

Listen to the Child  
By Elizabeth Howard

It's 1875 and London's East End heaves with children who work as prostitutes, hawkers, beggars and thieves. Constance rescues as many as she can, but there is only so much she and other charity workers can do. Then a solution is offered that sounds perfect – Canada, with its wide green plains, has farmers who need help, while their wives want housemaids. Shipping children to this land of plenty offers them a future far from the temptations of London's overcrowded streets. Widow, Mary Trupper, is wary, but the promise of good food and an education for her children is strong.

Are the fields green? Is the food plentiful? For some, yes. For others, the harsh winters reflect the welcome.

As Constance ran out into the rainy night, the wind whipped her cloak around her thin figure like a winding shroud. She tugged at it, anchoring it firmly against her thin chest, letting go only as she tripped over a hard bundle which cried out in pain.

Constance knelt down, her dress and cloak soaking up rain from a puddle. The heavy wind made the gas lights flicker, but a short lull allowed her a glimpse of a small face glistening in dampness. “Lawrence! You’re supposed to be in bed.”

The boy swallowed a sob and then spoke with a fast rhythm that once started couldn’t be stopped. “Miss, I was waiting for my father. He said he’d come back for me, but it’s been weeks. He’s never left me this long. I don’t want him to come while the home is closed for the night – he might go away again.” Lawrence paused briefly as he read Constance’s face for trouble. “I was only watching for him, Miss. I didn’t mean to do anything wrong.”

Constance pulled the boy to her and then dabbed his face with a dry part of her cloak, but the heavy rain quickly undid her work. “Lawrence, you must learn patience. Your father has to find a job, and then he has to pay off his debts and find a home where he can raise you. Only then will he be in a position to take you away from here.” She rubbed a tear that hovered at the tip of his chin. “All that can take a very long time.”

Lawrence sobbed. “How long?”

“Only Our Lord knows the answer to that question.”

The boy's swollen eyes threatened to erupt once more. Constance pushed gently at his shoulder. "Let's go back inside. Miss Winifred will find you a cup of hot broth and we'll get you into a warm bed."

Without waiting for agreement she ushered the nine-year-old back up the steps to the heavy door that guarded the Home of Industry. It was locked for the night, but Constance pounded heavily.

Winifred's stout figure peered out cautiously.

Constance pushed Lawrence forward. "I'm sorry, Winifred, but I found this young man outside. He thought his father might come and fetch him tonight, and I found him waiting in the gutter. I think he needs dry clothes."

Winifred eyed the boy's wet nightgown, which hung below his coat. Lawrence's right foot, shorter and thicker than the other, looked ruddy and chunkier than usual.

Lawrence caught Winifred's gaze and pulled his clubbed foot under his gown.

Her gaze interrupted, Winifred pulled a hefty key from her pocket and ambled toward the provisions room.

Constance ladled hot mutton broth from the stove and then watched the boy as he sipped. He didn't palm the entire cup and risk burning his hands like the other kids did. Instead, Lawrence held the handle of the mug in a perfect pincer grip.

"Lawrence, I'm sure your father misses you."

The boy looked down into his broth, giving only a light nod.

"You know, Our Lord works mysteriously, and there are always reasons for our difficulties." Constance put a hand on his shoulder. "Your life, Lawrence, has been a privileged one compared to many children, and maybe it would be good for you to share some of your fortune."

Lawrence didn't feel any fortune. His old life felt like a distant story he'd once read: Living in Prickwillow House and being cared for by Mrs Williams, the cook,

Martha, the housemaid and Mr Johnstone, the tutor – his own tutor. But that was before his father lost it all playing cards.

Constance sipped her own broth and then placed the cup on the table for Winifred to wash. “Lawrence, how would you like to help the other children with their reading and writing? You know we don’t have many children as skilled, and you could be of great use teaching letters. You could be my assistant in learning.”

Lawrence sat up a little straighter. He missed his lessons. Schoolwork at the Home of Industry was mostly copying words onto a slate. He wanted to write, put his thoughts down onto paper, pour out all the sadness he’d felt since his father left him in this orphanage.

“Miss, it would make the time pass faster, wouldn’t it?”

Constance patted his dark hair. “A busy mind is a happy mind – make that your motto. We can start in the morning.”

Winifred came in with a dry nightgown. Lawrence took it and climbed the stairs to the boys’ dormitory. He balanced cautiously so his clubfoot caused only the barest perception of a limp.

The elderly matron sat down, her thighs falling heavily onto the wicker weave chair. “You know it’s the ones with hope who have the hardest time settling in – those parents with their promises that don’t mean nothing are a waste of good air.” She picked up her knitting. “You know he’s a bed-wetter, that one.”

