener, Jacob, and his wife, Meg. They encouraged me to call them Uncle and Aunt; they aren't blood relations but they took me in when no one else would. And my London isn't the one Papa visited, or the one you think you might know; of that I am certain.

Our district is to the north and to the east. Instead of the majesty of Westminster Abbey and the grandeur of the Banqueting House, here the houses spill over each other; dishevelled and ugly. A sickly, rotten stench rises from the streets and the rain-bloated gutters. Some thoroughfares bulge with black mud where pools of fetid water have collected, while others are narrow and meandering. All are swart with the lack of daylight and connected by alleyways and byways that seep over the scabbed ground.

Between Virginia Row and Austin Street there is a pile of dwellings to the right, a heap of dwellings to the left. It is a place where the houses are so close together that dawn is never satisfied and dusk is quick to come. To the right of the last wooden house, warped and stooping, there is a covered alleyway no wider than a whip thong. At the end of the alleyway there is a yard; small as a poke, never gladdened by the warmth of the sun. In the far corner of that yard, behind a door that hangs loose on its leather hinges, is a room. It is a small room with a brick and dirt floor. This room is the centre of my London. I cannot and will not call it home, but it is the place where I live.



It is in this room that I wake and stretch the stiffness from my limbs. The hemp mat and horse-rug have done little to protect me from the night air. We used to have mattresses and coverlets, but last year's frost necessitated their sacrifice as fuel. I take the

boots I've been using as a pillow and pull them onto my feet. The leather is thin and they are down at heel, but my breath has at least left some warmth in them. I have no laces, so I use a twist of rag.

I am stupefied by the chilliness. It's not a biting cold but a clammy one; a wet washrag against my skin. A line of washing, gently dripping, is strung from corner to corner but there is not enough air to dry even a pocket-handkerchief. The wainscoting and plaster has long since rotted from the sagging walls and a breath of mist hovers midway between the ceiling and floor.

I yawn and my breath adds to this milky fog. The terrier in the corner, Missy, raises her head and sniffs the air. Her five pups wriggle, whimper and then take suck. Missy lowers her head then raises it again, her ears pricked towards the door. I listen too, but can't hear anything.

A breeze blows ash over the floor, carpeting the dirt with a veneer of grey velvet. The fire is down to its last cinder. I sit on the stool and prod the ashes, but can do no more than rattle the rust from the poker. The twins, asleep beneath the table where the iron washtub used to be, begin to stir. My belly gives a loud grumble, but the quartern loaf has all gone and there is no breakfast to be had.

'That you, Hester?'

It's Aunt Meg calling from outside.

'You awake, dearie?' she tries again.

I smooth my hair and tuck it behind my ears. It used to be thick and glossy, the colour of flax; locks that Mama used to brush for me a hundred times every evening. But with years and sorrows, the colour has dimmed to brown, and now I wear it short to reduce the appeal for vermin.

I tread carefully, reluctant to wake the day, and pull open the door. It has no latch, no lock. We have no need to protect ourselves

from the bad sort, because we are the bad sort. Foglers, lifters and murderers surround us: everyone's on the dodge in some shape or form. Jews to the right, Gypsies to the left and Jacktars in the rooms above: all in all, a well of criminality. Besides all that, we own nothing: nothing to steal, nothing to sell and nothing to pop at the pawnbroker's.

A glimmer of daylight creeps out of the gloom. I close the door behind me and pull the shawl around my shoulders. Aunt Meg is in the corner of the yard, a rag in her hand and a pail of muddy water at her side. She works at Uncle Jacob's boots, but they are caked in earth and clay and the soft leather absorbs the dirt she is trying to remove. She casts the first boot to the floor, takes up a knife and begins to scrape the sole of the second boot. She uses her forearm to brush the stray hairs from her face as she works. I won't ask why the boots are this muddy when they were perfectly clean last evening. I know not to ask what Uncle Jacob does at night. I take a step forward and realise Aunt Meg is crying, almost inaudibly.

'Let me help you,' I say. She turns and in one movement wipes her sleeve across her face and sweeps a clump of hair over her right eye. But the bruise is already shining and her eyelid is swollen and dark.

'Oh no, dearie,' she says, her voice contrived, too cheerful for the circumstance. 'We must keep your hands ready for Mr Gaberdine's manuscript copying. Some folks say we treat you too soft, Hester, but there's no one hereabouts what can do what you do. You keep those hands like a lady's, there's a good girl, and leave these boots to me.'