Constance’s eyebrow’s shot up at this news. The Mission Board liked cleanliness.

“Don’t worry, the boy’s a real gentleman. He came and told me was afraid of ‘disgracing himself’. Those were the words he used – ‘disgracing himself’. He said it had happened at his father’s friend’s house and he asked if he could sleep on the floor. Of course, I gave him a waxed

sheet and told him I'd waken him during the night with the others."

Winifred routinely rose during the night to relieve her own bladder. While up, she would rouse the known wetters. But that didn't protect the beds of those orphans who had only occasional accidents.

Constance said goodnight to Winifred for the second time that evening and hurried, head bent into the wind. By the time she neared Great Eastern Street, her cloak ties had worked loose, and the dark wool flopped against her like wet linen. Nearby an omnibus spilled the last passengers from the West End, while at the end of the street a paper boy called out for sales: "Gazette!"

The omnibus passengers scurried for home, their heads bowed to the wind. The boy held the wet newspapers tight to his chest as he chased after a portly gent carrying a leather bag. "Please, Sir, it's only a farthing!"

His words flew into the wind as the man hurried on.

The boy turned and ran quickly after the main stream of passengers hurrying toward Bishopsgate. But the wind and rain drowned any desire to put a hand in a pocket and fumble for a farthing.

The boy yelled, his voice burying into the wind: "Suez Canal opens – journey to India cut by half."

Constance watched as he pursued a stooped couple who shook their heads at his approach. He turned and kicked angrily at a puddle, making the water splash up into his face. Constance stepped towards him holding out a farthing.

The boy looked down at his newspapers now limp with rain and pulled one from the back where they were driest. "Sorry, Miss, they're all a bit wet." He took her coin and looked at it. "Does you only want one?"

The wind whipped so that Constance was pulled sideways. "I don't believe there is any point in my buying two."

The boy pocketed her money in his undershirt and scanned the road for more custom. The omnibus passengers had all disappeared.

"How many newspapers do you have left to sell?" Constance asked.

"A dozen! Four more if I'm to earn what they cost me." He looked at her hopefully. His nose was twisted and unnaturally large for such a small face.

"Have you eaten today?" she asked

"I aint a beggar. Me ma can feed me."

Constance took a small step back. "Then good luck with selling your newspapers." She walked into the darkness, stopping only when she was around the corner and could peek back at the boy who stood alone in the gaslight.

His lonely figure turned so the wind and rain blew onto his back. He waited several minutes, but with the last bus from the West End gone he knew his customers had all retired for the night. He walked slowly despite the wind pushing him forward.

Constance turned the corner and followed him off the main road and toward Field Street where they left the gaslights behind. The streets narrowed to alleys and became drenched in darkness. She walked with one hand on the walls to guide her, stopping at dark corners to listen to the boy's footsteps. Candlelight from the occasional window allowed Constance to hurry and not lose the boy in darkness.

In daytime Constance might have recognised the landmarks they passed. The pawnshop that looked poorer than any shop in the east end, and the cheap bakery with bread too tough to digest. It was rumoured that the

undertaker next door sold sawdust to the baker to bulk up his dough.

As they turned into a tight lane, the stench of sewage forced Constance to shut her mouth tight and breathe only through her nose. Sewage squelched underfoot, and she had to lift her loose skirt.

Constance's hearing was trained on the boy's squelched footsteps as they hurried across the sodden ground. She stayed close as he turned onto the stairs of a steep close. She ignored the sound of curses and slaps coming from one of the rooms as she followed the boy. Tall buildings like this could house twenty families in twenty different rooms and she couldn't lose him now.

His footsteps sounded up the full five storeys. Constance hurried upward then knocked lightly on the first wooden doorway in the narrow attic.

The door swung open and a woman smiled, her sagging bosom uncovered for business. But her gummy grin fell to a glare as if Constance was the devil himself. "Get away, ye do-gooder. I know what would do you some good." Her mood changed quickly with her joke and she laughed hoarsely before flinging the door shut.

Constance, her heart racing from the chase and from her mistake, turned to the other room. There was no door to knock on, just a drape of fabric hung from timber.

Her voice sounded quiet. "Hello, I am from the Home of Industry and I wonder if you might need any help." She paused and heard voices – a child then a woman. "I spoke with your son tonight; I know he didn't sell many newspapers."

After a brief silence, Constance pulled open the curtain. A meagre candle gave a waxen glow to a room crowded with tiny boxes stacked wide and deep. In their midst sat the newspaper boy with other children in a circle on the floor. A pot of glue lay in their centre and, over it all, was a mother whose hands were black with sores.

“You are matchbox makers!” Constance said.