I picture Mr Gaberdine's documents, shredded and only a little better than kindling, and the hours I spend piecing everything together and copying them out. I wish I could be more useful to Aunt Meg with the housework, but I also understand that the arrangement with Mr Gaberdine is how I earn my keep.

‘Thank you, Aunt Meg,’ I say, then add, ‘Does it hurt?’

‘This?’ She points to her eye. ‘It’s nothing, dearie. It’s not Jacob’s fault. It’s nobody’s fault. It just is what it is. And we do all right by you, don’t we? He don’t hurt you, does he?’

‘No,’ I say. Yet I find I don’t declare it emphatically.

Uncle Jacob was kindness itself after Mama and Papa died. With no relations who would own me and no means of subsistence, destitution seemed inevitable. It was decided I would stay temporarily with Jacob and Meg. It was hoped that the new parson would practise the benevolence he preached and take in a poor lamb of God to bring her up as his own. It transpired, however, that he was a bachelor whose sole interest was debating ecclesiastical matters with fellow bachelors in a haze of tobacco smoke. It was also assumed the new incumbent of the parsonage would still need a gardener, but he brought his own servants. Fortunately for us, Jacob’s brother owned an errand-cart business in London and so, to the finest city in all of Europe, Jacob and Meg went. And with the innocence of a child and the blind perversity of a sheep, I went with them, for what else was I to do? The temporary arrangement became a permanent solution.

Initially, we lived in clean lodgings. I arrived in neat clothing with my meagre keepsakes, as few as they were: a silver comb, a gold locket and a prayer book. We had an old range to warm us and oil lamps for light. The kettle was always hot on the trivet and Aunt Meg cooked chitterlings twice a week and collared eels every Friday. The business thrived and so did we. Then Obadiah, the old dray horse, gently lay down in the street one day and never got up again. Jacob’s brother followed his horse to the grave soon after and, with no horse or contacts, it wasn’t long before the business died too. Jacob sold the carrier’s cart together with his Dutch hoe, his rake, fork and shovel, and we moved to cheaper lodgings. Eventually, I was obliged to sell my locket and the comb. We moved

a dozen times in as many months, each time to lodgings that were smaller, grimmer, darker. And as a spider is washed down a spout by the force of water, so we were washed by the obstinacy of poverty into the corner of the yard at the end of the alley. Uncle Jacob sought solace in the gin shops, and a man soaked in geneva is hardly a man at all. He abandons propriety and loses control of his urges.

Uncle Jacob now spends his days odd-jobbing and devilling. He is known to pet and bundle with the eldest daughter of Mrs O'Rourke, the Irish gypsy. He is also frequently seen with Rabbitry Sue, who makes a living from tuppenny uprights. Three months ago, he told me how lovely my blue eyes were and that I had looks that could win a man's heart. Of late he has started to pay me more unwanted attention: sometimes wordless stares; sometimes he brushes close by my breasts and I feel his sour breath on my neck. He uses more blasphemy than a bargeman and, with his sharp edge and his sharp words, some days he is a pair of scissors at me, clipping my spirits with his taunts.

'Jacob protects us all in his own way, don't he though?' Meg goes on. 'And providing scran's not as easy as it once were. You take Mrs O'Rourke in there.' She jabs her thumb over her shoulder at the dilapidated house behind her. 'She's been feeding her brood on potatoes and penny bran since Michaelmas. And we had meat just last Thursday, didn't we?'

I nod as I picture the greasy leg of mutton boiled to rags. And as much as Aunt Meg tries to hide it, I perceive the austerity of our lifestyle in her features, and hear the futility in her voice. The last vestiges of our respectability are being crushed by poverty. Yet she will not admit it. Perhaps she doesn't know it. But I do. We are in a most miserable condition and live on the lowest terms life has to offer. And the only incentive I have to counteract utter oblivion is to believe that hope will arrive at Smithfield today, in the form of my cousin Edward.

I've never met him but Aunt Meg fell in to talking with some of the Lincolnshire drovers last time they came to town, discovering the existence of a distant relation of mine, who would be joining the cattle-men on their next drove. She said she told them how I can write a pretty hand and add up lists of numbers, and in exchange for a home and board could make myself very useful. Edward has since become the embodiment of my desire to be free of London. He should have been at Smithfield three weeks since to meet with me but has yet to arrive. I won't give up. I will wait there every day, for I must leave London, I must escape this life.

'You're going there again, aren't you, dearie?'