The mother nodded before lifting sandpaper sheets to paste onto a readymade box. “And we’re behind on the rent.” She pasted a sliver of sandpaper with a balding brush and then pushed her thumb tightly against the rough paper, scraping further at her sores. She slid another sheet of sandpaper forward for pasting and reached for the next box made by her children.

The stacks of boxes prevented Constance from moving further into the room. She gazed at each child’s face, seeing their white skin and pinched, tired eyes. The matchbox maker’s curse had rested on the smallest child, whose small face rested on a hunched back.

Constance spoke quietly: “How much does the dealer pay you?”

The mother looked up briefly. “Never enough!” She returned to pasting sandpaper strips onto boxes. “We pay tuppence a gross for the wood, then he pays us tuppence-halfpenny for a gross of boxes. But we can make sixpence a day when we’re all at it.”

A cold draught blew through the room, and Constance looked up to see a hole in the roof that had been badly patched.

The mother nodded towards the newspaper boy. “We thought it would be good to branch out a bit, not rely so much on one industry.” She gave a sarcastic laugh. “Didn’t do us much good tonight though – lost on them papers.” She glanced at her son. “Move them boxes onto the bed, George, so the lady can come inside.”

As the boy gingerly lifted a stack of boxes, the mother apologised for the lack of heat. “We burned the door for firewood.”

Constance sat down. “I followed your son because I saw all those unsold newspapers and I wondered if he’d had anything to eat.”

The mother shook her head. “None of us have, but we don’t depend on any charity. We work for ourselves – keep away from the workhouse door.” She looked up quickly. “You’re not from there, are you?”

Constance shook her head hurriedly. “I’m with the Home of Industry. We believe in dignity, hard work, education and the blessings of Our Lord.”

“What about food?” The mother asked.

“Yes, yes, we have that. In fact, I can bring you some if it’s not too late in your evening.”

The woman gave a lopsided grin. “When your belly’s empty, it’s never too late in your evening.”

Constance stood. “I’ll be back as quickly as I can. My mother’s house is not far.”

She stepped back behind the curtain and then remembered the warren of dark alleys. “But I’d like to find my way back. Could the boy come with me as a guide?”

The mother stopped pasting and stared at Constance, gauging her. “George is a good fighter and will tear at anyone who tries to take advantage of him.”

Constance caught her suspicions and stood a little straighter. “I am a Christian. I will ensure the boy comes to no harm. Please, you must trust me. Some in your neighbourhood already know me. You can ask – my name is Constance Petrie.”

The woman assessed her as if storing up a memory for future use.

Constance followed George through the network of narrow streets until they reached the gaslights of Shoreditch. The rain had stopped but the wind still sent the light flickers leeward. Constance asked the boy about his father.

“Lost at sea, Miss. The shipping company says he’s dead, but they’ve never found his body so my ma says

he'll come home one day. She says he was always a fighter.”

His pace hurried as he tried to lose the memory of his mother's shrieks the day the shipping agent visited them. She'd screamed that they'd all end up in the workhouse. After the shipping clerk left, she'd run from the house taking baby Tommy with her. Rose and he had chased after her, losing her in the alleys, but they'd come out at the riverside to hear the wailing cry of his mother as she loaded rocks into her pockets and down into the baby's nightgown. He'd tried to pull the rocks back out while pulling his mother away from the river, but she'd tugged and twisted free and took off along the bank. George had called on folks to stop her, tugging at the arm of a gentleman. But the man had pushed him off. “That'll make two less rats on this riverside.”

George could still hear the man's voice, his slow articulation of the words.

Thankfully, two women tackled his ma, one grabbing baby Tommy so his mother was forced to chase her through the alleyways and think about what she'd been about to throw away.

A cold sweat erupted on George's brow. He and his sisters could have ended up so completely alone.

Constance quickened her pace. “How long have you been selling newspapers?”

George looked up at her, his nose seemed even more misshapen than before. “Just the winter, Miss. But I think I'll leave it now until the summer. On good nights, you can make sixpence; but in bad weather like this – well, tonight we lost money.”

“How about matchbox making, how long has your family been doing that?”

“Since news came of me dad. His pay always came from the shipping company and we always had food. But after they said he was missing, well, there was no more

money from them and we had to move. We used to live in a big room, Miss, near Bethnal Green. Me dad was a weaver then, but the machines put him out of a job.” He kicked at a stone. “Now, we’re behind on the rent again.”

Constance led him across the road toward the only door with a candle at the fanlight. After only a short knock the door was unbolted. An older woman, taller than Constance, opened the door.

“Connie, where have you been in this weather? I was beginning to think I should go out and find you.” She glanced at the boy beside her daughter. “And I see you’ve brought a visitor.”

Constance pushed George forward then hurried past him toward the kitchen. “This is George. I brought him so we could find our way back – his family haven’t eaten today. Is there any of Geeta’s stew left? What about bread or soup?”

Helen pointed George to a bench in the hallway and followed her daughter down the steps and into the kitchen.

Geeta, the maid, rose wearily from her bedding near the range. Helen tapped her on the shoulder. “Lie down, Geeta, I’ll see to this.”

As the small Indian woman lay back down, Helen took a leg of ham away from her daughter and placed it back on the roasting jack.

“Constance, you can’t keep doing this!”

“What?” Constance had moved on to the bread bin.

“Trying to feed all the starving of London. We live only on what your father left us.”

“And we’ve never starved,” Constance said with a vague smile.

“No, we haven’t. But we give a lot to the poor already.”

“And there are still children out there who go hungry.”

“And, Constance, we can’t possibly feed them all.”

“Mother, she is a widow, like you, but has five or six children – I couldn’t count them all in that tiny room. They haven’t eaten today – I didn’t even ask about yesterday. They didn’t have heat either. They’ve already burned their door for firewood.”

She wrapped a hunk of mutton in a muslin cloth. “Can you imagine the difference this piece of meat will make to them? For us it’s just one meal that we can easily replace with a bit of cheese and pickle – but for this family, it’s a feast.”

Helen wanted to remind her daughter that the meat, cheese and pickle were bought from their carefully managed budget. But she knew that words made little difference when Constance was like this. She watched her daughter wrap the remainder of the day’s bread and all of tomorrow’s loaf in another cloth then followed her out to the hall.

George sat where he had been left, still wet and shivering from cold.

Helen handed him a wool wrap hanging from a hook. “This’ll keep you a bit warmer on the walk home.”

He wound the brown knit around his shoulders then looked up with an embarrassed smile. “Thanks, Ma’am.”

Helen peered at his nose. In the bold gaslight of the small hallway it looked positively twisted. “Good gracious, child, what happened to you?”

“A fight, Ma’am. A man, a thief, tried to take me newspaper money, and we had a fight. He was bigger than me – grown up, like. He got the money and left me with a bloodied nose. That’s when we got behind in our rent. Ma says if that hadn’t happened we’d be fine – probably would have had a bit of bread today, maybe even some fat for broth.”

Constance emptied the coal scuttle into a sack, sending coal dust out across the floor. Helen took a deep

breath but said nothing. She lifted her own cloak from its peg.

George led the way, his footsteps fast at the prospect of taking meat and bread to his family. Constance was quiet, but Helen knew she was thinking, planning. As they hurried down Bishopsgate, hearing grunting heaves from a couple in a shallow doorway, Constance was stirred to speak: "How many spaces do we have in the Beehive?"

"Spaces in the Beehive? Why? None. We never have spaces, as you well know."

"Could we squeeze in this family? I think there are about five children."

"Constance! We have a waiting list."

The boy looked up suspiciously. "What's the Beehive?"

Constance patted his shoulder. "Don't worry, it's not a workhouse."

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George awakened to feel his sister's feet poking his arms while the arched and bony spine of his brother jutted his ribs. A small smile played on his face as he thought about the bread and mutton he'd eaten before bed. It was more pleasure than he'd felt since, well, since his da's pay stopped coming.

Outside he heard the faint call of the baker's boy hawking buns. George smiled a little more. Usually that cry sent his empty stomach into cramps, but not this morning.

George rolled over to see his mother already at work pasting strips of sandpaper to box ends. She liked to work in the early morning while he and his brother and sisters lay in bed. She said she could spread out the freshly pasted boxes, giving them space to dry.

Mary Trupper swept her brush across ten small strips of sandpaper. She pressed hard against the roughness, pushing against each box for several moments, eroding further at the worn and putrid skin of her fingers. Around her a mat of freshly pasted matchboxes spread across the dusty floor.

George squirmed out from between his brother's back and his sister's feet. "Ma, leave it a while. I'll take over."

"No, you paste that lot over there, and maybe we can get them done before everyone's up, and then we can work on folding the boxes today. If we can put together two extra gross today and tomorrow, and eat only the food those do-gooders brought us, then we can get the rent up to date. We just have to work hard."

George thought they worked hard every day. He knelt down to paste the strips of sandpaper. He and his mother worked in unison, George using the pasting brush while his mother stuck down strips, pressing hard so they wouldn't fall off. She kept this job for herself. She didn't want to see her children's fingers as torn and painful as her own.

Rose woke first but stayed in bed so her mother and brother had full use of the floor. Maggie and Junie rolled over and leaned sleepily against their big sister. Only Tommy slept heavily, his spine curved so far forward that his head pitched permanently toward his toes.