'It's not that I'm ungrateful for all you've done for me, but—'

'I'm not blaming you, Hester. Your parents would have wanted a better life than this for you. God knows if I had the chance to go back to our little cottage in Lincolnshire and simply be the wife of a parson's gardener . . . but my place is here with Jacob, whether he knows it or appreciates it, well, I don't know. Don't get your hopes up, I suppose that's what I'm trying to say. You can't always rely on the word of a rustic, you know. Even if there is such a job, there's no guarantee it'll last for more than a few months. And being a dairymaid is as hard as any work, especially in winter. Just have a care for what you wish for, dearie. And . . . and . . .'

Her sentence trails away to nothing. She looks at me, her brow furrowed with worry. I raise my hand and find myself pulling her towards me. We embrace, and for the first time it feels as though she is smaller.

I make to leave, but then turn about.

'May I ask you a question, Aunt Meg?'

'Of course, Hester.'

'I've been reading the discarded newspapers at the market—'

'Yes?'

‘Well, last week there was an article about a boy that had gone missing: a Master Hogget.’

‘I’ve not heard o’ that name, I’m sure. Did you know the lad, dearie?’

‘Well, no. It’s just that no one can explain what happened to him. And I was thinking about my cousin, Edward, and worrying if—’

‘Hester, my girl. Let me offer you some advice where boys and men is concerned. Each and every one of them has a habit of being distracted. I think back over my life and I can call up the recollection of at least a dozen fellas what either went to sea, or joined Mr Astley’s circus troupe, or simply sought adventure at the bottom of a bottle for a few days. Some are gone for weeks, some are gone for years, and some don’t never come back, my love. But don’t you go fretting. Your cousin will just be late; he’ll have found some delight what he’s not known before and once he’s had his fill, he’ll be back. It’s what young men do, dearie. And Master Hogget; he’ll be the same.’

‘I was just concerned, that’s all.’

‘My advice is don’t rely on a man to be on time and don’t trust all what the newspapers write in their dailies.’

‘Thank you, Aunt Meg.’

‘You’d best get off, my love.’ She digs in her apron pocket, produces a shilling and presses it into my hand.

‘But,’ I say, ‘that’s for Uncle Jacob’s Blue Ruin.’

‘Let me deal with that. Trust that you keep your own counsel about it, that’s all. He can have porter instead of gin for once, I’m sure. And I can always take up that offer of work from dear Mrs Cohen, can’t I? She always said if we was on our uppers, she would direct a penny or two in my direction. A good friend she’s been over the years. So don’t you worry. Just get yourself a bite to eat and some ale.’ Her voice is brave, but her eyes betray her.

A whistle echoes in the covered alleyway and she shrinks back inside herself and resumes her cleaning. When Uncle Jacob enters the yard, I pull my wrapper over my head and make for the alley, almost tripping in my haste to be gone.

‘Where d’you think you’re going?’ he calls after me.

‘Oh, leave her alone, Jake,’ Meg says.

‘Don’t you tell me what to do, woman! She thinks she’s so special, that one. Well, I’m in charge and she’d do well to remember that. And she’s not too old to be taught a lesson,’ he adds, slurring his words.

I ignore him and push forward towards the road, worried that he might chase me and rip the shilling out of my hand. But I hear Aunt Meg instead, ‘She’s gone to fetch you a bottle of gin, Jake. I’m just on my way to borrow some coals for the fire and some eggs and flour, I’ll make you some skimmer-cakes, shall I . . .?’

Then the fog, which settles in the dips and the hollows, absorbs her voice and I begin to make my way down grim alleys where the sun never reaches, my own hands lost to the enveloping fingers of mist. I might as well be walking through the murk of the Thames for all I can see.

All I hear is the tap of my heel as I go westwards then south, following a footpath where the mud and filth has been trampled into a firm crust. As I hurry down Old Street, past the Bunhill burying grounds, leaves spin in circles around the hem of my skirt. I cut through a by-path, regain the highroad at Goswell and scurry down Wilderness Row: a series of lodging houses with broken windowpanes repaired with rags and paper, caged songbirds behind every third sash. Most shutters remain closed, with few folks stirring and houses still asleep to the business of the day.

Through the mist, there is a shape. As we draw near, I recognise Annie Allsop.

‘Well, strike me blind, if it ain’t you, Hester! Chilly one, ain’t it? A right piercer.’

She smiles. Her mouth is overcrowded with teeth and her breath is fragranced with gin. Her lank hair, which she usually wears down, is plaited up behind, baring a pale and narrow forehead. She is wearing her best linen collar, but it has grown yellow with age and the residue of snuff.

‘Hello, Annie. You’re up with the larks. Still cooking whelks?’

‘No, I ain’t done that in ages.’

‘Thought we’d not seen you for a while.’