"His poor back," Rose said as she stroked her fingers through her brother's matted hair.

Mary nodded toward the matchboxes that lay around her. "We all need to work or there's no rent or food. I don't know what else we can do."

"But he never straightens up anymore."

"Look, girl, don't make me feel guilty. It's just unlucky that his young life has been mostly work. The rest of you had more of your father's care and money, so be

grateful.” Mary pushed even harder at the sandpaper. “I really don’t know what else to do. We need all of us to work, otherwise we can’t live. It’s this or the workhouse and if we have to go there we may as well pitch ourselves into the river right now.”

George stopped pasting and stared at his mother, remembering the sight of her putting rocks in her pockets at the riverside, baby Tommy already weighed down with a rock wrapped in his gown.

“But maybe we’re asking Tommy to do too much,” Rose said.

Mary sent her oldest daughter a warning glare. “I suppose some of us could work the streets like our neighbours.”

Rose reddened, and Mary paused momentarily from pasting. She knew she shouldn’t take her anger out on the children. Threats only made everyone feel worse.

“How about some of that good food?” she asked.

Tommy stirred as at the word “food”.

Mary left the cheese wrapped up in the muslin bag and cut the remains of the mutton into six uneven slices. The older kids, George and Rose, received the thicker slices; while the middle child Maggie got a slighter smaller piece. The youngest, Tommy and Junie, were awarded the slimmer slivers. Mary herself took the shavings of meat left up from slicing. She wrapped them in a chunk of bread and let the first bite soak appreciatively into her mouth. It wasn’t just the juice of the mutton giving off a heavy meaty flavour, but the bread dough was light with none of the sawdust or weevils found in bread that came from the bakery down the lane.

The children ate fast, and Mary relaxed a little in their contentment. They’d all slept on full bellies thanks to the do-gooders. The two women had promised to stop by in a few days. The younger one talked about a beehive. She said it was where they could all work at making

matchboxes and that it was comfortable with proper seating, good light, fresh air, meals and lessons for the children. But Mary was suspicious of the price, probably a share of profits. She couldn't afford to give a cut to anyone.

She turned wearily to look at the stack of flattened woodcuts. If they could just move faster at turning these into boxes, they could catch up on the rent.

She clapped her hands. With full bellies and some warmth from the coal the do-gooders brought, they should be able to work harder than normal. "George, Tommy and Maggie, you get started on them boxes. Rose, you work with Junie. She isn't getting the hang of them corners. There must have been more than ten boxes of hers we couldn't use yesterday and that's money."

Junie's right hand moved instinctively toward a dirty rag doll that lay nearby. Her fingers clasped the worn cloth, bringing it up to her face as her skinny thumb slotted firmly between her thin lips.

Rose clasped the rag doll impatiently and pulled it from her sister. "Honestly, Junie, that's going to have to be put away while we work. It always gets in the way."

The young girl gave a puzzled stare, her thumb fixed firmly in her mouth.

"You'll get it back when it's time for bed," Rose said. "Now dry that thumb and get it ready for work."

Mary sighed. "Honestly, I think our Junie will be better off in service. If we can get her a scullery maid's job – maybe those two do-gooders know of someone who will give her a chance."

"Ma, she's only seven," Rose said.

"I know, but it's best to start young in them jobs. Lots of time to learn and, in a few years, maybe she'll work up to the cook's job. People like that never go hungry." Mary stacked the ready-made boxes against the

wall. Mr Robert would pick them up in the evening, count them and pay only for those that were perfect.

Tommy stood, his rounded back making him too short for his sharp face. "Ma, can I go and get water? The taps might be open."

Mary peered into the jug by the stove. A small pool lay at the bottom. She poured it into a mug to be shared among them and handed the jug to Tommy. "George, you go with him. But don't be long out there. We need plenty of boxes made if we're to pay the rent."

Tommy's bent frame, liberated by movement, hurried through the curtain. George hurtled ahead, taking the stairs two at a time. On the floor below, Tommy slowed to stare cautiously at a battered door. The last time he'd passed, the Irishman there had sent a gob of spit that had stung his eye. It could have been an accident, but Tommy had felt the man's cursed glare.

He watched to see if the door handle turned, and then ran to catch up with his brother.

Upstairs in the small attic room, Mary and nine-year-old Maggie bent thin wooden sheets so they were pliable. Junie watched vacantly as her mother's scabby fingers bent a crucifix-shaped woodcut and moulded it into a box.

"Now, Junie," Rose said, "we'll make the sleeves. You'll get on faster if I bend the lines, and you fold."