‘I come round last week, you cheeky mare, selling pigs’ trotters and plum puddings, but you wasn’t there. Meg says you’ve set your heart on working at a dairy house.’

‘Yes. It’s in Lincolnshire; that’s where I used to live.’

‘When she said you wanted to be a dairymaid, at first I was struck all of a heap. I says to myself, that’s a funny game, ain’t it? They say the udders dry up something cruel in winter; it’s like trying to squeeze milk out of a carrot.’ She laughs, showing every tooth in her mouth. ‘But I s’ppose if that’s what you fancy . . . And I hear old Jake’s rheumatics is back. You know, if I had a farthing for every ailment that had gin as a common father, well, I would never have to work again. Not that I need worry about that now!’

‘Oh?’

‘I’ve met a real good fella. He ain’t your hearts and darts sort, but I don’t mind that. Found him at the Fortune o’ War, didn’t I. He’s quite the diamond in the dust heap, and in these dark times and with all them missing folks, I reckon it don’t hurt to have a fella to look out for you.’ She moves her head as she talks, her dull oval eyes and loose lids at once becoming bright, as if she can’t quite believe her luck. ‘He buys me a pot of half-and-half, he does. “Hear this,” he says. “I’ve the very thing,” he says. “I

knew straight away you was the woman for the job,” he says. “And I should like a job well enough,” says I.’

‘What’s the job?’

‘It’s what I’m best at, Hester. It’s needlework, and for a proper lady too. He says she might give me some of her cast-off frocks in time. This day next month I’ll be wearing a tufftaffety gown. Think of that! And boots that shine like a chimney-glass. I got all the stuff, look.’

She pulls out a blue pocket and opens it to reveal a little pewter pincushion in the shape of a pig, four needles, a dozen or so pins, and a bobbin of scarlet thread.

‘He says he’ll take me for some bite and sup today, too. I’m meeting him again at the Fortune o’ War. I’ll probably see you on your way back from Smithfield tonight, won’t I? I could tell you all about it then. But here, Hester, you couldn’t lend me sixpence, could you, dear heart? There’s a hat I’ve asked Mrs Cohen to put aside for me at her shop. I should love to wear it when I meet up with him.’

‘I’ve only got this shilling, Annie.’

‘It’s only borrowing though, ain’t it? It’s not as though I won’t see you again. I’ll be at this very spot tonight. And my new fella’s quite free with his shillings and his crowns where the likes of me is concerned, that’s for sure. I’ll give it back to you later, I promise, with a penny for your trouble. Just you see as I don’t. In fact, I’ve got tuppence in me pocket, look. Take it and I’ll settle up the rest tonight. What do you say, dear heart?’

I hand over the warm coin and take the four cold ha’pennies from Annie.

‘God bless you, Hester. Must cut along now. See you later eh?’

‘Good luck, Annie.’

She walks away at a smart pace, singing to herself as merrily as a cricket, and as I slip through the groin of an archway, I’m

suddenly in the belly of the town. I feel the rumble of the streets first, then the stir of activity reaches me. All is wide-awake here. Feet thump and carriage wheels churn. The fog has cleared, but now the air is brittle with cold as crowds of people jostle for space.

I turn out of the lane and direct my course down Liquorpond Street, where the gutters are swimming with offal from the violin-string manufactory. There are men selling bunches of firewood, and girls carrying milk pails and baskets of dried lavender. I pass the spoon-mender's shop on a busy corner and pause to look at the handbills that have been pasted to the wall outside.

The number of notices has grown over the last few months and the papers have conjoined to form a skin that covers the entire surface of brickwork. Some posters describe missing children or absent parents, some simply appeal for information. Most sheets have succumbed to the damp of the city and are now wrinkled or distorted and unreadable. I wonder if the parents of Master Hogget will have a notice pressed for him, and I pray that Edward is never reduced to pasteboard and printer's ink.

I buy a ha'penny pie and eat it, grateful for something hot to fill my belly, while watching The Dancing Doll Man as he sets up his pitch. He attaches two painted dolls to a peg and board with a length of cable and ties the other end around his knee. With his fipple-flute he squeaks out a shanty, accompanying himself with a drum, all the time moving his knee up and down to keep time with the music and making the dolls dance. Before I leave, I throw a ha'penny to him; he smiles and nods but his mouth still works at the flute and he doesn't drop a beat.