Junie took the shape from her sister and her thin fingers began to shape a sheath for the matchboxes. The four figures worked on the cold wood floor. Little light penetrated the deep alleys and even less made it through the small hole that served as a window. In the corner of the room a toilet bowl gave off a stench.

Mary gave it a brief glance. "Rose, empty that pot out the window."

"Ma, we can't. We have to wait for the sanitary cart."

"To hell with the sanitary cart, it stinks in here."

“Ma, the sanitary man said it’s for our own good. He said throwing shit into the street causes disease.”

Mary rolled her eyes. “What does he know?”

Outside, George and Tommy stood at the well. Ahead, along the line, they could hear shouts and arguments until words spread towards them. “There’s not enough water – the pump’s closing early.”

George’s full belly gave him more energy than usual, and he ran forward. With the water jug under his arm, he plundered through the crowd until he reached the pump where four women pushed at each other as they all aimed to catch the last of the water in their own jug.

The fray gave George his opportunity. He aimed low, catching the stream of water as it missed the brawling women’s jugs.

“Could you do mine when you’re finished?”

George glanced up to see his neighbour Beryl. He passed her his half-filled jug and took hers.

“Hey, you!” the sanitary man yelled. George readied to run with Beryl’s jug and hoped she would take off with his.

The sanitary man pushed toward Beryl, his face red with anger. “I know you with that devil mark.”

Beryl’s face glowed red, turning the mole on her cheek purple.

The sanitary man glowered over her. “Where’s your mother? I’ve been hearing things about her.”

The young girl stepped back, shaking her head.

The red face followed. “I’ve heard she’s got the sores and is spreading disease. Tell her I’m after her and if she don’t show up clean then it’s the Lock Hospital for her. And there’ll be no work there – not unless she wants to take money from them that’s scabbier than she is.”

He stepped back and followed his apprentice who was pulling a woman with bleeding sores on her face toward a cart.

Beryl's legs shook as she hurried away with George, the two children carrying each other's water jugs.

"I need to find me ma and tell her the sanitary man's after her," Beryl said.

George handed Beryl her jug. It wasn't as chipped as his. "What will she do?"

The girl's eyes were wide, and George guessed that with the mother off the street Beryl would have to take extra customers.

Tommy had stayed at the street corner. The three children took their pitchers of water up the stairs, and then Beryl went in search of her mother. She knew the sanitary man was right. She'd seen her mother's sores. Now she needed to get her indoors and out of sight. No one who went into the Lock Hospital ever came out.

She hurried down Houndsditch, through Aldgate and into the Whitechapel market searching for her mother's large red hat with blue feathers. Traders hawked jellied eels, mouse traps, pea soup, offal, flowers, furniture, second-hand clothes and pies. At the corner of Goulston, Beryl crossed the road to avoid a thin man selling brown envelopes containing photographs. He'd offered Beryl work, but she didn't want to show herself to all those people. It was bad enough having one man at a time groping at her.

Across the street, one of her mother's friends held two men in her arms. All three, soused with gin, reeled from wall to wall. Beryl crossed to ask if she'd seen her ma. Pearl looked over her head like she wasn't there. Two customers meant double pay and she didn't want to have to share.

But Beryl pulled on Pearl's arm so she couldn't be ignored.

"No, I ain't seen your ma. I'm busy with my own doings," and Pearl pulled her customers after her.

The younger of the men turned to wink at Beryl. She sent him a scathing stare even though he looked cleaner than some she'd had to deal with.

Beryl hurried on, looking for signs of her mother's red hat. At the corner of Brick Lane, near a penny theatre, she caught sight of the blue feathers through the crowd. She hurried toward a large canvas painting with a naked fat lady whose arms and legs looked stuffed with sacks of flour. A black dwarf with a massive erection had been painted next to her.

Beneath the poster, Beryl's mother's breasts were bared, but her dugs were puny compared to the woman on the canvas.

A skinny man took Beryl's mother's arm, but Beryl grabbed her other hand and pulled her away. "Ma, you need to stop work. The sanitary man's after you."

The skinny man arched his brows and hurried on. Jean shook her daughter off and called out after him. "She's not serious. She's just trying to take me business. Five minutes, mister, and I'll have you smiling like a swaddled babe."

The skinny man didn't glance back.

"Ma, you need to come home. He's threatening to give you an inspection."

Jean Brown's breath was heavy with gin. "I'm clean as a whistle. I know that sanitary man. He's just after a free turn. I'll see to him later."

"Ma!" Beryl stopped to think of an argument that might scare her mother. "He knows about your sores."

Jean looked around quickly to see if anyone had heard. She clenched her jaw and spoke through her four remaining teeth. "I have no sores. Now mind your own business and get some work." She stood back, her voice not so threatening. "Look there, over that road, Pearl's corner is free and with that public house there's no end of business."

Beryl's stomach sank.

Jean held out the gin bottle. "Come on, now. This'll help."

Beryl played her only card. "I'll go to work if you go home and stay out of sight."

"I don't need to, I told you, he's only after a free turn."

"Ma, we can't take any chances. If you go to that Lock Hospital, you'll never get out and then what will happen to me and Ruby?"

Jean reluctantly tucked her sagging breasts inside her gown and tied up the neckline with a bow. "I suppose I should keep out of sight for a while. But this means you have to be out earning every day."

Beryl took the gin bottle from her ma and swallowed hard. Her throat burned but she knew she'd soon feel a haze that would make everything distant no matter who she endured. As she crossed Whitechapel she glanced around to see who would be her first customer of the day.

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Constance tapped her feet on the wooden floor. "Mother, I don't know why you're doing this."

Helen glanced up, her face flushed from pummelling dough. "I'm doing it because last night you gave away all our bread."

Constance pulled a long face. "Well, we could just buy bread like other people."

Helen glared at her daughter. "I hate shop bread. It's full of things that shouldn't be there – and it's not healthy to have all those people handling your food before it reaches the table."

"The Good Lord says we have to make do with what's available."

Helen sighed and placed the newly formed dough on a tray.

Geeta knelt on the floor scrubbing the range, a pot of black lead and a brush beside her for polishing. Helen lifted the black lead, afraid it might tip onto her carpet, and placed it carefully on the hearth. "Geeta, if you could put the bread in the oven when you're through?"

The young girl smiled, showing teeth beautifully white against her dark skin.

Pastor Beckett had found Geeta after she'd shown up hungry and scared at a church and wouldn't talk for days. Eventually Helen managed to understand her oddly accented English and found out that she'd travelled to London with an English family, who had employed her as a nanny. But the Parker family had been met by Mr Parker's mother, along with the old nanny who had cared for Mr Parker as a child. Geeta had been dismissed at the dock side, her single bag beside her and five shillings of pay. She had been robbed while trying to find a room at an inn and had wandered around Wapping Wall for three days, too scared to talk to anyone. It was the music that had attracted her to the mission. She said it sounded like the church the Parker family went to in Simla.

Pastor Beckett had brought Geeta to the Home of Industry, even though it was obvious that she was too old for the orphanage. After hearing her story Helen offered her a job as their housemaid, even though she couldn't really afford it and she and Constance had grown used to managing without help.

The small woman worked hard, especially at cooking. Helen taught her reading and scripture on Sundays, and Geeta saved all her pay for the voyage back home.

Constance watched impatiently as her mother wiped her face free of flour, pulled at the knot on her apron and threw on her cloak.

Outside the younger woman's feet moved as fast as her speech. "That family we visited last night, the youngest is already hunchbacked from work. We should try and find space for them in the Beehive – make them a priority or they'll be sure to end up in the workhouse. We really need another Home of Industry – we could easily fill it."

She paused to watch a small boy hawking fried fish and only moved on when she saw him make a sale. "Annie MacPherson said some wealthy church members might be willing to fund a second home." Constance moved fast, calling to her mother over her shoulder: "Just think of it, we could give more children the space to work safely and they'd have food, scripture and schooling. Think of the joy we could bring, Mother."

Helen glanced upward as though beseeching help. "What would give me joy would be to see you married."

Constance turned abruptly so that her mother stumbled into her. "Mother, look at me. I'm plain. In fact, I'm more than plain, I'm ugly. And in addition to that, I'm poor. I'm also twenty-four and far too old for any man to even consider as marriage material."

A few people in the street stopped to watch the two women for a possible confrontation. Helen dropped her voice to a whisper. "Constance, you are not ugly, old or too poor for marriage." Her voice rose just a little in tone. "What you need to do is to slow down so that a man might have a chance to get a better look at you."

Constance began walking again. "I don't want some man to get a look at me. I am happy with what I do each day – working at the Home of Industry with you. I see the children come to us, their faces all sharp and shrivelled but then, after a few months in our care, they grow softened from regular food and hope for a better future. I have the Good Lord with me every single day, and I am happy in his work."

“But I don’t want you to grow old and lonely. When I’m no longer here, a husband would be a good companion.”

“Mother, for companionship, I have the children at the Home of Industry.”

Helen sighed. “Well, I just wish your brother were here. At least he had friends who might show an interest.”

Constance walked faster, moving ahead of her mother. Mathew had left for Africa three years ago with 600 Bibles and a mission to take The Lord to the heathen. Constance herself would have loved such a mission.