The crowds thin as I walk down St John's, and dark thoughts begin to trouble me. I cannot stop puzzling over those notices and wondering how and why a person might disappear. We rub along in this den of infamy and we can all tell a lurker from a dupe, a rogue from the down-on-his-luck, a sinner from a saint. But

something else is here amongst us now. This new apprehension makes me shiver, and now any unexpected sound gives me a start; a slammed door, a heavy tread. I clench my teeth, press on and complete the final few rods to Smithfield.

When I arrive, the market place is already cluttered with waggons, some with beasts yoked to them, some with shafts in the air. As the bells of Shoreditch peal, I jump the puddles and weave in and out of carriages and barrows.

My attention is drawn to a single ribbon of beasts twisting and looping through the crowds. I rush to a man in his smock frock as he leads the cattle into a drove-ring, noses inwards, haunches to the outside of the circle.

‘Mister?’ I shout. But the panicking animals give voice and the drover doesn’t hear me.

‘Do you know Edward White?’ I say. He doesn’t even turn to look at me. ‘I’m supposed to meet him here. As soon as he pastured his cattle in Islington, he was going to walk down with the London drovers and meet me. Have you seen him?’

The man finally deigns to face me and roughly shakes his head.

‘Look,’ he says. ‘I don’t know him. But the word on the street is that this place isn’t as safe as it once was.’

‘But why? What’s changed?’

‘I don’t know. I don’t want to know. You look out for yourself.’ I am pushed aside as he smacks the rump of the next heifer and starts to form another drove-ring.

This is how I have spent the last three weeks. This is how I will likely spend today and tomorrow. Every dawn, when my senses are in that midpoint between sleeping and waking, I convince myself that when the earth has turned one more revolution, then my life will change. But then each day passes and the shadow of my fading dream draws long and dark and I begin to believe that my seeds of hope are sown where nothing will ever grow.

Hoping my cousin will be forced to materialise by my sheer force of will, and reluctant to return to Virginia Row for fear of Uncle Jacob's inebriated wrath, I spend the remainder of the day watching for drovers and asking fruitlessly after Edward. The brief pleasure of spending what I had left of the gin money has faded and I can only imagine how I'll be received when I return to the yard. Eventually, coloured by the glare of gas-lamps, I scuff my way through discarded meat wrappers and turnpike tickets; the street bordering the marketplace as grey as the fog above it.

Through my feet I suddenly feel dull vibrations and hear a clatter of hooves. I turn as a carriage appears from nowhere, thundering along the street towards me. It is being driven recklessly and, as I stand aside to let it pass, the horses with their wide nostrils and steaming flanks veer onto the footway. Gloved hands pull at traces and bits. The driver shouts. I let out a cry and, as my chest empties of air, I see the carriage bearing down on me.

It is at this moment I realise there is no hope. I send out a prayer for my salvation as the wheel-spokes spin and black specks dance in the air before me. There is a swimming sensation inside my head as my pulse becomes small and I cannot tell what is passing around me. At last my legs fail me.

I am trapped beneath the carriage and a dizzying throng of onlookers gathers in a knot around me: costermongers and hawkers in the main, all with faces and cuffs dripping with water. I cannot stop trembling as I hear the smack of a mallet and a crack of snapping wood. Someone tugs at the broken shaft while the coachman steadies the horses. Then, finally, I am pulled from beneath the wheels.

Someone cries, 'Is she hurt? I can't look.'

'No, she's just being theatrical,' another calls. 'Could earn her living at the penny gaffs, this one. A drop of gin-daffey's all she needs.'

‘Do try to quieten down, miss,’ the coachman says to me, and I realise that I have been wailing and promptly stop. ‘Mr Brock. You might want to take a look, sir.’

I experience violent pain rushing up my right leg. It throbs and brings me out in a sudden fit of shivering, sufficient to banish all other thoughts. I snap my eyes closed for fear of what I might see. Perhaps my skin is torn and my flesh mashed beyond repair? A gentleman’s footsteps approach and I peep from between my eyelashes. A hatted head is bent low, its owner searching my face. He squats and studies me, then flicks the cape of his grey surtout over his shoulder and presses the top of my thigh. I am numb with cold and feel nothing. He gently squeezes just below my right knee and I shriek. As a reflex, I look down at my leg and briefly note the point of collision. My skirts are ripped and my linen undergarments are blood-soaked.

‘Her leg is probably broken, Jenkins. Get her in the carriage. And you there,’ he points with his cane to a barrow boy, ‘get some sacking to hold this shaft together. Here’s a shilling for your trouble. Be quick about it.’

The coachman, with the assistance of a groom in his stable-jacket, lifts me up and I am placed inside the carriage. With the windows shut up against the cold night air, the coach moves off as soon as the steps have been put up, and we strike west towards the better part of town.