All that faded from her mind as they entered the Home of Industry where Winifred and a crew of older girls were serving porridge to three hundred orphans. Annie MacPherson nodded a greeting from her office near the front hall. Constance stopped, hoping to exchange more words with the great woman, but Miss MacPherson’s head was already bent over her papers.

It was Annie MacPherson who’d turned 60 Commercial Street from a disused warehouse into the Home of Industry. She’d pursued all and any businessmen who professed Christian belief and persuaded them to give money for the orphanage and workplace. Some of the wealthy had given easily; but others had had to be shamed into donating with repeated visits and lengthy descriptions of the poverty, grime and sickness that saturated London’s East End.

Constance had watched Annie MacPherson drown all stubborn argument by pushing her earnest assertions on the rightness of employing and educating the poor. Some of her words still played in Constance’s ears: “*All will benefit when the children are able to work securely. All, even the benefactors, will be saved by the Lord.*”

Constance wished God had given her such power of speech. All she could do when asked to speak at mission

meetings was blush and stutter, and she hated herself for it.

She left the great lady at work and hurried to help with breakfasts. Lawrence sat at the end of his row of fifty children, his porridge bowl already empty. "Miss," he called out to Constance as she passed. "Please, Miss, do you remember your promise?"

Constance's mind went blank. She searched the boy's face for a clue.

"The reading and writing, Miss. You said I could help the others instead of copying onto my slate."

Constance smiled at the memory. "Of course, Lawrence, remind me when we're upstairs in the classroom, and I'll give you someone to help."

Lawrence turned to the boys who sat around him. "See, I told you I was going to be an assistant."

A bell sounded the end of breakfast and the children filed upstairs to class. Helen climbed the steep stairs to the classroom. The orphans had two hours of writing Bible passages and the rest of the morning was spent in vocation classes. The boys learned either carpentry or valet skills so they could work in service or trade, while the girls received instruction on cookery, laundry and sewing in preparation for positions as maidservants.

Outside the home, three hundred matchbox makers queued at the front door for breakfast. After eating, they would work in the Beehive, a large airy hall that was well lit and lined with high tables. At the end of each day, they had a hot supper and received lessons in reading, writing and scripture.

Constance followed the orphans to her classroom and sat at the piano. With the first note, the children rose from their benches.

*"There is a better world, they say,  
Oh, so bright!  
Where we can find the Lord*

*And he will help us everyday,  
And never let us fall."*

When the song ended, Constance told them of Jesus, the five loaves and the two fishes.

"Children, this story teaches us to have faith. We must believe. The Lord will always provide. He will never leave us hungry."

She wrote across her board and bid the children copy her.

*My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not.*

Lawrence's hand rose immediately.

Constance nodded permission for him to speak.

The boy stood, wobbling a little as his clubbed foot caught on the leg of his stool. "Miss, may I help the younger children with their writing?"

Reminded of her promise, Constance led him to two small boys. She pointed to the taller one. "John sometimes forgets which side of the slate to begin his words, and Peter often puts his letters backward. They will both be grateful for your help, Lawrence."

He grinned widely and, as the others worked, he pointed John to the left corner of his slate and watched his two charges as they wrote the first words of the phrase.

In the next room, Helen's pupils, older than those in Constance's class, copied down the Ten Commandments. Two boys, the only black children in the classroom, leaned toward each other as they wrote.

"Henry and Horace, I've asked you before to separate." Helen approached two small boys sitting on either side of the aisle. With a tap from her hand, they stood in the aisle while Henry and Horace reluctantly parted to sit in the newly vacant spaces.

"You must mix with the other children," Helen said as she walked up the aisle.

Henry and Horace exchanged wary looks. The children around them shared grins as Helen expounded on Thou Shalt Not Steal.

“Oooww!” Horace called out as fingers tugged heavily on his hair.

Helen glared at the boy then noted his moist eyes and realised he was a victim rather than a perpetrator.

She glared at the children around Horace then spotted tufts of black curls under a seat. Helen sharpened her eyes on Horace’s neighbour. “William! Why have you chosen to disrupt our lesson in this way?”

The boy stood, his head hanging from his neck so that none of his face could be seen. “Miss,” he shrugged.

Helen moved forward so she looked down on the boy’s drooping neck. “This is my commandment. That ye love one another, as I have loved you.”

Silence settled across the room.

Helen stepped back only a fraction. “William, you shall make Horace’s bed each morning for the next week, and offer him what he wishes from your evening meal. I hope he shows you more grace than you have shown him. Sit down.”

William sat; his head still bent so far forward it almost reached into his lap.

Helen returned to the front of the class. “Now, children, we will return to the Commandments.”

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